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Decoding the Academy:

A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education

Rashné Jehangir, PhD | Terra Molengraff, PhD | Kelly Collins, PhD | Tai Do, PhD

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FirstGen Forward, *formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success*, partners with higher education, philanthropy, business, the public sector, and others to catalyze first-generation student success. We provide data, training, and expertise for a growing network of colleges and universities around the country to scale and sustain the important work of serving first-generation students while engaging a broad coalition of advocates and allies across the public and private sectors to ensure support for this critical population. Transforming higher education to drive first-generation student success effectively and equitably across education, career, and life.

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Foreword

As a faculty member and administrator who has taught graduate students and overseen graduate programs for the better part of my career, I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education*.

The book begins by inviting readers into the ongoing scholarly conversation about who first-generation students are. Rashné Jehangir, Terra Molengraff, Kelly Collins, and Tai Do identify the shortcomings of current definitions and perspectives about what it means to identify as first-generation. It also discusses how incomplete understandings of the intersecting identities and experiences lead to inadequate graduate curricula, programming, and support systems for first-generation students. With rich, beautiful detail, *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education* shows how first-generation students are not a monolithic group. Instead, multiple and intersecting identities, issues, and experiences create unique and complex first-generation graduate student realities. One of the incredibly important aspects of this book is that the authors adopt an intersectional perspective to define what it means to be a first-generation graduate student, foregrounding the lived realities of students of color and other historically excluded students. Moreover, by drawing upon the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (Núñez, 2014), the authors offer theoretically grounded, complex, and novel conceptualizations of first-generation graduate school experiences situated in students' ecologies.

In higher education, decades of literature have called upon educators to recognize and support the unique needs of first-generation students. Yet, scholarship about first-generation students, especially graduate students, is limited. *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education* is an incredible resource that illuminates the critical need for intentional equity strategies for first-generation graduate students. Using powerful narratives drawn from a robust qualitative study, Rashné Jehangir, Terra Molengraff, Kelly Collins, and Tai Do offer important intersectional insights into the perspectives, struggles, and successes of diverse first-generation students.

As a supposed "expert" with a doctoral degree in higher education administration, I find the bureaucratic hurdles, unclear policies, and unspoken rules in post-secondary education puzzling. And, I also regularly witness frustration in colleagues and students trying to navigate confusing graduate education systems successfully. *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education* details these hurdles with both contextual literature and powerful student narratives. Through this work, Rashné Jehangir, Terra Molengraff, Kelly Collins, and Tai Do expose the myriad of ways academic systems and structures perpetuate inequities for first-generation graduate students. Student quotes point to the ways first-generation graduate students experience educational environments where their qualifications, lived experiences, and successes are questioned or delegitimized. The authors introduce readers to innumerable unwritten rules and opaque expectations of graduate education. Drawing upon terminology used by participants, the authors offer rich insights into the many ways graduate school socialization feels like a "black box" full of "jarring juxtapositions" for first-generation students. By contrast, students from privileged backgrounds often understand how to find (and use) the keys to the black box while first-generation students are locked out. In sharing the rich stories of first-generation graduate students, this volume can help educators dismantle inequities and create more equitable graduate programs where first-generation graduate students can thrive. *Unveiling the Untold Story* concludes with tangible recommendations that can be implemented to make graduate school more accessible and humanized for first-generation graduate students.

Unlike many writings about first-generation students that focus on educational hurdles and/or supposed educational deficits (knowledge, capital, support) in students, Rashné Jehangir, Terra Molengraff, Kelly Collins, and Tai Do call attention to the invaluable forms of capital and funds of knowledge that first-generation graduate students possess. *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education* explicates how students build new capital, develop authentic relationships, transverse home-school settings, and make sense of their evolving first-generation identities as they navigate new educational, familial, and community realities. These are just a few of the many invaluable highlights in the text.

Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education is a must-read for a multitude of audiences. First, I am confident that this volume will become a staple for preparing the next generation of leaders in graduate education. This text is also an invaluable resource for anyone advising undergraduates in their pursuit of postgraduate degrees. Moreover, this volume is a gem for graduate students themselves as they may see their own experiences (or the experiences of their peers) reflected in these pages. Finally, *Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education* can be a useful resource for families who want to understand and support, their first-generation students as they embark on the graduate school journey.

I encourage readers to spend time with this powerful resource. And, I know that as readers engage with student stories and consider the recommendations for practice, they will be inspired to make positive changes within their spheres of influence. For me, I am already thinking about the immediate and long-term changes I can make to foster more equitable graduate education within my spheres of influence.

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About the Authors

Rashné Jehangir, PhD. is a learner, a scholar-practitioner and equal opportunity educator. She holds degrees from Lawrence University and two graduate degrees from the University of Minnesota where she is Professor of Higher Education and the Beck Chair of Ideas in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. She is also the founding Director of the First Gen Institute and was recently named the Inaugural Dean of Education Opportunity Programs at her college. She is the inaugural co-editor of the Journal of First-generation Student Success.

She spent the first decade of her career in student affairs and has strong roots in the federally funded TRIO SSS and McNair Scholars Programs which provided fertile ground for key questions in her research inquiry. Her research focuses on equity and access with specific attention to the confluence of structural constraints in the academy that impact the experience of poor and working class, refugee and immigrant students, and students of color many of whom are first in their family to go to college and graduate school. Her focus on access and persistence include attention to belonging, pedagogy and curriculum that is affirming and humanizing, and provides opportunities for career preparation and avenues to enter graduate school and student affairs.

Her scholarship is featured in several journals including Journal of College Student Development, Innovative Higher Education, Urban Education and the Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. Her book Higher Education and First-Generation College Students: Cultivating Community, Voice and Place for the New Majority was published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Terra Molengraff, PhD. the Program Director of First-Generation Initiatives at the University of Michigan. She graduated with her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota's Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development Graduate Program. Her research focuses on how colleges and universities support FG college students with an emphasis on institutional change agents and organizational change. As a FG college student who attended and graduated from graduate school and now supports FG students, her work focuses on the intersections of the FG identity and how the structures of higher education can be changed to support students.

Kelly Collins, PhD

is the Director of Education at the University of Minnesota's Office for Equity and Diversity. She is a graduate of the University of Minnesota's Organizational Leadership and Policy Development doctoral program. Kelly began her career as an advisor for first-generation, low-income college students in the TRIO programs at the University of Iowa, where she also received a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs and served on the Native American Staff and Faculty Council. Kelly has served as the Associate Director of Racial and Social Justice Education at the University of Minnesota and as the Native American Student Success Coordinator and Community Faculty in Ethnic Studies at Metropolitan State University. Kelly currently serves as a steering committee member of the University of Minnesota's First Generation Institute. She is a proud first-generation alumni and professional, community activist, intergenerational caregiver, traditional beadworker, and access and equity scholar and practitioner.

Tai Do, PhD

a Research Analyst with the Minnesota Department of Education. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota's Educational Psychology program.

Tai's research and expertise intersects education, psychology, and measurement with emphasis on understanding and supporting systematically marginalized (e.g., first-generatio, low-income, and/or immigrant) students' sense of belonging.

Acknowledgment:

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context of the Study

There has been increasing interest among higher education administrators, faculty, and staff regarding the experiences of first-generation college students, particularly with respect to what is required to facilitate their well-being and academic success. There are varying definitions of *first-generation*. The U.S. Department of Education's (n.d.) definition of *first-generation* refers to an "an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree." There are also varying definitions of *first-generation* in the literature. For example, first-generation undergraduate students have frequently been defined as students who are the first in their families to complete an undergraduate degree (Jehangir & Collins, 2021). Although we recognize the importance of the use of the U.S. Department of Education's definition of the term, scholars (e.g., Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2018) have noted how aspects of this definition, such as "parents" or "complete," may discount and exclude students whose lived experiences would otherwise reflect the first-generation experience. For this reason, we prefer
the consideration of first-generation status to reflect students
who are the first in their family of primary caregivers to attend a four- year institution. We elaborate on the rationale for this definition in later sections.

As the percentage of first-generation undergraduate students continues to climb, there is evidence of their increasing matriculation to graduate and professional endeavors (Hamilton, 2023; RTI International, 2021). Yet how the term first-generation is defined, framed, and recognized in graduate school requires deep consideration because of the complexity of both the first-generation experience and the nature of graduate school. Being a first-generation undergraduate college student can carry through into the graduate school experience. In this manner, the first-generation identity is not simply tied nor limited to either the undergraduate or the graduate experience. Navigating first-generation status occurs across all stages of life, including from higher education to professional endeavors. Nevertheless, being a first-generation graduate student (FGGS) invites entirely separate nuances that complicate the first-generation status label.

Because more institutions are interested in developing language that can be inclusive of first-generation experience in graduate school, this monograph invites readers into a conversation rooted in research that is aimed toward initiating structural and design changes in graduate settings. Our aims fall into three key arenas: heightened recognition of lived experience of first-generation college students (awareness), attention to how support for FGGSs can be institutionalized (structure), and consideration of these processes (design) to make graduate school more accessible and humanized for all students. With this context in mind, we focus on the experience and educational pathway of FGGSs in graduate school, including the motivating factors for attending graduate school, the process of graduate school socialization, the availability of support systems, and the recognition of past and current barriers toward graduation for FGGSs.

Language Around First-generation Status

To begin this conversation on the experiences of FGGS, we need to contextualize how language and definitions for the term first-generation

have shifted over time. Specifically, it is important to recognize that the first-generation identity does not exist in a vacuum, and being the first in a family to go to college and graduate school is influenced by intersecting identities. Compared with their continuing-generation counterparts, students who are first in their families to go to college are more likely to be poor and working class, from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups, adult learners, multilingual, and people with disabilities (Jehangir, 2010, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). In many ways, first-generation students are likely to sit at the juncture of race, class, and gender inequalities, and as such their experience in educational milieus are deeply intertwined and constrained with historic institutional contexts and forms of structural oppression and barriers. For example, first-generation students, compared with continuing-generation students, are more likely to work more than 20 hours per week (RTI International, 2019). While many definitions are employed in the literature, our definitional stance is rooted in this history. We use the term first-generation to refer to a student whose primary caregivers have not earned a four-year college degree. This includes caregivers with some college experience, 2-year degrees, and siblings who attended college (Ardoin, 2021). Even though many universities identify diversity and multiculturalism as core values, they continue to struggle to recruit and support first-generation students to the same degree of effort as for their continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). This is notable because 54% of the current undergraduate students in the United States are first-generation (RTI International, 2023).

Critical Considerations for Supporting First-generation Students in Graduate School

As colleges and universities aim to create more support structures, especially with respect to the attainment of advanced degrees for FGGSs, they must consider how they define first-generation and why they chose that definition. The following section details the derivation of the term and how critical it is to consider the intersecting identities of FGGSs when providing support for the population. The final section describes how the graduate school context can be especially difficult for FGGSs and how definitions influence understanding the needs of the student population based on campus context.

Historical Foundations of the Term "First-generation"

The definition of first-generation college student is an institutional question every college and university must answer in the process of identifying and then supporting this population. The term was first used to reflect both income and parental education as a designation for eligibility for federal TRIO programs (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2021). In an interview, Council for Opportunity in Education founder and president emeritus Arnold Mitchem, PhD, and current president Maureen Hoyler, JD, described the interwoven history of TRIO programs and the importance of the term first-generation college student as a method of identifying students with the most need. The criteria of income and parental education allowed "advocates on the ground to push for outreach and supportive services for those who need[ed] the services" (p. 10). Hoyler described that originally the "term was introduced to produce change and to produce equity and to produce a recognition of individuals' potential that may not have had their potential recognized without the term" (p. 11). Mitchem and Hoyler also argue for the necessity ensure that history of the term first-generation is not erased:

> We cannot ignore the additional barriers of race, ethnicity, class, and disability. And that's what TRIO's about. That's what the federal role in higher education is about. It's always important that the advocates for first-generation students on campus remember that Civil Rights history (p. 12).

Importance of using First-gen+

Following Mitchem's and Hoyler's lead, we use Whitley et al.'s (2018) conceptualization of First-gen+, which recognizes that an individual who is a first-generation college student may also inhabit other marginalized identities (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), poor and working class, with disability, LGBTQIA+, and more). In the chapter, "What's in a name? Narrative and Counternarratives of the First-Generation Moniker," Jehangir and Collins (2021) described the intention around using the term first-generation college student and the importance of considering intersections of identity and the influence identities have over a student's experience in college:

> Not all first-generation students are low-income, or students of color, or immigrants, but there is enough significant overlap in these categories that institutions need to begin developing richer portraits of the intersectionality of their campus to tailor support around their first-generation students. (p. 305)

Recognizing First-generation College Students in Graduate School

For graduate students, we define FGGSs as those whose parents, guardians, or caregivers did not attend and graduate from a four-year college. Alongside our definition, we also emphasize that graduate and professional endeavors are diverse and can include a variety of degree, licensure, and accreditation seekers (e.g., MA and PhD). There has been much scholarship on student access and retention interventions over the past decade. For example, research on the experiences of first-generation and working class, and/or poor students (both undergraduate and graduate) is vast (Ardoin, 2021; Martin, 2015; Wildhagen, 2015). However, scholars have also noted how institutions of higher education continue to struggle to effectively increase the enrollment, persistence, and graduation of poor and working-class and first-generation students at the graduate school level (Gardner & Barker, 2015; Kezar, 2011). Importantly, researchers have demonstrated that students from these underserved backgrounds do not attend and complete undergraduate degrees or seek and obtain advanced graduate and professional degrees at the same rates as continuing-generation, middle-class, and high-income students (Baum et al., 2013; Hamrick & Stage, 2004). To address this need, many graduate schools have dedicated programs seeking to increase the access and retention of underrepresented students (Newlin et al., 2019). These programs employ strategies such as providing individual support and mentoring, fostering avenues to building relationships with faculty, and establishing a sense of community (Ardoin & Erb, 2022; Griffin et al., 2016).

The research on graduate school access and the persistence of underrepresented students demonstrates a palpable tension at the nexus of institutional diversity missions and the lived experiences of students in graduate school. Students describe an indecipherable labyrinth of barriers, expectations, and challenges that inhibit their ability to thrive in graduate school (Casanave & Li, 2008; Hill Duin et al., 2012; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Palmer, 1992). The dissonance between the espoused values of university mission statements and the underactualized potential of underrepresented graduate students influences the intellectual ethos of higher education at large (Fryberg & Martinez, 2014). FGGS are often caught in the crossfire of the prevailing narratives, such as the brutalist survivor mentality of graduate school and the urgency to diversify the academy in response to an unprecedented enrollment of historically marginalized and underrepresented students in higher education. In addition, the deficit narrative perpetuates the "dominant and problematic ways the FGS [first-generation college student] term has been operationalized" (Nguyen &

Nguyen, 2018, p. 146), especially for graduate students. Such narrative focuses on the individual rather than the ecology of the systems that perpetuate inequities, all of which are more conspicuous in graduate school spaces, curricula, and policies.

While there is scant research on the socialization experiences of FGGSs, there is an emerging inquiry on the acclimation and persistence of graduate students of color, many of whom are first-generation (Gardner, 2009; Leyva, 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Patton & Harper, 2003; Ramirez, 2017). First-generation students as a whole are more likely to be nontraditionally aged, financially self-supporting, non-native English speakers; have a disability; and come from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds (Bui, 2002; Jehangir et al., 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; RTI International, 2019). Additionally, first-generation students are also more likely to seek employment to pay for college and living expenses and attempt to balance school and work (Jehangir, 2010). First-generation students' experiences and social identities are further affected by the graduate structures that perpetuate and are saturated with pervasive and persistent barriers, such as lack of department integration and socialization, unyielding heteronormative racial climate, and limited access to financial and social resources (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Felder et al., 2014; Gardner, 2008; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Truong & Museus, 2012). Therefore, recognizing the trends and experiences for first-generation students writ large illuminates how the intersectional marginalization of first-generation students contributes to the broad picture of higher education enrollment and attrition for all underrepresented graduate students (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009).

The inclusion and persistence of first-generation students in graduate school have the potential to diversify the professoriate and advance the diversity of academia (Griffin, 2014). The untapped knowledge, ways of knowing, community capital, and potential of FGGSs are a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary socialization and diversification models in higher education (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Hands, 2020; Yosso, 2005). This untapped knowledge and potential would be limited without shifting labels, definitions, and operationalizations (i.e., moving from the monolith to complexity) of FGGS experiences and social identities.

Putting "First-generation" in the Context of Graduate School

Similar to the ways that the definition of first-generation status has been critiqued for failing to "capture the richness and complexity of students' lives," conceptualizing the definition of first-generation status becomes more complicated when institutions are considering the needs of FGGSs (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018, p. 148). In addition to institutional context, it is important to consider national statistics about first-generation students who decide to pursue graduate studies. Although the definition of who is considered a first-generation student can vary, there are a few national statistics available about this population. According to the Center for First-generation Student Success, 23% of first-generation college graduates enrolled in postsecondary education after completing a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2021). The National Science Foundation (2015) survey of science and engineering doctorates indicated that approximately 30% of earned doctorates in STEM are students who are the first in their family to go to college and then graduate school. More recent data from the National Science Foundation Survey of Earned Doctorates indicated that approximately 28% of earned doctorates across disciplines are students who are the first in their family to go to college and graduate school (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2021). Both institutional and national context demonstrates the need to look more

closely at the demographics of this population so that higher education can reflect on the graduation and retention rates and how intersecting identities may influence a student's experience while on campus.

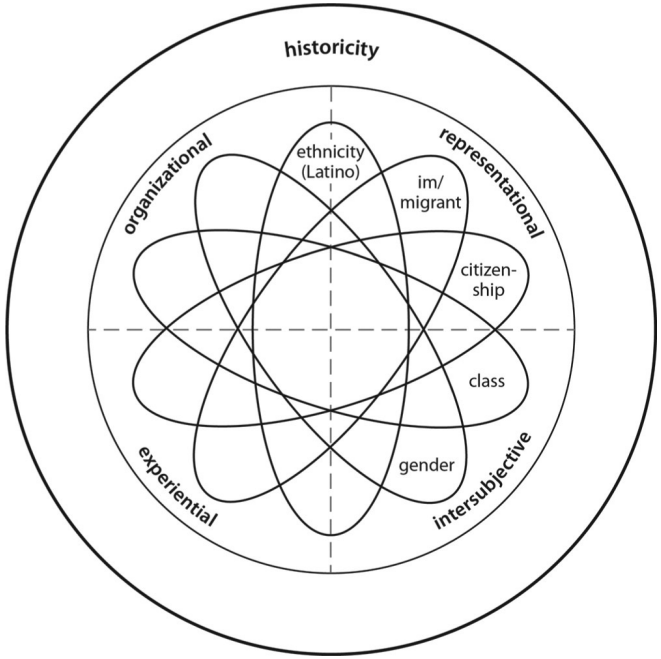
It is well documented that graduate school is a challenging, stressful, and often dehumanizing experience for many students, not just for those who are FGGSs (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Grady et al., 2014; Wallace & Ford, 2021). Many students enter graduate programs with doubt, multiple questions, and confusion about processes and norms in their institution, program, discipline, and field. Students whose parents attended college are not immune or exempt from challenges and systemic barriers. Our rationale for defining FGGSs is an intentional recognition that the history of the term first-generation is grounded in naming the systemic structures that resulted in entire communities' ability to access education as a resource. Exclusion from education and access to resources are inextricably tied to racism, classism, and other forms of structural inequality. By earning a college degree, students have a greater chance of gaining a higher SES (Bowen et al., 2005). However, granting access to education does not ensure success. Depending on a student's experience before attending college and their understanding of navigating the college environment, the systemic inequality that leads to different life outcomes will still be present for first-generation students (Jack, 2016). To focus on the importance of defining first-generation is strategic with an eye to structural barriers. In this strategy lies the belief that higher education has a responsibility to these students to ensure they are successful. The history of higher education demonstrates that institutions were not designed for first-generation students, and as such, campuses colleges and universities should understand where they are complicit in the barriers.

When we create programs and support services with this group as the focus, we understand the breadth and depth of the need these students may have given the intersections of their identities (Jones & Saucier, 2023). If we do not highlight the terms of identity, it will limit "the capacity to grasp how students' backgrounds and identities shape their decisions and relationships to others and to institutions, and risks reproducing the very inequality that education researchers wish to mitigate" (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Finally, by focusing on a population with the highest need, we have the capacity to restructure and redesign accessibility and community in graduate education so that everyone benefits (Karp et al., 2020). Currently several definitions for FGGS are in use at institutions. They include but are not limited to a student whose parent(s)/guardian(s)/caregiver(s) did not earn a master's, doctorate, or professional degree, such as a JD or MD; graduate students and alumni who are the first in their families to go to graduate school; and students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) have not earned a master's or doctoral degree. Institutional contexts influence the definition chosen. These contexts may include the requirements of donor funding, the advocacy of student organizations, how a college or university defines first-generation students overall, or the composition of the student population on campus. Resources are limited on college campuses; therefore, defining who has access and why is essential to providing support for this population.

Theoretical Framework

This Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (MMI; Núñez, 2014) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how intersectionality can be applied to various dimensions and interactions. The framework addresses "how different levels of analysis, types of practices, and relationships between social categories separately or together affect educational opportunities" (p. 85). Núñez encouraged the use of the framework for diverse social identities. Therefore, this framework provides

space and rigor for us to conceptualize the first-generation student experience as complex (e.g., First-Gen+) and to recognize the role of students' ecologies (e.g., history, structures, and individualized experiences) in shaping their navigation through graduate school.



Research Study Methodology and Design

This research study draws on interview data collected from 30 graduate students in the spring and summer of 2020. Data collection occurred during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately negatively affected lower-SES students and first-generation students (Levin, 2020; Soria et al., 2022). The purpose of the study was to focus on the experience and educational pathways of FGGSs. For this study, participants were current graduate
students at a large, public, land-grant research institution.
This institution is in a urban location with a total population of 3.7 million.

For 2023–24, the undergraduate enrollment for this institution was 30,469 students. The graduate and professional enrollment was 11,233 students. Twenty percent of graduate students are first-generation. 19% of graduate students who enrolled in graduate school across the University of Minnesota system are Students of Color. Additional demographics of this population, such as social class, immigrant status, disaggregated race/ethnicity, and other intersections were not accessible.

This institution defines a first-generation college student as a student with neither parent completing an undergraduate degree in the United States. This first-generation college student definition is applied to both undergraduate and graduate students. As such, for the purposes of recruitment for this study, a FGGS is a student with neither parent completing an undergraduate degree. This definition includes students whose family members, such as siblings or cousins, have attended college. The intentionality around this inclusion is meant to focus on students who come from families or communities that have been excluded from or granted limited access to education, mirroring the foundations of the term in the TRIO movement (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2021). The definition chosen for this study was based on the historical foundations of the term first-generation and the context of the university. It is advantageous to use this definition on this campus given the large presence of TRIO programs.

Methodology

Students were recruited through announcements in graduate listservs, word of mouth, and electronic flyers distributed through departments. Students demonstrated interest by filling out an initial information form. The research team sent an email invitation to students who filled out the interest form and were invited to participate in an interview that took up to 90 minutes with a member of the research team. Participants were compensated with a $25

gift card.

Each interview followed the same format with attention to responses around the following questions:

- What are the motivating factors for attending graduate school?
- How do graduate students experience the process of socialization?
- What support systems do graduate students utilize?
- What are past and current barriers toward graduation?
- What recommendations do they have for administrators and faculty?

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before starting the recording, researchers reviewed consent forms and participants filled out a demographic survey, self-identifying key social identities (race, ethnicity, gender, and other intersecting identities). We reserved time at the start of each interview to address COVID-19–related challenges. However, the content of the interviews was reflective of their experience before the pandemic.

Participants

Thirty graduate students participated in the study. Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants. Of the participants, 63% were pursuing a PhD, 33% were pursuing a master's degree, and 3% were pursuing a professional degree. Over half of the students were pursuing degrees in humanities (13%), social sciences (43%), or interdisciplinary studies (10%). Thirty-three percent of students were pursuing STEM degrees. For the racial and ethnic demographic composition of participants, 37% identified as white; 33% identified as Asian and/or Pacific Islander; 20% identified as Latinx, Chicanx, and/or Hispanic; 13% identified as Black, African, and/or African American; 10% identified as multiracial; and 7% identified as American Indian and/or Native American. Of the participants, 63% identified as women. Twenty percent of participants identified as immigrants whose parents did not complete a college degree within or outside the United States. The countries represented were China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, and Thailand. Sixty percent of participants said that they received a federal Pell Grant during their time in higher education, indicating that they came from lower-SES backgrounds.

The following section contains individual and aggregate demographic information. Individual participant demographics are available wherever a participant is quoted. Students indicated the identities they wished to include on their demographic form; those identities are represented. The descriptions demonstrate the ways in which intersecting identities should be considered together and that a student speaks from their lived experience at the intersection of their identities.

- **Megan:** Megan is an American Indian/Native American and white woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in an interdisciplinary field.
- **Aleisha:** Aleisha is an Asian/Pacific Islander and Christian woman born in Hong Kong. She identified as Christian. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Brian:** Brian is an Asian/Pacific Islander and white man. He was in his 6th year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Elisa:** Elisa is a multiracial woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a STEM field.
- **Kyra:** Kyra is a Black/African American woman from a low-income background. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in social science.
- **Leonora:** Leonora is a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic and LGBTQ+ woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a social

science field.

- **Chris:** Chris is a white LGBTQ+ man. He was in his 2nd year of pursuing a master's degree in a humanities field.
- **Caitlin:** Caitlin is a white woman. She was in her 5th year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Wei:** Wei is an Asian/Pacific Islander woman born in China. She identifies as an only child and as nonreligious from a collectivist culture. She was in her 3rd year of pursuing her master's degree in a social science.
- **Jenny:** Jenny is an Asian/Pacific Islander woman originally from Indonesia. She identifies as middle class and Buddhist. She was in her 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Makayla:** Makayla is an American Indian/Native American and Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a STEM field.
- **Maiv:** Maiv is an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Danao:** Danao is an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, and Filipino woman from a SES family. She was in her 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a humanities field.
- **Jason:** Jason is an Asian/Pacific Islander man. He was in his 4th year of pursuing a PhD in a humanities field.
- **Kamari:** Kamari is a Black/African/African American and LGBTQ+ man. He was in his 4th year of pursuing a PhD in a humanities field.
- **Miya:** Miya is a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman. She was in her 3rd year of pursuing a PhD in a STEM field.
- **Cesar:** Cesar is a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic and asexual man who grew up in a low-SES household and was an English language learner. He was in his 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Camilia:** Camila is a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman. She was in her 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a STEM field.
- **Nate:** Nate is a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic and LGBTQ+ man. He was in his 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a STEM field.
- **Rachel:** Rachel is a multiracial woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Anna:** Anna is a white woman. She was in her 4th year of pursuing a PhD in an interdisciplinary field.
- **Sophia:** Sophia is a white woman. She was in her 3rd year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Adam:** Adam is a white man. He was in his 5th year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.
- **Abby:** Abby is a white woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a STEM field.
- **Sara:** Sara is a white woman. She was in her 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a professional degree program.
- **Tan:** Tan is an Asian/Pacific Islander man born in Thailand. He was in his 1st year of pursuing a master's degree in a STEM field.
- **Jaeho:** Jaeho is an Asian/Pacific Islander man. He was in his 2nd year of pursuing his PhD in a STEM field.
- **Linda:** Linda is a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman born in Mexico. She was in her 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a STEM field.
- **Ji:** Ji is an Asian/Pacific Islander man. He was in his 2nd year of pursuing a PhD in a social science field.

Throughout this resource, you will notice references to the participants and their experiences. As you come across their names, simply hover over them to remind yourself about their identities and backgrounds.

Participants Demographic Characteristics (N = 30)		
Characteristics	**Frequency**	**%**
Sex		
Male	10	33%
Female	19	63%
No response	1	0.3%
Degree type		
Professional	1	0.3%
Master	10	33%
PhD	19	63%
Area of study		
Humanities	4	13%
Interdisciplinary	3	10%
Social science	13	43%
STEM	10	33%
Race/ethnicity*		
American Indian/Native American	3	10%
Asian	10	33%
Black	4	13%
Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic	6	20%
Multiracial	2	7%
White	11	37%
Immigrant status		
Yes	6	20%
No	23	77%
No response	1	0.3%
Pell Grant recipient		
Yes	18	60%
No	11	37%
No response	1	3%
*Some students listed more than one race/ethnicity and not multiracial, so the total number is higher than the actual participants.		

Data Analysis

This study used narrative inquiry to gain insight into how FGGS identities influenced the process of socialization, presented barriers to graduation, and how students build and use capital to complete their graduate studies. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocol, the research team's initial codes were developed during transcription review and then collapsed into categories where the following themes emerged: Naming and Negotiating Black Boxes, Living Ivory Tower Socialization, Building Capital, Doing (Me) Research, Jarring Juxtaposition, Family, Financing Education, Managing Mental Health, and Making Meaning of First-generation Identity. Following initial code development, the research team cross-checked these codes with three transcripts to continue the process of categorization and arrive at a saturation of categories. This iterative process created a code book used to code transcripts within Nvivo. After creating the code book, the research team chose a subset of participants with varying demographics to cross-check after Nvivo coding to ensure similar coding. After this, the research team met to discuss the discrepancies in codes and address any questions with this process to finalize the codes. Memoing was used to refine the code book and resulted in the findings.

Summary

We shed light on how institutions of higher education can better prepare for and serve the population of students who are the first in their family to earn a graduate and/or professional degree. We cover themes that honor the stories of first-generation students as well as recommendations for how practitioners should receive, interpret, and implement this information. We provide a universal framing of what institutions can and should do in support of FGGSs.

In this monograph, we provide additional contexts for our research and the current research and scholarship regarding the graduate and professor school experiences of students who are the first in their family to complete an undergraduate degree. We draw on Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality and describe each component of the model. We then use the model to contextualize the themes that we present and share. Finally, we conclude with discussion, recommendations, and guides for how institutional contexts can be used to inform the graduate school experience.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this chapter, we review contemporary literature on the first-generation graduate student (FGGS) experience. We recognize that attention to first-generation students in graduate school is relatively nascent in the higher education literature. Earlier work emerged around socialization in graduate education, challenges that first-generation students faced, and college sociocultural contexts. (e.g., Gardner, 2013; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). While acknowledging this past work, we endeavored to capture contemporary research and scholarship on FGGS experiences with a focus on literature that acknowledges both systemic inequities in higher education and intersecting positionalities of FGGSs.

We sought burgeoning research that not only acknowledged structural issues but also used foundational research to offer new insights into critiquing the status quo. This endeavor was more challenging than anticipated because an abundance of literature is still rooted in the deficit-narrative (see Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021, for their systematic review of literature on first-generation students). For this reason, as much as possible, we position our narrative to reflect everything that FGGSs can do and more. In this chapter, you will read more on language and terminology around first-generation, reflect on the juxtaposition of the first-generation graduate identity with other social identities that graduate students hold, and learn more about what may be unique to FGGS in graduate education.

A Brief Primer on First-generation Students

First-generation students are not a monolith; their social identities are often intertwined with their racial, ethnic, cultural, class, gender, and/or immigrant or refugee identities, among many others (Ardoin & Erb, 2022; Jehangir et al., 2024; Seay et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2018). We know, for example, that Hispanic or Latinx/a/o (73%), Black or African American (65%), and/or American Indian (64%) students make up a large percentage of undergraduates who are first-generation (RTI International, 2023a).

Through these intersectional facets, first-generation students may bring cumulative capital but also experience disadvantages, as well as representation and underrepresentation, as a result of their social identities (Gopaul, 2019). For this reason, we simultaneously promote an asset-based perspective on first-generation experiences and refer to first-generation and first-gen+ (Whitley et al., 2018) students collectively with other oppressed and disenfranchised social identities as systematically marginalized (rather than historically marginalized or minoritized). In doing so, we recognize that the antecedents to students' marginalizations are not only historical but are also currently operating against them and that students' exclusion and othering from academic spaces are not accidental or without some intentionality (Ardoin, 2021; Ardoin & Erb, 2022; Jehangir et al., 2022).

Language and Terminology

Defining First-generation

Over the years, higher education institutions have adopted the federal TRIO program's definition of first-generation college student: a student whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree. More recently, this definition has been expanded to be more inclusive. First-generation status, more than before, now includes individuals whose parents completed a 4-year degree outside of the United States (NASPA, 2017). Many higher education researchers (e.g., Ardoin, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2020; & Jehangir, 2010) have noted the complexities of the definition

of first-generation identity, especially as it pertains to graduate school (Ardoin & Erb, 2022). In particular, not only are there preferences by researchers and practitioners regarding the types of degrees earned or not earned by parents, but Ardoin (2021) also argued that the use of the word "parents" might even serve to alienate some students who may have been raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, family friends, siblings, and/or themselves as the primary caregiver. Thus, we purposefully employ the definition of first-generation, following Ardoin's recommendations, to be students whose caregivers have not earned a 4-year college degree in the United States. As such, we also frame continuing-generation students to be students whose caregivers have earned a 4-year degree in the United States, recognizing that additional nuances and exploration will be required for students in which these definitions will not neatly fit. We lay out these interpretations of the first-generation identity to emphasize how institutional definitions often may not be adequately inclusive of the lived experiences of first-generation students. Additionally, these institutional definitions may not capture all the nuances that encompass the first-generation identity. Given the definition we presented, we note that we use the same conceptualization of first-generation for graduate students as we do undergraduate students (i.e., FGGSs are those whose caregivers have not completed a 4-year degree and are now in graduate school). This nevertheless comes with its own challenges: Institutions supportive of (e.g., provides funding and resources for) graduate education also notably vary in how they describe first-generation. For example, the National Science Foundation describes first-generation college students as those whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree, whereas the National Institutes of Health use the definition of first-generation as those who have or had no parents or legal guardians who completed a bachelor's degree.

We undertake this reflexive and recursive process of defining and operationalizing first-generation experiences and spaces to honor the roots and application of the term first-generation, which dates to the Higher Education Act of 1980. This act set the stage for college access programs and initiatives like TRIO and Pell grants (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2022). TRIO, as an overarching label, primarily refers to three outreach and student service federal grant programs: TRIO Upward Bound, TRIO Student Support Services, and TRIO McNair Scholars Program. Currently, eight TRIO programs serve systematically marginalized students (i.e., low-income, first-generation, and/or with disability). TRIO Upward Bound serves low-income, first-generation high school students; TRIO Student Support Services serves low-income, first-generation, and/or with special needs undergraduate students; and TRIO McNair Scholars Program serves low-income, first-generation college students interested in and/or applying to graduate school. For example, 64% of McNair scholars who received a degree in 2016–17 were enrolled in graduate school.

The intersectional identities of the students TRIO serves reminds us to explicitly acknowledge the role of race, social class, and access and opportunity when describing the first-generation identity and how amalgamated these identities and experiences are for students themselves. An overview of TRIO Student Support Services in 2013–14, for example, identified that participants were largely female (67.5%); 17 to 22 years old (50%); both low-income and first-generation (68.5%); and majority white (42.7%), Black/African American (26.6%), and Hispanic (20.7%). As Maureen Hoyler described, "People are less open to disclosing their class and family backgrounds, but they can't not disclose their race or ethnicity" (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2022, p. 16). Particularly, the use of language surrounding first-generation must also address the cumulative impact of systemic racism and classism on students' access to opportunities, as well as their overall educational pathways (Jehangir et al., 2022; Saichaie, 2023). We conclude this section with another quote from Hoyler:

> If we don't invest in individuals who are first-generation—regardless of race, regardless of income—and provide assistance and support, their potential is often unrealized. But we cannot ignore the additional barriers of race, ethnicity, class, and disability. And that's what TRIO's about. That's what the federal role in higher education is about. It's important always that the advocates for first-generation students on campuses remember that Civil Rights history. (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2022, p. 12)

In the next section, we expand on what it means to be a first-generation student participating in graduate education.

Who are Graduate Students?

A 20-Year Snapshot of Graduate Student Degree Awardees

In their book *A Handbook for Supporting Today's Graduate Students*, David Nguyen and Christina Yao (2022) brought together scholars and practitioners to share their expertise and research on the experiences and education of today's graduate students. Notably, Nguyen, in his chapter on the trends in graduate education, highlighted the demography of graduate students (with master's or with doctoral education) from 1998 to 2018 (Nguyen, 2022). First, the number of graduate degrees awarded has increased significantly. Second, while race, ethnicity, and sex demographics of graduate awardees have evolved, graduate education is still a white- and male-dominated profession and endeavor. Other researchers (e.g., Bostick et al., 2022; Bryson & Grunert Kowalske, 2022; Roksa et al., 2022; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022) have noted this "double-bind" phenomenon (see Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021), which reflects inequality in aspects of higher education such as institutional funding, student loans, and access to opportunities for graduate students who are non-white and not men.

Graduate Student Socialization

Nguyen (2022) also noted types of socialization today's graduate students tend to receive and embody. This includes mastering discipline-based knowledge and specialty-based areas; developing and producing discipline- and specialty-area theories and methods; and collaborating with peers, faculty, and other colleagues in their disciplines and specialties (Lovitts, 2005; Weidman et al., 2001). When graduate students are effectively socialized into the cultures and expectations of their disciplines and specialties, they may be granted a cumulative advantage (Gopaul, 2019) that further prepares and propels them into professional and academic careers. Graduate students who are able to secure fellowships, for instance, may then be provided additional opportunities for research, teaching, and/or professional development. With the notion of compounding access to opportunities in mind, when considering who graduate students are and how graduate students are socialized, not only must we look at their dispositions, but we must also consider who they are in conjunction with the interpersonal relationships and structural constraints that act on. For example, researchers have identified academic departments, graduate colleges, and identity-centered organizations as influential places of socialization for facilitating and supporting graduate student success (Hypolite, 2022; Perez et al., 2020). However, barriers and obstacles from these entities (e.g., insufficient funding and lack of instrumental support) may instead serve to hinder and socialize students away from graduate education (Lovitts, 2001; Maher et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2022).

Graduate Students Are Everywhere, Everything, All at Once

Doctoral education is not a passive experience, nor are graduate students passive recipients of their education (Gonzales et al., 2024; McGee et al., 2022). Graduate students are highly motivated producers of knowledge who bring with them an abundance of wisdom, gifts, and experiences. They are intellectuals with goals and aspirations to empower communities.

They are also revitalizers of themselves and their families, working toward uplifting their communal assets and bringing their community and familial cultural wealth to the academy (Breeden et al., 2024; Cadenas et al., 2022; Gardner, 2013; Gonzales et al., 2024; Montero-Hernandez & Drouin, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Graduate students are agents and recipients of intellectual growth, professional socialization, and progressive independence from advisors, mentors, peers, and colleagues, of which the quality of the mentorship and support has a consequential impact on graduate degree completion and attrition, and career and professional aspirations and achievement (Brown et al., 2021; Posselt, 2018).

Therefore, in all conceptualizations of a graduate student, there must also be recognition of how faculty advisors and mentors, peers and colleagues, and department, program, and lab settings all simultaneously influence graduate students' pursuit of their doctorate (Rodriguez et al., 2022; Roksa et al., 2018). Given that graduate students are also highly aware of power imbalances in their relationships and interactions (Breeden et al., 2024; Friedensen et al., 2024), intentionality in addition to instrumental support within the entire ecosystem (see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is required for facilitating belonging and success. McGee and colleagues (2022) expounded on this idea well by criticizing the co-opting of impostorism by campus administrators. They describe how contemporary uses of impostorism problematize graduate students and put the onus on them to "cure themselves" rather than the institutional policies and practices that actively work against their success. Thus, McGee and colleagues point to the multiplicity of the social forces that affect success—rather than success being a function of the graduate students themselves or their motivations.

About First-generation Graduate Students

Before our review of the literature, we contextualized the FGGS experience by comparing contemporary data on first-generation students with data on continuing-generation students. The Center for First-generation Student Success has released several national data fact sheets that include comparative information about first-generation college students, including their demographic and enrollment characteristics, as well as their COVID-19 pandemic and postgraduation experiences. With respect to degree aspirations and enrollment (RTI International, 2024), more first-generation college graduates (47%) expected to complete an undergraduate degree than did continuing-generation college graduates (41%). However, more continuing-generation college graduates expected to complete a master's (40%) or doctoral (19%) degree than did first-generation college graduates (37% and 16%, respectively). Regarding the actual percentage of enrollment, more first-generation college graduates enrolled in undergraduate-level (21%) and master's-level (65%) programs than did continuing-generation college graduates (20% and 56%, respectively). Yet, more continuing-generation college graduates enrolled in a doctoral program (24%) than did first-generation college graduates (14%).

These trends are important and provide actionable steps for educators and policymakers. Nevertheless, these trends on first-generation college graduates should also not be examined in a vacuum. For instance, the higher percentages of first-generation college graduates enrolling in a master's program and lower percentages enrolling in a doctoral program may be informed by how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a greater percentage of first-generation college graduates of color (compared with first-generation white students) experienced deferment on private student loans, delayed additional education, were employed outside of their field, or had taken on additional family or childcare responsibilities (RTI International, 2024). These trends were largely consistent across all racial/ethnic groups, except for students identifying as Hispanic or Latinx/a/o, when comparing first-generation college graduates with continuing-generation college graduates. These data comparisons lend additional

nuances to understanding today's graduate students, particularly FGGS.

FGGSs in Tandem With Other Graduate Students

In this section, we overview and juxtapose FGGSs within the overall graduate school experience (i.e., endemically middle- to upper-middle social class) and in relation to other graduate student social identities and experiences. Although research on FGGSs exists in the higher education literature (e.g., Ardoin & Erb, 2022; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Nguyen & Yao, 2022), we argue that more research on FGGSs' narratives (e.g., who they are, how they succeed, and the challenges they encounter) are still needed for understanding the breadth and depth of the FGGS experience (Nguyen & Yao, 2022).

Similar to other graduate students as a whole, FGGSs are motivated to overcome significant challenges (e.g., insufficient and unstable funding and career prospects, emotional exhaustion, research misalignment, and imposter syndrome and invisibility) to become content experts, producers of knowledge, and renowned scientists (Bahack & Addi-Raccah, 2022; Borrego et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2024; Wallace & Ford, 2021). Many FGGSs also require and depend on validating mentorship and instrumental support that are positive, stable, and humanizing from institutional agents, with agents being mainly advisors, mentors, peers, and colleagues (Bañuelos & Flores, 2021; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). When FGGSs do not have this, they will also create their own support systems and counterspaces in order to succeed within graduate education spaces (Breeden et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Similar to other graduate students, many FGGSs pursue graduate education to uplift and bolster social mobility for themselves, their families, and/or their communities (Hurst et al., 2023).

The Juxtaposition of FGGSs With Other Systematically Marginalized Graduate Students

As with other systematically marginalized graduate students, FGGSs face obstacles toward success in graduate school, such as financial barriers and biased assessment and evaluation, as well as cultural mismatch with faculty, the department, and/or the overall institution (Alejandro et al., 2020; Hypolite, 2022; Jain, 2022). FGGSs and other systematically marginalized graduate students often also perform invisible work. For example, FGGSs may need to rely on code-switching (i.e., shifting of speech to navigate different class contexts) and thereby be situated in spaces that require invisible labor to fit in (Elkins & Hanke, 2018; Sabnis et al., 2023). Code-switching, among other forms of physically and mentally taxing invisible work, may be useful strategies for buffering structural barriers, culture shock and hidden curricula (i.e., unspoken expectations), and oppressive institutional policies and practices experienced in graduate education (Abes, 2016; Laiduc & Covarrubias, 2022; Wallace, 2022). Notably, these strategies may also function to assuage discrepancies and dissonance with purported department and program diversity work or lack thereof as well (Slay et al., 2019).

Code-Switching Between Academic Spaces and Family Values.

Outside of the academy, similar to other systematically marginalized graduate students, FGGSs must navigate the divide between academic norms and practices with family beliefs, values, and obligations (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Although family and cultural values and obligations are not always in opposition to graduate student success, the energy and capacity required for navigating and justifying graduate school decisions with family and community are significant. This is particularly true when FGGSs and other systematically marginalized graduate students also need

to concurrently negotiate their academic and professional identities with institutional policies and practices (and barriers).

Uniquely FGGS: Gifts and Grind? Benefits and Burdens?

Unique to FGGSs, however, is the need to expend additional mental and financial resources to thrive, if not maintain a base level, in the academy due to lack of access to information on navigating higher education (Wallace & Ford, 2021). This does not suggest that FGGSs are without assets but rather emphasizes that the social capital accrued from having caregivers that can give direct guidance on integrating and assimilating (e.g., accessing resources correctly and efficiently) to graduate education is pivotal to overall educational success and well-being (Miner, 2022; Walsh et al., 2021). Furthermore, this also does not suggest that caregivers do not want to provide FGGSs with guidance and advice; rather, researchers have noted that, as much as possible, family members, caregivers, and other institutional agents try to position themselves as supportive agents through providing vocal support, pep talks, and overall acknowledgment of FGGSs' successes (Ardoin, 2017; Jain, 2022) and that FGGSs do respond in kind. For example, Breeden et al. (2023) found that Black FGGSs depended on friends, colleagues, faculty, affinity groups, loved ones, life partners, and support staff (e.g., administrative, custodial, and facilities staff) as pivotal support systems.

FGGSs Carrying it Forward.

For FGGSs, a consequence of inadequate opportunities and access to resources and information on navigating middle- and upper-class institutional structures is the aversion to making mistakes and subsequently the motivation to support others in avoiding similar mistakes in graduate studies (Lunceford, 2011). For example, Wofford et al. (2021) found that FGGSs expected more skill-based guidance and assistance from their faculty advisors, with the goal of learning to do research the right way. This preference prepares FGGSs not only to learn how to research as a method of resisting imposter syndrome and devaluation in graduate education and academic spaces but also to carry it forward to support others (Ardoin & Erb, 2022).

The Invisibilized Identity.

Another facet that is unique to FGGSs navigating graduate education, compared with other graduate students, is the invisibility of the first-generation identity (Holley & Gardner, 2012). There are no physical characteristics that explicitly designate someone as first generation, and the invisibility of the first-generation identity can serve to bolster or hinder the graduate education experience. The invisibility of the first-generation identity means that, for instance, FGGSs have the autonomy to determine when, where, and how to reveal, conceal, or compartmentalize their first-generation identity to institutional agents (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Phu, 2020). At the same time, the invisibility of the first-generation identity means that it can remain unrecognized by others, or even to students themselves until made known by others (Jehangir & Collins, 2021). This nonrecognition may result in inadequate and insufficient advising and mentoring due to faculty advisors and mentors, for instance, not being aware of FGGSs' needs (Pumaccahua & Rogers, 2023). This subsequently adds to the immeasurable burden and cognitive load as FGGS must negotiate receiving support or destabilizing their relationships when revealing their first-generation identity. Chang et al. (2020), for example, described how those with first-generation identities may underutilize social support (thereby not making their identity known) due to concerns about burdening others, being judged by others and losing face, and making matters worse. A final consequence of the first-generation identity being unrecognized is that the first-generation identity and first-generation experiences overall can be perceived as either unique or singular (Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021). The perception that the first-generation identity is unique or singular can

function to erase the first-generation identity through eliciting doubt of one's own experiences (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). For example, researchers have recounted instances in which FGGSs themselves doubt whether they are first-generation due to someone in their family and/or a caregiver attending college during or after the students themselves enrolled (Ardoin, 2021; Collins & Jehangir, 2021).

Concluding Thoughts

Separating the Inseparable

We want to provide a disclaimer now that you have read this chapter on the FGGS experience. Although we tried to separate FGGSs from other graduate students to highlight the unique experiences of FGGSs, it truly is not that simple. The difficulties in parsing out the first-generation experience lies in the intersectional social identities that FGGSs carry. For example, Black FGGSs interviewed by Wallace (2022) noted how they themselves could not parse out their first-generation identity from their minoritized identities because of how their experiences of being oppressed and discriminated against are so enmeshed in both identities. Phu (2020) also described how her gender and Asian American identities were so embedded within her first-generation identity as a graduate student and now faculty member that her words, actions, and emotions could not exclusively represent one identity over the other. For Latinx FGGSs in Bañuelos & Flores's (2021) study, instrumental support from faculty was also entangled in their intersecting identities. Applying to research programs and fellowships as a Latinx FGGS, for example, required faculty support and experiential knowledge that could simultaneously assuage students' experience with racism and classism, limited knowledge on graduate school and research opportunities, and financial instability.

We shared research on FGGS narratives, including who they are, how they succeed, and the challenges they encounter, to highlight the diverse factors that influence the first-generation experience. While we tried to parse out FGGS characteristics, we fully recognize and emphasize that identifying as first-generation is multidimensional, intersectional, and complicated (Jehangir & Collins, 2021), and that there is no uniform FGGS experience in graduate education (Miner, 2022; Seay et al., 2008). As Gardner (2013) proclaimed, "Getting into graduate school is only half the battle." We conclude this chapter with the following observations:

1. What we know about first-generation undergraduate students can also apply to FGGSs (Lunceford, 2011; Miner, 2022; Roksa et al., 2018).
2. First-generation status carries through not only graduate school but also into professional and career spaces (Jain, 2022; Covarrubias, 2022).
3. First-generation experiences are not anomalies; rather they should be noticed as trailblazing and make it clear for others who come next (see @FirstGenDocs in Brown et al., 2021).

In later chapters, we share our recommendations alongside those from prominent researchers and practitioners in first-generation spaces.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter provides an overview and rationale for theoretical frameworks that inform this study. We employ intersectionality as an overarching framework and, by extension, use the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality to demonstrate how theory can illustrate the interplay of multiple identities and systemic inequities in the first-generation graduate student (FGGS) experience (Núñez, 2014).

Intersectionality as a Grounding Framework

For this study, we use intersectionality as a way of highlighting the multiple identities FGGSs hold in higher education. Intersectionality describes "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). In current research, intersectionality has been applied in examining categories of interconnected systems of oppression on race and ethnicity to gender, class, sexuality, nationality, language, and disabilities (Davis, 2008; Lutz, 2002; Winker & Degele, 2011).

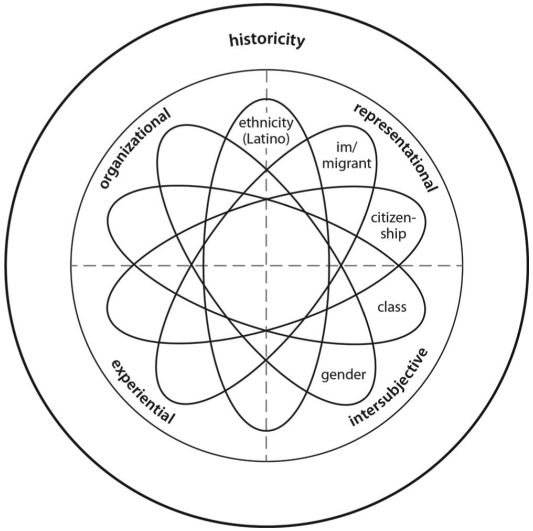
When FGGSs enter higher education, they experience the campus context through a complex maze of overlapping lenses that are reflective of their intersecting identities (Whitley et al., 2018). Certain identities come into salience in varied spaces in both home and school. This negotiation occurs in a world of "intersectional constraints perpetuated by racism, classism … that are not new to them—they have often traversed, negotiated and challenged structural inequities in other parts of their lives" (Jehangir & Collins, 2021, p. 303). As such, intersectionality as a grounding framework names the way power structures and preferred forms of capital affect FGGSs.

Intersectionality's foundations lie in Black feminist thought and critical race theory, which emerged from the active role of Black women and women of color in the creation of race, class, and gender studies as an interdisciplinary field (Collins, 2015; Combahee River Collective, 1995; Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1998). It is vital that we pay homage to the foundations of intersectionality as a critical framework for understanding identity in the context of systems and structures of inequality. The multiple intersecting identities of FGGSs in school influence how they interact, engage, and pursue success in environments that historically were not created for them. Intersectionality names the histories of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of structural inequality that are interwoven into the very fiber of higher education and employed as forms of exclusion. As FGGSs enter graduate school, they encounter increased ambiguity; gatekeeping by both faculty and peers; and institutional practices, procedures, and policies that constrain their engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence in the academy (Gardner & Barker, 2015; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Posselt, 2016).

Multilevel Model of Intersectionality as a Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework draws on Abes, Jones, and McEwen's model of multiple dimensions of identity and intersectionality theory as a way of understanding the interaction between the individual and the environment (Abes et al., 2007; Collins, 2015). While not explicitly stated, the concentric circle referred to as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem alludes to Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Abes

et al. (2007) provided an examination of multiple dimensions of identity for students in the college context. Intersectionality highlights the interaction between individuals and systems and structures of oppression and how multiple identities influence their experience of an environment (Collins, 2015).



Together, these offer a lens for examining how environments grow from individual interactions to systemic interactions and the ways students with multiple identities must negotiate institutional, social, and historical contexts and domains of power.

Building on the work of sociologist Floya Anthias (2013), Ana Marie Núñez (2014) offered the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (MMI) (see Figure 1) as a means of building the flexible application of intersectionality toward educational research. Anthias (2013), as cited in Núñez (2014), argued:

> Examining power relations in an intersectional manner must involve interrogating how certain social categories are constituted as inferior in comparison to others, how people are framed as part of a larger economic project rather than encouraged to actualize their own self-defined potential, and how resources are distributed in uneven ways to limit the life chances of certain individuals in specific social categories. (p. 86)

The MMI considers how multiple identities intersect with other micro-, meso-, and macrolevels of analyses. The MMI allows for the analysis, interpretation, and use of intersectionality, and in particular inequality, across structures, contexts, and systems. The MMI represents the interactions between social categories, social identities, social relations, and historical perspectives and contexts. The model affords greater analytical clarity by operationalizing the questions about "what is being referred to (social categories or concrete relations), arena of investigation (organizational, representational, intersubjective and experiential) and historicity (processes and outcomes)" (Anthias, 2013, as cited in Núñez, 2014, p. 87).

The innermost circle encompasses the social categories that represent individuals' varied social identities (e.g., gender, class, race, im/migrant status) and how they might relate to one another. This level of analysis recognizes that social categories are socially constructed, such that social positions, divisions, and hierarchies are developed and maintained by the individuals within a given society. As a result, social categories are not necessarily bound to individuals' social identities but stem from and are influenced by within- and between-group comparisons. Núñez (2014) argued that identifying and recognizing social categories is the necessary first step to employ intersectionality and understanding how social and educational inequalities are maintained and perpetuated. Notably, individuals hold multiple social identities, and consideration of only one individual level of identity parochially focuses attention on individuals'

dispositions rather than the economic, social, and political contexts, policies, and structures that root these social and educational inequalities.

The second circle of mesoanalysis considers how the social categories and social identities are shaped by four arenas:

- Organizational relations refer to positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education that affect educational and social opportunities.
- Representational relations encompass discourse and prevailing narratives, specifically the conversations on who is included or excluded from societal and educational opportunities.
- Intersubjective relations consider the relationships between individuals, their identities, and members of affiliated and nonaffiliated groups. In particular, how individuals and groups relate to one another can influence the societal and educational opportunities made available.
- Experiential relations constitute narrative sensemaking and how the narratives and counternarratives constructed about oneself or one's group influence the potential to engage and succeed in societal and educational opportunities.

Each represents practices constituting domains of power that influence the maintenance and perpetuation of inequalities across social categories.

Historicity is the third level of macroanalysis and situates the social categories, social identities, and social relations within historicity, or historical perspective and contexts. Historicity incorporates and engages the systems of economic, legal, political, media, and social power and classification. In doing so, historicity illustrates how social categories and social relations function to either foster social and educational opportunities or maintain and perpetuate inequalities and inequities.

Núñez (2014) employed the MMI to provide insights into understanding the role of intersectionality, including different social categories, social relationships, and temporal contexts in educational research. Particularly, employing intersectionality through the lens of the MMI allows for a more in-depth understanding of the role of dominant power relations, practices, and systems on educational opportunities or lack thereof. It is important to note that Núñez employed this multidimensional model as a tool to study the diversity of social identities among Latino im/migrant high school students and the "interlocking relationships between social systems of domination and marginalization in shaping Latinos' educational equity" (p. 89).

FGGSs who aspire and matriculate to graduate school also share diverse social identities and experience forms of marginalization shaped by norms, mores, expectations, social capital exchange, and history of structures not designed for them. Núñez (2014) highlighted the heuristic capacity of the MMI and how the model "can be applied to study how other social identities, including gender, race, class, citizenship, sexuality, religion, and other dimensions of difference, simultaneously influence educational experiences and outcomes" (p. 90).

We take on this charge to attend to the historical, economic, and social contexts that influence the educational opportunities and success of FGGSs. Inspired by our participants, we situate this book as one that can identify divergent power dynamics that perpetuate social and educational inequities and in which intersectionality is dynamically recognized in advocacy of FGGSs.

Flexibility and Adaptability of MMI Model to First-Generation Graduate Students

Exercising the flexibility of the MMI model, we apply its components to

the context of FGGSs in U.S. higher education. The following paragraph highlights how the different social relations and practices exemplified in the MMI (i.e., organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential) and historicity are contextualized within the context of the FGGS participants.

Historicity

The lens of history invites a consideration of interlocking systems of economics, law, politics, media, and social power, particularly how these shifting forces influence language and narratives and function as policy and practice. Historicity represents how graduate students, particularly FGGSs, are organized in higher education with their multifaceted identities and within prevailing structures and systems of power that affect their access, persistence, and success in graduate school.

Policies have long dictated who has access to higher education. In 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) granted funding for veterans to pursue higher education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and Higher Education Act of 1965 aimed to address the barriers to college access and increase the number of students attending higher education (Nidiffer, 2010). The Economic Opportunity Act also established federal TRIO programs to fund opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). These types of policies at the federal level determine who has access to higher education and what additional resources are available to students who have historically been excluded from college.

The weight of historicity is also felt in language over time and by institutional context. Ngũgĩ (1986) argued that "language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive our place in the world" (p. 16). The question of what one is called and how this classifies place in higher education is particularly important for FGGSs because the term first-generation has often been used as a marker of deficiency or lack (Jehangir & Collins, 2021). Specifically, the assessment of first-generation students' ability has included evaluation of merit that perpetuates the use of measures and internalized tropes of deficiency. In literature, programmatic rationales, and in direct reference to students, the term first-generation has often been used to signify lack compared with continuing-generation students. There is a working and faulty assumption that merit markers (grades, standardized tests, AP courses, access to internships and research opportunities) are procured solely by individual skills and diligence without attention to the ecological, societal, and historical barriers that affect educational endeavors from early childhood to graduate school. "Merit is always a conditional, not an absolute assessment" (Posselt, 2016, p. 7). As such, FGGSs must navigate through and against a language of deficiency and negotiate how to use their own assets and gifts in their research, teaching, or negotiation of program requirements and milestones in the shadow of the social and institutional history. In recent years, there has been a reframing of the term first-generation in a more positive light, demonstrating the changing social construction of language and terms over time. For this reason, historicity demands consideration of synchronic (a moment in time) and diachronic (patterns over time; Anthias, 2013). The meso or second concentric circle in the diagram reflects the four arenas of investigation and their application to FGGSs: organizational, representational, intersubjectivity, and experiential. These four arenas address what Anthias (2013) calls "embodied practices" (p.12).

Arena of Investigation: Organizational, Representational, Intersubjective, and Experiential

Organizational Arena

Anthias (2013) defined the organizational arena of investigation as "a structural position that focuses on how population categories are organized within institutional frameworks, e.g., family structures and networks, educational systems, political and legal systems, the state apparatus and the system of policing and surveillance" (p. 11). Núñez (2014) extended this to the educational milieu to consider positions in "structures of society, such as work, family, and education" (p. 88), that are affected by policies that hinder or promote students' educational opportunities (e.g., anti-im/migrant or affirmative action).

The organizational arena considers how populations and groups are organized within systems. Given that FGGSs occupy multiple and overlapping social categories, their lived experience in academia is affected by policy, legal and political systems, and shifting state policies. They may experience interruptions as well as discrimination from policies that favor exclusion over inclusion. Policies and practices can perpetuate implicit curricula over explicit communication. These organizational structures and power dynamics can influence FGGSs' access to and understanding of norms of practice. The institution, through academic (e.g., enrollment), financial (e.g., funding), and social (e.g., first-generation week) capital, has the power to shape and define the narrative of the successful graduate student and thereby the successful FGGS.

The institution as an organization intimately defines who does and does not belong. Both prestige and precarity exist in being first-generation and operate within the institution, the graduate program, and the field of study. The institution and its components may be hostile and punitive to FGGSs who, explicitly and/or implicitly, share their first-generation identity. For example, revealing first-generation status may be attributed to a lack of rigor and may cost students opportunities to be selected for certain projects. The institution socializes and awards certain forms of capital over others. Those who do not align may experience harm or be dismissed as lacking rigor or fit, further limiting (and hoarding) financial, social, and educational capital to the black boxes and ivory tower.

Representational Arena

Anthias (2013) defined the representational arena as "discourses that focus on the images and texts, the documents and information flows around social divisions in different institutional frameworks" (p. 11). Núñez (2014) extended this application to include "discursive processes that signal who is included or excluded from opportunities" (pg. 89). The dominant narrative of groups and the social construction of students in the larger context of higher education and its repeated use over time shapes how faculty, staff, and peers engage in discourse about said group or social category.

The representational arena addresses narratives and discourse that shape and guide information and perception around social divisions in a field or institution. What is the story that a particular institution tells about FGGSs? Is their narrative absent or excluded in graduate spaces? Is the narrative one that is rooted in deficit- or asset-based construction? Is the narrative one-dimensional or does it attend to the complex social categories (race, class, gender, ability, and more) that embody first-gen+ identities?

The language and the prevailing explicit and implicit discourse that institutions posit about FGGSs shape perception, policy, and practice by faculty, staff, and peers. These discourses can and have employed language that perpetuates a deficit narrative (e.g., "at risk"). Even an absence of naming FGGSs is a means of invisibilizing the experience of

FGGSs and suggests that the dominant narrative of who is a "successful graduate student" is the expected status quo. Considering how information is shared and operationalized in dominant discourse and media (e.g., images, texts, and documents), whose identities, lived experiences, and community capital are emphasized and reinforced as positive in higher education? For example, the statements and visuals used for advising and goal and initiative development often value the exemplary graduate student (e.g., dedicated only to research and dissemination of research), inadvertently devaluing the other roles graduate students, particularly FGGSs, inhabit and may be responsible for (e.g., caregiver, cultural broker, and familial expert).

The discourse around graduate school and FGGSs has experienced shifts with recent trends that recognize the community cultural wealth that FGGSs bring to academia and the arguments for humanizing graduate education (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Wallace & Ford, 2021; Yosso, 2005). The extent to which these particular discourses are shifting the narrative within institutions and specific disciplines will affect the experience of FGGSs. In addition, as national First-Generation College Celebrations have grown, FGGSs must navigate how graduate schools and programs represent them and whether the institution practices are supportive or merely tokenizing their first-generation identity—that is, whether the institution employs problematic celebratory discourse where the first-generation experience may be put on a pedestal at specific times, without attention to changing structural supports and challenging deficit narratives in images, texts, documents, and discourse.

Intersubjectivity Arena

Anthias (2013) defined intersubjective as follows:

> Practices that are in relation to others, including non-person actors such as the police, the social security system, and so on. It also denotes patterns of practices of identity and otherness (e.g., such as practices of bonding, friendship, and distancing). (p. 11)

Núñez's (2014) definition described intersubjectivity within the educational context as "relationships between individuals and members of groups" (p. 89) and how individuals and groups relating to each other influence educational opportunities.

Intersubjectivity raises questions about how FGGSs' social and cultural capital is perceived and how this might affect their ability to cultivate relationships that support or hinder success in graduate school with advisor(s), peer groups, mentor(s), and professional organizations. The capacity to build this relationship can profoundly influence belonging, access to resources, and understanding of resources toward various key milestones, funding, and career opportunities. This is complicated by the fact that FGGSs negotiate their graduate school experience in the context of family, community roles, relationships, and cultural expectations.

For FGGSs, these relationships include faculty members, advisors, peers, and partners in research endeavors as well as connection or lack thereof with disciplinary sites of study (e.g., conferences, cross-institutional groups, postdocs), all of which are part of a web of relational support structure and forms of socialization. The intersubjectivity arena raises questions about how socialization processes in graduate school may work to perpetuate forms of meritocracy versus processes that humanize and normalize space for unpacking hidden curricula and recognizing ways of knowing that reflect the diverse intersecting identities of FGGSs and their communities. Graduate institutional spaces often lack sufficient representation and are a stark reminder of who made it into graduate opportunities and who is legitimized in the academy. When faculty, staff, and peers are continuin-

generation, a community of FGGSs and first-generation professionals becomes notably more important. The lack of representation further foreshadows to FGGSs whether they would be welcomed and invited into future academic and/or professional career spaces by key stakeholders.

Belonging in an institutional context requires relational processes in which the space has been constructed as a place of belonging on behalf of and with intentional advocacy for FGGSs. For FGGSs, finding role models and mentors (i.e., individuals with similar mentalities and experiences) is pivotal. These institutional agents may be peers, faculty, advisors, and particularly folks who perceive and can make positive assumptions about what students know and can do. FGGSs rely on institutional agents who can contribute to an understanding of navigating gaps, advise on building relationships, counsel on navigating or avoiding certain paths in graduate school, and help them negotiate systems and bureaucracies.

Experiential Arena

The final component of the model is the experiential arena, which refers to how individuals construct meaning about their experiences and personhood and how narratives, both positive and negative, about ability, merit, and belonging shape their experiences and outcomes. Anthias (2013) defined this concept as "narratives related to meaning-making and sociality (including the affective, the emotional, and the body). This definition includes narrations of identification, distinction, and othering" (p. 11).

For FGGSs, this experiential arena pertains to narratives they construct of themselves as they negotiate the embodied practices of the aforementioned arenas. FGGSs' narrative construction of who they are and what they can do in multiple academic spaces can include a resistance of deficit framing and other perceived markers of merit, especially while navigating interlocking systems of oppression within educational and societal systems. In addition, the compounding influence of FGGSs' other intersectional identities may make it challenging for FGGSs and institutional agents to differentiate from the first-generation identity, such as educational attainment, social class, disability status, race, and ethnicity. For instance, the navigation of academic, familial, and social obligations becomes a narrative of both pride and conflict for FGGSs that may not be explicitly clear to institutional agents. Family and cultural obligations are points of negotiation in which FGGSs have to balance their role in their family with their pursuit of graduate school. This can influence FGGSs' sensemaking and how they construct their narratives and dream of their educational possibilities. For FGGSs, the extent to which the deficit narrative is internalized or resisted is shaped by family, community, peers, and mentors who equip them with forms of support, ways of knowing, and collective capital that allow them to push against negative narratives to recognize their adaptability and navigational, linguistic, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005).

Summary

Given how students and their communities experience higher education as an organization, students are required to challenge how institutions situate themselves and whether there is alignment with the institutional espoused mission of serving all people. For FGGSs, there may be instances of problematic popularity and conditional belonging in which there is an internalized dilemma and questioning of whether students are being included or excluded, and whether inclusion necessitates being put on the pedestal when the diversity of the institution is highlighted but invisibilized in every other situation.

The relationships that FGGSs build can help or deter their navigation of graduate school. FGGS arrive with a wealth of knowledge navigating

systems; however, FGGSs have to further make meaning of not only the important institutional actors and nonactors but also the systems and bureaucracy that employ the actors. Particularly, whether the space has been made for positive interpersonal relationships to occur and be maintained, and whether the relational processes socialized within those interactions can align with and support students' social identities (including first-generation status), lived experiences, and communities. In this way, the MMI, through explicating the relational, institutional, and historical contexts and domains of power that maintain social (in)equalities), provides critical and conceptual lens for understanding how FGGS negotiate and navigate educational and societal institutions.

Chapter 4: Black Boxes and Ivory Tower Socialization

I think there's a lot of hidden culture behind academia that isn't super explicit, that you're expected to just know — Anna

Overview

This study yielded themes that are expanded on in Chapters 4–6. The first three themes in this study, Black Boxes, Ivory Tower Socialization, and Building Capital, explore the ways in which FGGSs experience the institutional context and, particularly, forms of meritocracy and hidden curricula that are embedded in higher education structures, disciplines, and socialization practices. The next themes, Doing (Me) Research, Jarring Juxtapositions, Family role, Financing Education, and Mental Health Management explore how FGGSs negotiate their identity and place between academic worlds and their home and familial communities as well as the toll of this emotional labor on their well-being. The final theme, Making Meaning of First-gen Identity, examines the challenges and cost, as well as capital and agency, that FGGSs engage in negotiating their place, positionality, and loyalty between academic, home, familial, and communal ways of being and knowing and salience of other intersectional identities.

This chapter unpacks two themes: Black Boxes and Ivory Tower Socialization. Black Boxes is derived from the conceptual function of a black box as a device or system that provides important and valuable information but does not reveal much about its own inner workings. As such, Black Boxes speak to the ways in which FGGSs' early experiences and orientation to graduate school are opaque. Ivory Tower Socialization builds on the first theme and operationalizes how FGGSs experience their place in these opaque structures and systems in graduate school settings. It is important to note that these themes also reveal the ways in which dominant norms and expectations in the United States are deeply embedded in graduate school and rooted in dominant white and middle- to upper-class norms as valued capital and currency.

Black Boxes

Black Boxes encapsulate how FGGSs describe, negotiate, and navigate the structures of higher education as well as the hidden curriculum of their department, field, and discipline in the early phases of their graduate career. The term black boxes is derived from an interview in which a participant used these words to describe the hidden expectations and rules within higher education that appear to be designed with the assumption that all students operate within worlds that employ the same norms and etiquette. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: Negotiating Process and Milestones and Institutional Language, Professionalism, and Etiquette. These subthemes are components of understanding higher education structures and unwritten rules and are reflective of hidden curricula in graduate school.

The dimensions of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (Núñez, 2014) most applicable to the Black Boxes are, first and foremost, historicity (which names and engages the systems of economic, legal, political, media, and social power) and classification. In addition, organizational relations refer to positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education that affect educational and social opportunities. Finally, representational relations encompass discourse and prevailing narratives, specifically the conversations on who is included or excluded from societal and educational

opportunities.

It is important to know that as students talked about their orientation to graduate school, the application process, introduction to the academy, and how they tried to make sense of many unknowns, they often spoke from their complex positionality as first-gen+ graduate students. From this position, they pointed out the challenges, gaps, and failing of the academy at the intersection of their FG identity with other marginalized identities, especially race, social class, gender, and LGBTQIA+ identities.

Negotiating Process and Milestones

At the core of the experience of considering and entering graduate school were ongoing questions about the very nature of graduate school and for whom it is designed. FGGSs raised questions and shared experiences about the challenges of applying to graduate school as well as the absence of guideposts and preparation for the culture and demands of the endeavor. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, described the process of applying for graduate schools as entering unknown territory:

> I think the biggest one was just not knowing what to expect. Like I said, no one had these
> conversations with me about what grad school was, what the application process looked like. I was just going with the flow, honestly…. I thought that it would just be this easy thing I could do by myself over a weekend. Like "I'm just gonna sit at home and fill out my applications." I didn't realize how in depth these applications were or how hard it would be to construct a personal statement. There were just a lot of barriers for me like having to come to these realizations and come to them fast.

Camilla, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, expanded on this experience to name the challenges in the application process and the questions it raised for her. Her reflection underscores how her identity as a FGGS shaped access to resources and know-how about entering graduate school:

> I guess that identity really comes into play when you're starting a certain process... The first thing was always applications, knowledge around applications, knowledge around the testing for those applications... Up until I applied for a PhD, half the time, I didn't even know what it was. I still don't know and I still struggle. What does a PhD mean? What does a master's mean? What types of jobs can I get out of that? It feels to me sometimes as if it's taken for granted that you know certain information that you don't know.

Many students commented on their success in high school and college and how, despite odds, they were able to learn to navigate undergraduate systems and find key supports. In comparison, the nature of graduate school was murky and the application process felt mired with rules that were hard to understand. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, reflected on her application process:

> I was trying to figure out even how to apply to school if I graduate. That was something that was very difficult to do. Applying for graduate school, that was a totally different beast as well. When it comes to being a first-gen, it's so hard because you're trying to navigate this world, not just like living in America, but also this academic world that is so new. And you don't have anyone to show you the ropes and say, "Hey, this is how you go about doing this," or "When you study, this is how you should study," or even "When you write research papers, this is how you should write it."

Embedded in the process of applying were constraints related to

standardized tests like the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), an entrance exam required by many graduate schools. Students noted limited resources to master this particular measure of academic success and shared that it is just one reflection of ability and is often rife with references to forms of capital that FGGSs have less opportunity to access. Camilia, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared:

> Everybody [else] essentially has money. No one's really talking to you about fee waivers. No one's telling you, "Oh, that's a possibility." Or no one's telling you about the free testing prep. "How does this GRE thing work? What's the best type of stuff?"

In addition to concerns about preparing for the GRE, students critiqued the value of this form of assessment and the ways in which familial resources affected access to test preparation and even the number of times one could take the test. Adam, a white man, said, "I really think GRE scores are horseshit.… Looking at the stats, I know they're not predictive of success."

Once students surmounted the hurdles of getting admitted to a graduate program, they found themselves immersed in an environment with implicit expectations that were seemingly understood by many of their peers. FGGSs shared that there was little consideration of what it took to move to an entirely new place, geography, and academic culture. Rachel, a multiracial woman, shared:

> I think the first thing for me was the discombobulation of my department. I need to know when this orientation is, like when I need to move up there. I need to be aware, when do I need to register, what classes do I need to register for? I think that was kind of my first impression…. I might have to be very adamant.

Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, described feeling thrust into her 1st year without clarity on what the work and rhythm of graduate school were supposed to be and the challenge of observing peers who seemed to know the answer:

> I was just kind of thrown in, and I had no clue what I was doing, other than I had some classes, but when I wasn't in class, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing with that time, but everyone else seemed to be busy. But when I would ask people like, "So what am I supposed to be doing right now?" They would just be like, "What do you mean?" I think it was set up with the understanding that you were coming in already knowing what a graduate program was. It took me a few years to kind of figure out that I was supposed to be reading papers and coming up with ideas for my thesis and stuff like that.

In addition to these critical nuts and bolts about beginning a new program, FGGSs raised questions about confusion around key milestones. These included questions about what one is supposed to do and accomplish in the 1st year of a program versus in the 3rd year, key differences between master's and doctoral programs, as well as ascertaining specific measures that were demonstrative of success but were often unclear and unnamed.

Markers of success ranged from small things (like praise for students who read optional readings) to more concrete ones (like publishing a certain number of papers by a particular year of graduate school or procuring an internship or fellowship). FGGSs grappled with negotiating the concrete workload of classes while also trying to glean expectations that were not explicitly stated but apparently understood by many of their peers. This is where FGGSs talked about coming to terms with an awareness of social capital that peers and faculty in the program had and employed intuitively.

Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, shared her experience observing this social capital:

> It's not just about money. Money is a big part of it. But the social capital is huge. We can tell when people look for jobs, when people are looking for help and they can easily say, "Oh, my mom has a friend…." And especially a lot of those non-first-gen students, their career choices are usually hugely influenced by what their parents are doing, but they can get more guidance…. And so I have had to do this all by myself.

FGGSs acknowledged that there were forms of social capital that were shaped by generational wealth and demonstrative of very disparate pathways to the academy. They negotiated this reality all the time in graduate school. Sophia, a white woman, said:

> One of my friends in my cohort has two parents that are both professors. They're in the same field as us, so it's just a fundamentally different experience. He had a fundamentally different experience growing up than I did. It became very apparent to me when he would share, "Oh, I send my manuscripts to my mom for proofreading and for her advice on editing and stuff," and I've never even considered doing that. Those kinds of things just started to add up…. I started at a fundamentally different level than all of these people did. In my 1st year, I feel like I sat back and observed a lot of people as they were just going about the academic lifestyle to see, just to figure out dynamics and how to go about it.

What it meant to be a successful graduate student varied by program and field, but FGGSs referred to hearing about these markers of success secondhand or by observing which peers in their cohort were deemed outstanding. As Brian, an Asian/Pacific Islander and white man, said when comparing undergraduate and graduate experiences, "There is less of a template," and by way of that certain forms of knowledge and capital. Adam, a white man, noted, "One of the most salient things for me has been to note how the whole graduate school system is set up for a certain type of learner and a certain way of knowing."

Not only did FGGSs describe observing how access to social capital prized by academia was shaped by social class, parental occupation, and all the trappings of middle- and upper-class norms, but they also noted how insidiously this was built into language of the academy. Social capital also showed up in understanding power dynamics with peers, faculty, and staff in graduate school. FGGSs described trying to read the room to understand academic code for hierarchies that were valued. They also observed that peers or faculty referenced their proximity to certain things like quality of undergraduate programs (Ivy League), particular journals, or names of scholars esteemed in the field as currency.

FGGSs employed these observations to understand power dynamics in social spheres and in relationships with faculty and advisors within this academic hierarchy. Sophia, a white woman, described grappling with "power dynamics that were super tricky for me because I was not used to dealing with anyone who had that much power" in her advising relationships. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, added:

> It is not always transparent how to handle these power dynamics. And I think maybe there is some fear, being a first-gen student, and maybe also part of it is just being a grad student, is "How do you negotiate those power dynamics? How do you get out unscathed?"

The students also described how the culture of the graduate programs influenced peer groups and student relationships. Chris, a white man, referenced "a real culture of one-upmanship about education. Like, 'Ooh, I went to this school and this person was my professor.' I'm like, 'Yeah, you went to fuckin' Yale, of course you had great professors, no shit.'" Miya shared how some peers were unwilling to share knowledge and acted like gatekeepers rather than collaborators because the assumption was that she should know the answers to questions she was asking.

As noted in these voices, FGGSs were often negotiating entry and persistence in graduate school with limited guidance and new implicit power dynamics. In addition, they addressed how language in graduate school is steeped in historicity and requires translation.

Institutional Language, Professionalism, and Etiquette

A second subtheme that emerged was FGGSs' experience with making meaning of institutional language, jargon, and etiquette of academia. This includes feeling lost with new jargon as well as particular ways of phrasing and discussing theory, practice, or discipline-specific terminology. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared, "There is certain terminology that they use...and I have to look it up, and [chuckle] it's just like other students don't have to.... And I'm understanding how to be okay with that." Kyra, a Black/African American woman, described entering her graduate program as an undergraduate and finding that many words or phrases that were common parlance in her graduate program were new or unfamiliar to her. She describes how she is "seeking out things that I didn't get in high school or undergrad in terms of [the discipline of] economics.... I'm trying to build a skill in institutional language." The concern with knowing the right words within the discipline was further complicated by jargon and acronyms that are commonplace in academia. Rachel, a multiracial woman, described attending a conference for the first time: "I didn't know what a SIG [special interest group] was. I had no idea." While participants described needing translators for institutional language and jargon, they also addressed the necessity to learn academic speak. Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, Filipino woman, described this as "in the academy, we're supposed to talk a certain way." This notion of how one should speak and what forms of language signaled belonging in the academy was not only knowing the right words to use but also trying to discern context and forms of professional etiquette that accompanied language. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, described this process of trying to employ modes of communication and etiquette that were normative in graduate school:

> I think my professionalism is different than students who maybe came from different families.… I come from maybe a little bit more blue-collar family, and I worked in warehouses and serving, so my form of professionalism is admittedly less professional, and people notice that. And I put a lot of energy to put on this professional front, but it takes so much energy that I can only do it so long before it falls apart.… I've actually had professors be like, "You're a first-generation student, aren't you? I can tell."

Closely linked to language and etiquette was the need to understand protocols, particularly in high-stakes contexts like professional conferences, fellowship interviews, and job application processes. Living her own version of what not to wear and what not to say, Sophia, a white woman, shared:

> I run into it a lot trying to navigate some of the systems in grad school. How you should talk to professors.... I knew nothing about fellowships and some of those unspoken rules that are in grad school. And at a conference, what are you supposed to talk [about]? How do you ask questions? How do you respond

> to questions? What happens if you don't know things…when somebody asks you a question? Or what clothes you're supposed to wear when you go? Are you expected to be dressed up, not dressed up? [It] just required a lot of piecing together. There wasn't a lot of explicit mentorship or mentions of how that functions. Just like social culture but it's hard to operationalize.

These collective experiences of trying to understand the inner workings of Black Boxes contributed to FGGSs' feeling of what Caitlin described as "typical impostor syndrome, like everyone in the room was smarter than me," and self-doubt. For many FGGSs, navigating through these gaps and learning this new language happened by what Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, described as "I just kind of figured it out over time by watching other people and seeing what they were doing." Other FGSSs described one trustworthy person, sometimes an advisor, other times a peer or staff member, who became their go-to interlocutor to decode language, process, and milestones. Some FGGSs sought answers from growing online and often student-driven communities. Camila, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared:

> Twitter, I feel, seems to have exploded and students are asking for help, because this is a good forum and this is where you get all this information. So there's a lot of that level of information that is coming from different media.

Graduate school is arduous regardless of social identities, but Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, eloquently described the key differences for FGGSs:

> There's a difference in walking a trail that's already made for you, in a way, or leading you there, versus having to carve a trail. If you're in a forest, and if you see that a trail is partially already made, then you know which direction to go. Understanding how the system works, and understanding how to maneuver and navigate that system, and what you truly need is to have networks available. It's not often the work that you produce, but it's the networks that you have to get you to where you want. And that's something that I feel like a lot of first-generation college students don't understand, because everything that we've been taught is based on the work you produce.

Summary

The theme Black Boxes captures how FGGSs name the structures, processes and norms that shape their trajectory into graduate school environments. The two subthemes Negotiating Process and Milestones and Institutional Language, Professionalism, and Etiquette demonstrate the mechanisms through which the hidden curriculum is operationalized within institutional and organizational expectations and systems. Chapter 5 and the theme of Building Capital unpacks the various ways in which FGGSs sought to fill these systemic gaps with both institutional and social support and expands on the importance of relational and institutionalized support systems.

Ivory Tower Socialization

> ***Unfortunately in grad school, even in the application process, you're not presenting yourself as a person.... You're presenting yourself as a research idea generator and knowledge of skills and tools.... You're bringing something to a lab.—Caitlin***

In this second theme, Ivory Tower Socialization, participants articulated

how structures and hidden curricula reflected in the first theme were manifested, operationalized, and felt in their lived experiences. They also shared examples of gaps in resources and socialization processes as well as types of support that benefited them as FGGSs. Three subthemes emerged: Status Quo Socialization, Sanitized Spaces, and Bridges and Hustle. Making sense of graduate school was rooted in the complexity positionalities of FGGS who found themselves pushing against normative approaches to socialization and inclusion. Many participants named how their intersecting identities, particularly related to race, ethnicity, social class, and first-generation status, left them isolated and unsure about where to find a sense of belonging and place. FGGSs like Leonora often referred to their identities as "multiple layered…intersecting identities" and noted that as graduate programs consider diversity, they tend to frame diversity into discrete categories (e.g., race, gender) without attention to how intersectional and systemic constraints affect students who occupy more than one marginalized identity. Students like Tan, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, shared that this was particularly problematic when understanding the lived experience of FGGSs:

> I think programs are so concerned with diversity that they're always thinking of people of color. And they always assume people of color are also first-generation like it's a two-for-one deal! But then they don't really discuss it.… There's a difference between being a person of color and also a first-generation.

In many cases, FGGSs of color felt tokenized based on race but invisible regarding other identities like their first-generation status or social class. This blanket disaggregated approach to "diverse students" also played out with how FGGSs experience the culture of their units, departments, laboratory spaces, and disciplinary fields.

Status Quo Socialization

This subtheme is a symptom of the structures described in Black Boxes and addresses how introduction to graduate school felt rooted in white, middle-class norms and capital, which were often expressed in language and expectations that favored individualism. FGGSs named ways in which their collectivist values around learning, collaboration, and community were mismatched with the individualistic and competition-driven culture of their academic department, discipline, and field. Wei, an Asian/ Pacific Islander woman, shared:

> I'm from a collectivist culture.… I really prefer we work together on things instead of competing with each other. Competition is exciting, but there's too much emphasis on achievement. I really wish [graduate] school could be more realistic, but positively change.... Not give a very toxic pressure on students.

Participants also shared how this culture of competition plays out in the rhythm of the academic year and how these cycles of competition often privilege students who are in the know or who have forms of social capital described in the Black Boxes theme. As such, the socialization to graduate school seems to follow a status quo model that is designed for students whose families, peers, and faculty are familiar with or even steeped in understanding the hidden curriculum of graduate school. Kamari, a Black/ African/African American man, reflected on the annual process of fellowship applications:

> Immense demands are being placed on the department, and that department places [demands] on those of us who are first-generation of color, particularly within the realm of the drive to win fellowships is symbolic violence that happens during those seasons.

The collectivist values that many FGGSs expressed also call attention to the ways that graduate programs and milestones are designed with a focus on individual trajectories with limited attention to familial responsibilities that are often key roles in the lives of FGGSs. Sophia, a white woman, describes taking care of her immunocompromised mother and grandmother while juggling graduate school:

> The department is understanding, but there's still this massive workload. And so you're trying to juggle these two things. And they're saying, "We understand" and "These are crazy times," but then there's also these due dates that have not moved [chuckle]. So it's like that double-edged sword.

Other FGGSs shared additional challenges as working adults and/or parents particularly in programs that were designed for younger students. Linda, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shares, "No one talks about the challenges of balancing your career as a professor and your personal life as a parent. Or much less the career as a graduate student, and then also as a parent." In addition to structures, FGGSs raised existential questions about the design and core ethos of graduate school as an individual journey driven toward accruing certain prizes. Participants shared that their key motivation to attend graduate school was rooted in deep curiosity about their subject matter but also often accompanied by a desire to make change that would have a positive impact on people and the planet. Several participants began to feel like this desire was at odds with the culture and epistemology of their department or field. Caitlin, a white woman, shared:

> I've been very adamant that I don't wanna do science just for science's sake. I'm much more cognizant of…how is this going to translate to helping people, and how can I speed up that process? And there's a distinct portion of people in academia more broadly [that] don't necessarily think about that. It's like, "Oh, that's for other people to worry about," or like, "Oh, this is an interesting intellectual exercise." I don't care about interesting intellectual exercises if it doesn't translate to something practical or further the science in some way that will ultimately make something more practical.

Several FGGSs shared concerns about disciplinary devaluing of intellectual work that had practical implications. This was perceived as elitist and classist and raised questions about how forms of scholarship and ways of knowing are valued. Caitlin, a white woman, expanded on her comments:

> Translational science is not valued, and practical intervention science isn't valued, and like, "Oh, if you wanna get tenure, you have to do a bunch of basic science, so you can just push the manuscripts out the door, and then you can do the practical stuff." There's like this playing the game of academia…this weird intellectual pursuit thing.

FGGSs also critiqued how their discipline or field responded to key challenges in today's world. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, sharded that her discipline:

> Has failed to do service. And it's true. To me, I just feel like public health itself is needed, but it needs to be better, and it needs to do better because public health has a history of harming a lot of people, especially people of color, and removing those opportunities of education from individuals.… I'm just conflicted within my program because I don't feel like there's as much support for students of color, and especially support for students of color who are first-generation.

Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, extended this critique to question the rationale of approaches to data collection and

what she perceives as devaluing of ways of knowing of laypeople and communal knowledge, particularly about the natural world:

> There seems to be no point where they're gonna say, "Oh, we sampled enough." It's just like, "Collect, collect, collect, collect, collect," and make these huge collections, and it seems like the goal, it should be about research, but it seems like it's about publishing.… When I hear people talking about their projects and they're talking about it in terms of "What can I publish?" rather than "How is this going to actually help conservation?" That's a big conflict for me.

Chris, a white man, spoke to forms of bureaucracy in academia and the challenge of community engagement:

> I don't like gatekeeping institutes, really don't. And I'm sure it has something to do with my first-gen student identity. I think there is a lot of priority placed on research productivity and sort of this ivory tower-esque mentality on how we need to perform within these structures, and from our ideas versus really valuing a lot of the community-based work. And when I say community-based work, not just popping into a school to do your study, that's not community-based work. There isn't a structure set up that rewards that sort of engagement.

Other students felt that their lived experiences were questioned or delegitimized particularly in the context of their discipline or field. They raised questions about forms of feedback and critique that were rooted in norms predicated on middle-class values or tropes of lived experience of people of color and low socioeconomic status. Chris shared his experience receiving peer feedback in the humanities:

> I wrote a poem about my mom on her hospice bed, and the imagery around that felt very strong. And this one fellow poet said, "I don't think you got the imagery right here." And I just had to say, "No, I've seen it. I've seen this." And so there's a lot of those moments in the critique process in images of addiction, in images of poverty, of the contradictory oppression and liberation in education that made me feel that I've had to defend them.

Sanitized Spaces

The second subtheme captures the emotional labor that many FGGSs articulated as they sought to negotiate graduate school and moved from feeling like an intruder to feeling the need to assimilate to spaces that conflicted with their values. The process of negotiating graduate school bureaucracies and hidden curricula as a FGGS took an emotional toll on many students. Most prevalent was the repeated mention of the word isolation to describe their entry into graduate school. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, shared:

> As a first-gen you have to learn how to navigate a lot of different firsts, a lot of learning how to navigate the academic world and how to just navigate so many systems.… It puts a lot of pressure and stress on me as an individual. And at times it can feel like you're really alone trying to navigate these systems.

The experience of what Brian, an Asian/Pacific Islander and white man, called the "otherness of growing up poor and being first gen" fed into the impostor syndrome and a weight of being found out as a fraud in the academy. Adam, a white man, shared:

> I'm inadequate in a lot of these things, and I don't think graduate school really helps with that. It almost amplifies it, because you're constantly being told that you don't know anything.… It's beaten

> into you, so it just sort of like, it becomes even more salient at that point. I was just trying to assimilate. I was like, "Why do I feel like an outsider?" Assimilation and impostor syndrome were probably much stronger because I was a first-gen!

Feeling lonely and isolated was often attributed to the solitary nature of many tasks in graduate school, particularly writing, and was perpetuated for FGGSs of color who experience overt or covert racism and microaggressions in classroom space or laboratories. Camilla, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared:

> And so early on...I hate to say this, I hated my lab. I would go to lab meeting and every time I tried to speak up I would be cut off, like immediately, or put down. So I just quit talking in lab meetings, and I didn't...for probably my 1st year I barely ever spoke up in the lab meetings.

Loneliness was exacerbated by both forms of microaggression and also when community building was underdeveloped and relationships felt more transactional. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, shared that she saw little effort to develop:

> Interpersonal relationships. No "Hi, how are you? Nice to meet you. I am me, who are you?" We did a few ice breakers, the basic ones that you start off with, but that was it. And it was like, "Here's your stuff, these are your deadlines, go about your business. See you later." And I guess in essence, that's what graduate school is. It's all about business and getting what you came here for: your master's degree.

Finally, many participants shared that academia seemed a sanitized space, underscored by a reticence to show or share emotions. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, described being trained "to harden you up and make you into a scientist. I've been critiqued for bringing emotions into my project, for caring about conservation." Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, Filipino woman, describes her experience breaking down in a peer group:

> It is kind of a professional, polished space, so we are just sitting around the class, sitting at our desks, and it's supposed to be this in your mind work. I just broke down. I had no idea I was gonna break down and take up time just crying in front of people. I think it really has impacted me, because even when I was crying, there were people who let me cry and everything, but it still had not continued on. So I felt like I had to be apologetic. I did feel like I needed to apologize for disrupting that space.

These examples are a reflection of how FGGSs view the construction of space in graduate school and the demands it places on their emotional well-being. Despite these challenges, participants shared examples of positive experiences that sustained them and also ideas they had for improving graduate school orientation and socialization to create more humanized experiences for not only FGGSs but all graduate students.

Bridges and Hustle

Many FGGSs named specific resources and people that helped them negotiate key gaps in their socialization and orientation to graduate school. Multiple students reference the McNair Scholars Program that prepared them for the reality of Black Boxes of academia. Other students appreciated the opportunity to choose their advisor in graduate school and felt supported, but also noted that faculty in graduate school rarely shared if they were first-generation themselves. Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander,

Hawaiian, Filipino woman, shared:

> No one has ever shared a first-gen identity with me. None of my professors. So, training for our professors to [share], because it really has not come up at all. And that's why maybe I'm not really encouraged to talk about my own positionality as well.

Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, shared that in a very white chemistry department, one professor who was Latino and LGTBQIA+ held a forum on his experience as a FGGS, which was both normalizing and empowering. Students noted that rather than relying on a single faculty member to speak, institutionalizing opportunities to make the FGGS experience visible would be powerful. They described using undergraduate models of first-generation-specific student groups, graduations, and targeted panels around hidden curricula to be critical in claiming space and place. Jason describes a practice in his own program where students created a "Google Doc with a list of words that keep popping up in grad school that nobody knows what they mean." Specific recommendations include events where faculty can talk about their own experience negotiating hidden curricula both as graduate students and as professionals as well as their approaches to work–life balance. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, noted, "I do feel a lot of actions are required, concerning workshops of mental health and open conversations, about power dynamics." Finally, in light of the toll that graduate school takes on all students but especially FGGSs, Elisa, a multiracial woman, recommended humanizing graduate school:

> If I came back as an alumna to basically impart my own wisdom on the current students who are in the program…I was thinking about…this false idea that there's a trade-off between your well-being, whether that's your emotional, spiritual, physical health, and your ability to succeed in the academic world.… I just feel like what I see among students within my own program, but pretty much across the entire sphere of the academic world, is people just enslaving themselves to studying and just developing such unhealthy habits that carry beyond the time they graduate.

Many FGGSs attributed their ongoing persistence in graduate school to their own hustle and adaptability. They often referenced challenges but also felt that experiencing navigating bureaucracy in other systems had prepared them for cultivating a resilience to challenging environments. Rachel, a multiracial woman, notes that a big part of the process is that "I have to be okay with failure." Adam, a white man, extended this point to share how past challenges have shaped his approach to graduate school:

> How did I manage? Well, this is sort of where it came back to just my pragmatism in dealing with adversity. I just sort of put my head down and power through because I'm like, "Yeah, whatever, it's hard, but it's life." And so I feel like I've had more exposure to that than possibly someone who's not first-generation.

Finally, Abby, a white woman, commented about employing her own capital and agency to build resources when none were provided is reflective of the immense adaptability that FGGSs share:

> The first was the hardest 'cause I just had none of the skills. I had to quick build a table. Everyone else came with a table and I was like, I gotta build my table. But I got my table now, so good! Just being resourceful. Just going out and making it happen. No one's gonna set out the tools for me, so I have to go get them and build them.

Chapter 5 expands on how FGGSs engaged in processes to build capital and reflects on roles of faculty and peers groups in this effort.

Summary

The theme of Ivory Tower Socialization examines how FGGSs moved from making sense of unknown structures, norms, and values to trying to live and learn within the confines and culture of these structures that were often unclear or at odds with their values. The subthemes of status quo socialization and sanitized spaces illustrate the impact the hidden curriculum had on perpetuating isolation and impostor phenomenon. Comparatively, the subtheme of Bridges and Hustle reflects how FGGSs employed their own capital to traverse milestones and power dynamics while leaning on supports like McNair Scholars Programs and key advisors and supportive faculty to sustain themselves.

The two themes addressed in this chapter situate the lived experience of FGGS in the historical context of higher education that is rooted in structures and norms that do not attend to the complexity of their positionalities. The FGGSs' nuanced self-reflections underscore the need to both complicate the identity of FGGSs and attend to the intersectional systems of oppression that shape graduate school processes and practice. The following questions invite readers to begin these conversations at institutional, departmental, and programmatic levels.

Questions to Consider

- What is the narrative of first-generation graduate students on your campus? Is it a deficit- or asset-based narrative?
- To what extent is the term first-generation graduate student employed by graduate schools and departments? How is it defined?
- What forms of data are collected about first-generation graduate students, and to what extent do these data disaggregate to consider race, ethnicity, social class, LBGTQ+, and disability status?
- How does the graduate school share data or engage departments in training regarding first-gen+ graduate students?
- What are specific programs, spaces, or resource materials designed by the graduate school to support first-generation graduate students across the institution? How are these resources shared with first-generation graduate students and referenced throughout their experience?
- Does your department employ the term first-generation when considering holistic needs of students in your program?
- Do faculty in your department share their own first-generation status if applicable? Why or why not?
- Do departmental websites and recruitment materials explain the application process with written instructions and captioned videos? What forms of hidden curricula/language might be present in these materials?
- Is information available about the types of recommendation letters required and how to ask for recommendations?
- Do faculty include on websites any statements and/or introductions to their advising and teaching philosophy?

Chapter 5: Building Capital and Doing (Me) Research

Overview

Building Capital demonstrates the power of relationships for FGGSs and the role these relationships can play in students' navigation of graduate school and the kinds of support available to them. Building Capital has two subthemes that focus on peer relationships and faculty relationships.

The theme Doing (Me) Research explores how personal identities and experience can influence the research, teaching, and overall experience in graduate school. Doing (Me) Research has two subthemes: Employing Funds of Knowledge and Intellectual and Emotional Labor. Both Building Capital and Doing (Me) Research shed light on the multifaceted dynamics shaping the graduate school journey for FGGSs.

Building Capital

> *It's about information, it's about solidarity, it's about not feeling alone.—Camila*

Graduate school requires students to negotiate and navigate milestones and the structure of higher education to a much greater degree than does the undergraduate experience. For students in this increasingly challenging environment, people who can offer insights on success in getting into and through graduate school are essential. This chapter explores the resources that first-generation graduate students (FGGSs) use to navigate those challenges. Building Capital refers to the actions taken to mitigate gaps in knowledge or resources that FGGSs experience. Institutional agents (e.g., staff, faculty, transition programs) and peers assist in negotiating the hidden curriculum and environment of graduate school. The three subthemes (peer relationships, faculty relationships, and pathways and pathfinders) represent vital people who can aid or impede a student's success.

The dimensions of the multilevel model of intersectionality (MMI) most applicable to the Building Capital are intersubjective (i.e., the relationships between FGGSs and their peers, faculty, and other actors that may influence their path). Building Capital illustrates the power individuals and groups have in providing support, information, and guidance to FGGSs before attending graduate school and during graduate school. Not all of these relationships are positive or encouraging. Therefore, the presence of these individuals and groups influences FGGSs' understanding of how to maneuver to and through graduate school and what information they may or may not have access to that will ensure their success. These groups or individuals sometimes assist FGGSs with the negotiation of Black Boxes and the experience of Living Ivory Tower Socialization. Therefore, the presence of these groups, either as formal or informal support, may offer critical insights for students in their graduate school process. A more in-depth presentation of these themes is in earlier chapters.

Building Capital: Peer Relationships

This subtheme refers to the relationships FGGSs build with their peers, which include other students in their cohort and relationships with students they meet in their classes, labs, research projects, or community-building spaces. FGGS participants interact with their peers in several spaces and may connect through faculty, group projects, as well as information connections such as events on and off-campus. Cohort spaces are created to build a sense of community within the department. Other spaces, such

as community groups or identity-based groups, have the specific purpose of connecting students to build relationships in graduate school. Some spaces may provide opportunities for students to connect, but the primary purpose may not be relationship-building. For example, research labs can have a social benefit but the purpose is conducting research under the direction of a faculty member. Peers are an essential support for FGGSs because they are a source of social and navigational capital in an ambiguous environment. When FGGSs can build relationships with their peers, they have a community to seek out answers to questions and provide support to each other. FGGSs who cannot build these relationships may not have these outlets and will likely experience more challenges through graduate school. Though some graduate schools explicitly create spaces for these types of relationships, the importance of these relationships may not be stressed as critical to the student's success.

Building Capital: The Power of Positive Peer Relationships. For graduate students, peers serve as a connection to information, camaraderie, and support. For FGGSs, peer relationships provide information on navigating graduate school and a sense of understanding and affirmation through the challenging academic environment. It is from peers and a grounding in the community that FGGSs can navigate the environment and build confidence and understanding in their academic trajectory.

Colleges and universities may create specific spaces and opportunities for graduate students to connect and build relationships. These spaces and events can be made at varying levels, such as within a specific track, department, school, college, or discipline. They could be identity-focused, such as specific spaces for FGGSs, students of color, or communities that reflect intersectional identities. They may also be targeted around a particular milestone (dissertation, prospectus, preliminary exams) through a writing group. Research labs can have a social benefit, but the purpose is conducting research under the direction of a faculty member. For FGGSs, these spaces are essential not only as a physical place to work on their studies but also as a place to find other FGGSs who may connect with them at the intersections of their identities. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, discussed a university group that existed outside of his department and how he has connected with other FGGSs:

> I've been a part of this really, really, really valuable writing group, critical. It's an ethnic studies writing group, so it's writing mainly for people of color. A lot of people are first-generation, come from low-income backgrounds, and we just get together every few weeks and we share our writing with each other.

Kamari found other FGGSs through this group, even though it was not explicitly created for FGGSs. The group's representation of intersections of identity serves as a supportive environment for writing and building community. Kamari further described how the writing group has evolved into a social circle: "We spend a lot of time socializing with each other outside of the university, and a lot of my best friends now have come from that experience." Even though the university-organized group was started within a specific department, students who were not in the department could join and connect as a social support system.

In their recruiting and admission process, some graduate programs create cohorts of students who will move through the program at the same time. These are university-created spaces with the primary purpose of building a community of scholars so that students can work together and move through milestones at a similar pace. Anna, a white woman, described how she is close with her cohort and how it serves as a nice balance of support: "They're…super-rigorous and really smart and impressive people

while also just being really nice people and encouraging." This group both drives Anna to do well and provides encouragement. Rachel, a multiracial woman, also described how her cohort, along with other cohorts in her program, had been an essential social support. Her department provided a space at orientation where her cohort could meet with existing cohorts, and those students could serve as mentors. The department provided funds for students further along in the process to go out to lunch to build relationships. Though it is not guaranteed that this will happen, the university created an opportunity and provided financial support where a relationship like this might blossom.

Graduate school milestones and expectations are specific to the department and track that a student chooses. One of the challenges of graduate school is the lack of clarity in what students are expected to do with their time and how they navigate the multiple steps required in each program to demonstrate progress and success. For FGGSs in these settings, this represents a hidden curriculum that can be very unclear and difficult to navigate. One source of information is peers, particularly peers who are further along in their program or area of study who can provide timely and accurate guidance. These peers have recently reviewed program requirements and achieved milestones, and so they can talk with newer students to clarify how to navigate and negotiate the departmental expectations. FGGSs may meet these people by chance in classes or a research lab. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, met a PhD student in her lab who gave her explicit guidance on procedures: "[He would] delineate, 'Okay, write this thesis, which will probably be this number of chapters, and each chapter will be this.'" Miya described how this student was also a FGGS, and how she preferred to seek out other FGGSs because, when she had questions, "[FGGSs] would just answer it without trying to make you feel bad for not knowing." Students further along in the program provided support and encouragement even though it was not an explicit part of their role. These relationships offer academic support and mental and emotional support to students when navigating the stress of the academic environment.

FGGS participants especially valued their peers' honesty and transparency about graduate school. This type of support was frequently found with students in the same cohort or year because students could commiserate about stress and doubts. This shared experience provided affirmations to students going through similar emotions or challenges. Several FGGS participants describe how the culture of graduate school facilitates competition more than collaboration. Adam, a white man, described how, in the beginning, he saw his cohort as competition. Still, eventually, he let his guard down: "It was nice to have a camaraderie with them and kind of go to them with questions or concerns…realizing they're experiencing the same thing, that it's not just me." Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, described how transparency is beneficial because graduate school can be a critical environment: "We're being honest with each other about it and not trying to one-up each other and make it seem like it's all okay." This honesty and transparency created environments where FGGSs could provide support and encouragement from a place of vulnerability and understanding. Caitlin, a white woman, expressed how she would sometimes apologize for her data when presenting her research. Another student encouraged her, "Never qualify what you're saying [or say] 'I don't know.' You do know." Students at similar points in their academic trajectory could understand the stress of that particular moment and provide support and encouragement even if the graduate school environment lends itself to competition more than collaboration.

Racial and ethnic identity spaces are especially vital given the intersections of the first-generation student identity with marginalized racial and ethnic identities. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white

woman, described how she struggled during her first couple of weeks on campus, and she "went to a Frybread Friday, just to feel kind of at home... just interact with other Native students." These types of spaces offer a connection to familiar communities. Similar to Megan, Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, described how she was able to interact with other Hmong women: "If it wasn't for that program, I wouldn't know of any other people whom I consider similar to me and in a graduate program." This connection to people of similar racial and ethnic identities and backgrounds can provide a sense of community that might otherwise be difficult to find. These racial and ethnic identity spaces create opportunities to build community. However, Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, described how his department strives to admit more students of color and Indigenous students, which influences the overall culture of the cohort. Jason expected graduate school to be very white, but his experience was different because of the recruitment efforts. After describing the composition of the graduate program, Jason said, "The cohorts above me have been… so generous with their time and helping the first-year [students] adjust. They've made themselves pretty available to talk about things." These racial and ethnic identity spaces and efforts influence FGGSs' perception and experience of graduate school as a predominantly white space. They serve as essential connection points for FGGSs to find support through their racial and ethnic identities and the experience of being in graduate school.

FGGS participants described building relationships with other FGGSs and how they felt they could connect across similar challenges and navigate graduate school. When students were able to connect with other FGGSs, they were able to share opportunities and resources. Camila, Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, described how as a FGGS:

> If you don't know where to look or whom to talk to, it's just really hard, and so that's a good way of being able to share an experience and then seeing that other people also share that experience with you.

Camila could follow other FGGS pathways to graduation because it was not always clear how to get to the next step in graduate school. Identifying with students through the first-generation lens provided a space for understanding while encouraging students to seek out resources to ensure their success.

Building Capital: The Absence of Peer Community.

Peer relationships are critical not only for social support but also for assisting with navigating graduate school. For some FGGS participants, peer relationships, or lack there of, were a source of stress or unfulfillment, like they had missed out on opportunities to build community. Some FGGSs compared their experiences at previous academic institutions and reflected on the lack of peer academic support. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, described how she had to come to terms with not having the same "tight-knit community" she had in her master's program:

> At first, it was really hard because I expected to have that community to fall back on within my academics. If I needed help, I knew it was okay to go and ask.… I did not get that feeling here.

FGGSs may come to graduate school with expectations based on their experiences at previous academic institutions. They may be disappointed when faculty are not willing to mentor them or peers are not as open to building relationships that are vital in knowledge sharing. This could be a reflection of the institutional or departmental climate, and particularly the values that the climate endorses toward developing these types of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, what originally may have been an

endeavor filled with expectations of a supportive community can become an even more solitary experience. There is an increased opportunity for connection in spaces where FGGSs have a built-in opportunity for community building, like through a cohort structure or a lab. However, if there are not explicit expectations around including new lab members in the established community or there is not a formal structure for engagement, then some students may not feel included. Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, felt his lab mates were not being intentionally rude when they would not ask him to lunch, but it was not a welcoming environment. Nate described, "One member in my lab would say, 'Oh, hey,' and he would go to three or four people and say, 'Do you wanna go get lunch?' And then he wouldn't ask me…. It would have been nice to be asked." This demonstrates one small opportunity for community building among peers that was missed. Although it relies on the students in the lab to provide the invitation, the expectations around inviting and welcoming new students can be established by the faculty members in the lab at the beginning. This is a reflection of the overall climate in the lab and how students are or are not encouraged to share their knowledge and experience with each other as established by the faculty leading the lab.

Not only are feelings of exclusion present, but they can also be experiences of discrimination and not feeling understood or heard in academic settings. There may be an expectation that this is just graduate school culture in general and that FGGSs should learn to handle it themselves. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, described being the only person of color in her lab and feeling tokenized. After interactions with another student escalated, her lab felt hostile, and she had to move her desk away from the other student. She sought out support from the central diversity office and graduate school. The person at the graduate school shared her experience as a woman of color and how "that is just part of grad school, and the hard truth is you'll have to get used to it…. You just kinda have to learn to deal with it." For Miya, the recommendation was that she should manage the microaggressions herself and to not expect the lab culture to change. However, experiences of exclusion or not feeling heard can extend into every component of graduate school, reflecting the ways navigating dominant white culture is perceived as part of graduate school culture. Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, and Filipino woman, reflected on her experience in the classroom: "Why is it that either I don't feel heard or maybe some pushback…people read me differently in the classroom, where it's like, 'Oh, you know, why is she talking about stuff like decolonization?'" Danao's research and interests intersected with concepts like decolonization, but she felt dismissed and misunderstood in the classroom setting. Jaeho, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, described how, in his cohort, he didn't feel as supported, so he sought out other students to build a sense of community:

> The people who I usually hang out with…they're more people of color. They're more, I wanna say, less academic, but they're more activist-type of people who take part in the TRIO programs and who are very involved in politics and protests…. And I feel like in academia, or at least my cohort, they're very much focused within their research, and that's all they do.

The need to find community outside of the readily available spaces, such as a cohort or lab setting, places increased pressure on FGGSs who may already experience challenges from being in graduate school in general. For FGGSs in these settings, the unfamiliarity of graduate school paired with a lack of community support makes the difficulties of graduate school more isolating and difficult.

Building Capital: Faculty Relationships

This subtheme refers to the relationships FGGSs build with faculty, which

includes their relationships with their advisor and connections with faculty within their department or across the university. FGGSs interact with faculty in classrooms and research labs and on research projects or other project opportunities aligned with their career or academic interests. Some of these projects are paid and have specific expectations. However, some projects or interactions are more ambiguous. FGGSs are encouraged to build relationships with faculty. Still, expectations may not always be communicated about how to form these relationships and balance project work with their academics and graduate assistantships. The lack of clarity is challenging for FGGSs because it is a representation of the mismatch between the middle-class independent norms common in higher education and the interdependent norms of FGGSs coming from poor backgrounds (Stephens et al., 2012). FGGSs detailed the ways faculty supported them in their experience during graduate school and when they felt encouraged, supported, and connected to opportunities. FGGS participants also talked about how these interactions may leave them with unanswered questions and feeling like a faculty member does not care to know them or assist them in their journey through graduate school. Relationships with faculty have an essential impact on the success of graduate students in general, as they are typically the gatekeepers to passing milestones and facilitating connections to postgraduate opportunities.

Building Capital: Supportive and Encouraging Faculty Relationships. Faculty relationships that were more positive recognized FGGS participants as students, scholars, and people and aimed to build a relationship with the student by demonstrating support and encouragement. Faculty demonstrated care for FGGSs as holistic people by recognizing and affirming their experiences in the graduate program and sharing their own identities. FGGS participants sought out mentorship from faculty who cared about their success and challenges. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, described how one faculty member who was particularly supportive would talk with students when they were feeling anxious and ask them to share their feelings and challenges. Wei felt supported and affirmed because this faculty member explicitly asked and let students know they were open to hearing about their experiences. Some FGGS participants described connecting with their advisors or professors across many common interests, experiences, and viewpoints. These faculty and students built relationships where they could share aspects of their personal lives and "relate more than just [the] relationship between a student and professor" shared Jenny, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman. Caitlin, a white woman, described her advisor as her "champion." She felt her advisor was a great source of support: "She has very clear professional boundaries, but she's very understanding and supportive." The relationships faculty and students built centered on understanding the students holistically, getting to know them, and hearing about their experiences in graduate school and beyond.

FGGSs sometimes found faculty who shared identities and could connect on these similarities. Graduate school would sometimes be the first place a student would have a professor with a similar identity. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, came to her graduate program because her advisor was Hmong, which was the focus of her research. He was the first Hmong professor she had. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, talked about her connection to another Latina faculty member:

> We're both Latinas, we're both women, we both speak Spanish, so we'll talk in Spanish.... We share the same identities, we even talk about our cultures and foods that we grew up with, and she sends me opportunities all the time.

Not only is this a connection around a shared identity, but it also provides opportunities and access to resources. The relationship extends beyond the shared experience and assists the student with navigating opportunities that may be beneficial for academics and career. When Sophia, a white woman, was having a difficult time, one of her faculty members pulled her

aside to share that she was also first-generation: "I just wanna remind you, you're doing really well and you deserve to be here." This identity alignment represents being seen and understood in ways a student may never have experienced. These professors sought to understand the FGGS and provided encouragement and opportunities throughout that relationship.

One of the designated roles of faculty advisors is to provide guidance through graduate school. FGGS participants described some relationships with faculty who would affirm their decisions and align with how the student desired to be mentored. Faculty may initially advise FGGSs on balancing their time and effort. However, FGGSs also wanted the autonomy to convey how they wished to be mentored by their faculty. Those faculty members would discuss this with the student to better align the expectations of the relationship. Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, wanted more freedom with his project, and his faculty allowed him that autonomy. He described this dynamic: "I could always go to her and ask her questions, but she's not going to sit me down and say, 'You should do this, this, this, and this,' as some other advisors would," which was a dynamic he appreciated. Students were able to receive guidance but also communicate about what their needs were and what support was available. The faculty created a space and relationship dynamic where students felt comfortable describing their needs or experiences. In addition to creating a space for discussion about support, faculty were also providing guidance and opportunities for FGGSs. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, expressed her advisor's desire to support her even beyond graduate school. She described the conversation in which he told her, "I want you to come out of this program as a very competitive individual and to make sure that you have all of…these boxes check[ed]." This demonstrates providing not only guidance in completing graduate school but also the development of the FGGS. For Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, her advisor provided opportunities but also allowed her to say no. She described how she related this to being first-generation: "I feel like that's not often an option that first-generation students are given…. You can't say no." Faculty are often required to provide feedback to FGGSs either through coursework or in overseeing and guiding milestones needed in graduate school. Faculty can also provide these insights through critiques. Anna, a white woman, described how her professor models how to approach and handle academic critiques and how to grow from the experience. This balance of understanding and guidance was critical to success in their graduate school experience.

Another role faculty can play is communicating expectations around fostering peer connections in the lab environments, classrooms, or on the research teams they lead. They can do this both by being explicit about this value and the importance of it and by connecting students to each other for the purposes of sharing knowledge and experience. One way faculty provide guidance is by creating opportunities for students to connect with other students. This may be accomplished through creating a formal structure where FGGSs can meet, or it may be more informal. Ji, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, described how his advisor set up a group study: "He will reserve a classroom…. He will be there and all his students in different years…so that created an environment for us to communicate to each other and get to know each other." This structured opportunity creates an expectation around sharing information and encouraging that at regular intervals. For Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, his advisor connected him to older graduate students and explicitly recommended that Nate contact an older student for guidance through a portion of the graduate school process.

One critical way FGGSs described their positive relationships with faculty and advisors is how they would make the implicit explicit. As previously mentioned, faculty can do this by being clear about expectations of peer

mentoring, but they also can make the unwritten rules and processes of graduate school more explicit for FGGSs. Graduate school may have several milestones, and these processes are not the only structure the student has to navigate. Sophia, a white woman, describes how her professor taught her to "function as an academic…. You always want to have papers moving, and this is that process." Her professor would review her calendar with her and encourage her to carve out specific time for writing and structure this into her schedule. Students would describe how the detailed explanations about graduate school milestones and how to navigate professional environments were vital. Caitlin, a white woman, described how her professor talked about navigating an academic conference: "She's very explicit about things that other professors might assume…. She has in the past made explicit social faux pas…. They would just assume that you know." The guidance provided goes beyond the classroom and influences how FGGSs navigate their professional and academic environments.

Building Capital: Faculty Inattention and Dismissal.

Not all faculty provided guidance and support for FGGSs. Though students described several fulfilling and supportive experiences with faculty, they also described unhelpful and discouraging relationships. These interactions ranged from perceived indifference to active patronizing. All graduate students, but especially FGGSs, rely heavily on their advisors and faculty members to prepare them for their milestones to finish graduate school, provide information on securing a position, and to network in their field. If students do not have these relationships or they are actively discouraged, the results can harm the emotional and mental health of the students and their career prospects.

One end of the spectrum is indifference, lack of contact, or unclear expectations between students and their faculty and the effect this has. Several FGGS participants talked about how they were not sure if their advisor would remember them if they saw them. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, tried to meet with his advisor, but his advisor never came to the meeting: "It took months for him to respond to one email…. I felt like I was flailing…. I was making all [these] decisions about coursework…. I had to figure it out all on my own." Students described needing to figure out the "magic question" they needed to ask to get information. Camila, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, reflected, "How am I supposed to know what I need to ask you if I don't know what I don't know?" Although some students described wanting a more hands-off approach, this was only after having their faculty or advisor talk with them about what their goals were and how they wished to approach the relationship. This lack of communication and guidance can result in disconnection from the program and isolation. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, had never formally met with her advisor and described how she felt: "No one cares here. I could drop out tomorrow, and no one would care." This isolation can be further exacerbated by the expectation that graduate school requires suffering and may promote a culture of tearing down to develop FGGSs into scholars. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, described how some interactions with professors were condescending and patronizing: "You can't always expect to come out of that unscathed…. There's a lot of tearing down in grad school…. You submit something, and someone tears it apart, and you have to smile and rebuild it." It was not only in providing critique or feedback on writing or through projects but also the assumptions professors held about FGGSs. Cesar also described how professors make assumptions and how they can affect students' growth: "Some professors might just assume a deficit right away…. These students don't really know anything…and just send a really negative message about how you can possibly grow." Graduate school is difficult. However, some students described an ethos of graduate school and how it is centered on breaking down students to develop them into some preconceived template of an accomplished scholar. This concept of having to struggle to demonstrate growth is a culture that is particularly

damaging for FGGSs because navigating graduate school is already unfamiliar.

Faculty hold an extraordinary amount of power in their relationships with graduate students. For FGGSs, these relationships are exceptionally important because the graduate school environment is laden with hidden rules and structures that make navigation challenging for any student. When faculty are not present, are actively discouraging, or make assumptions about FGGSs' abilities, they create an environment where impostor syndrome thrives. Though faculty have many expectations and responsibilities, FGGSs are in a vulnerable position. If that faculty member is their advisor, this is even more precarious because the students' success and completion of the program rely entirely on their faculty. Without checks and balances to these relationships and clarity around expectations, students are left to navigate an environment that is increasingly hostile and isolating. When faculty themselves are socialized to perceive graduate school as a hostile and critical environment, it translates to the student experience. It is an influential role, and if faculty choose to reflect on their power and role in the structure, all students benefit.

Building Capital: Pathways and Pathfinders

The subtheme Pathways and Pathfinders refers to the experience(s) that introduced FGGSs to graduate school and influenced them to pursue that path. These programs and experiences could take place before pursuing their undergraduate education, but they still played a role in FGGSs' desire to attend graduate school. They could be formal programs that are structured and funded to provide a road map for pursuing graduate school. They could also be individuals not affiliated with a particular program that provided critical insights and guidance around pursuing graduate school. These individuals may have been primarily other students or professors who provided information and advice about the purpose of graduate school and the application process. FGGSs reflected that they may not have known what graduate school was or its purpose, and that these people and programs provided that information and guidance at critical points in their academic trajectory.

Several FGGS participants described the experience of being in programs specifically designed to assist undergraduates with pursuing graduate school. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, reflected on how he was intrigued by the financial incentive of doing a research project during the summer. But while on that research project, he thought a lot more about graduate school and how he wanted to go. Although Kamari was not initially in the McNair Scholars Program for the graduate school pipeline portion, he ended up viewing it as an option because of the program. This reflects how, for FGGSs, those pregraduate experiences reveal what graduate school is, even if that is not their initial intention for participating. Anna, a white woman, described specifically how the McNair Scholars Program helped her navigate the many components of the graduate school application process:

> The McNair Program really, really helped.... There are so many black boxes and things that I had no idea about without that help. 'Cause they did a ton of sort of educational stuff around, what is the application process, how do you write a CV, what are they looking for, how do you interview? I had no idea about any of that.

The McNair Scholars Program provided information about graduate school and also assisted students with the specifics of the application process, which can be daunting and complex for those who may not be familiar or may not have other people to assist them. The McNair Scholars Program and other pathway programs provide not only crucial information but also the necessary encouragement. Kyra, a Black/African American woman, described how she felt before the McNair Scholars Program: "I don't have these skills. How dare I think I can go to grad school?" But with the McNair

Scholars Program, she learned how to advocate for herself and built confidence in her skills.

FGGS participants also referenced pregraduate summer workshop programs for Black, Indigenous, and people of color that were facilitated by the graduate school's diversity offices. These workshops provided weekly seminars, social activities, opportunities to start research, and an orientation to specific campus resources. Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, reflected on how these seminars provided information about finding proper literature, reviewing literature, and other skills necessary for success in graduate school. Several FGGS participants mentioned finding other FGGSs through this program, even though it is not designed for FGGSs. This connection to other people and community building were necessary for Nate: "[It] was really nice to see and know that… I'm not alone here. There are other people here. So it was nice to get other people's affirmation of just the feelings that I was feeling." Not all spaces where connection happened were FGGS specific. However, FGGSs could identify other FGGSs when allowed to connect in smaller group settings focused on developing skills for graduate school.

Some graduate students found support from their undergraduate or previous graduate program professors or peers who were not necessarily affiliated with a transition program but offered information, encouragement, and insights about pursuing graduate school. In particular, undergraduate professors who offered opportunities that provided information to demystify the graduate school process were important. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, described one professor who would have an open meeting every semester to provide information about graduate school. Megan reflected on what was covered during these meetings:

> She would…give a presentation on graduate schools. How to find different graduate schools to apply to. What you need. How to consider whom to ask letters of recommendation from. All, kind of, the need-to-know stuff…she recognized the fact that... some students don't have these supports at home.

This professor understood that information about graduate school might not be readily available or accessible to everyone, so she created a regular space where students could ask questions and learn about the process. Camilia, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, also described how she was mentored by a professor from her master's program:

> I was guided by one professor only, who literally said, "What you need to do is contact the schools, talk to faculty members, try to figure out what's the best thing 'cause at the end of the day you have to go into a program where there's faculty members that do what you do and all these different things."

These individuals provided vital information about the graduate school search and application process not as a part of their specific role but because they knew that students may not all have access to the information.

One critical component of graduate school is identifying funding sources and understanding how graduate school is or is not funded. Not all programs are funded, but many are. However, this information may not be immediately apparent. FGGS participants described the vital role that faculty can play in helping them negotiate advantageous funding packages, whom to talk to, and how to request additional funding. Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, described receiving insight from a mentor: "'You should email the director of graduate studies...[to] let him know that I got [a fellowship].' And he was like, 'Ask if there's something that you can do to apply for it here.'" Had he not had guidance in this negotiation process, he

may not have received the funding package at the institution that he felt was the best fit for him. This demonstrates the importance of having resources and encouragement when navigating graduate school funding, one of the most important areas of concern for FGGSs.

In addition to faculty guides, FGGSs shared that other students and peers offered essential insights on navigating graduate school. These connections may form during the students' undergraduate education with undergraduate peers or with graduate students with whom they interact. Caitlin, a white woman, worked in a lab with graduate students during her undergraduate education and described this experience: "I just remember how terrible my personal statement was in my first draft, and then I gave it to one of the grad students.… She gave me really, really good feedback." Undergraduate peers and graduate students shared their experiences and also provided important connections to professors for FGGSs to talk to about graduate school.

Summary

Building Capital highlights the multifaceted relationships established by FGGSs within academic settings and throughout their time in graduate school. One of the subthemes in this section illuminates the role and significance of peer relationships in multiple contexts and how FGGSs connect with their cohorts and peers within and beyond formal academic settings. These connections serve as a vital source of social and navigational capital that offers avenues for support and information exchange critical for navigating graduate school. However, our findings also reveal that not all FGGSs had the same access to supportive peer spaces. Furthermore, institutionally designed peer support spaces may also not be adequately attending to the intersecting identities of FGGSs. Another subtheme in this section focuses on the complexity of faculty relationships, emphasizing the deciding role of faculty members as gatekeepers to academic milestones and postgraduate opportunities. While faculty relationships are a critical component of success in graduate school, it is also evident from our results that challenges can arise from inadequate support and lack of clarity in graduate school expectations and perceptions. The final subtheme, Pathways and Pathfinders, highlights the pregraduate school experiences that introduced and influenced FGGSs to apply for and pursue graduate education. Whether through structured programs or guidance from individuals such as peers or professors, FGGSs receive invaluable insights and guidance on the purpose of graduate education and the application process. This demonstrates the nuanced dynamics that exist with relationships and access to information for FGGSs and the implications the relationships have for the academic journey and success of FGGSs in graduate school.

Doing (Me) Research

> *Having lived the gap, you kind of see how academia gets it all wrong. —Cesar*

Overview

Graduate school is often an opportunity to investigate and analyze questions and topics through critical analysis and in a structured learning environment. One way FGGSs do this is by using research to explore social identities and examine issues relevant to their communities. They may use this examination as a way of elevating voices, narratives, and ways of understanding populations that have been historically absent from research or academic spaces. This section has two subthemes: employing funds of knowledge and intellectual and emotional labor. Employing funds of knowledge highlights how FGGSs use their lived experiences, connections to communities, and critical understandings of structures of power to ask informed questions and push academia to include these narratives. Intellectual and emotional labor highlights that, although graduate school offers many opportunities for exploring new topics, the challenges FGGSs

experience from pursuing this type of research may not only affect their ability to finish their graduate degree but could also be perceived as biased and influence their postgraduate opportunities. These experiences are closely aligned to the theme of Ivory Tower Socialization and provides a more in-depth representation of these environments, which are especially hostile for FGGSs. These sections highlight how Doing (Me) Research is both a benefit and a cost for FGGSs in academia.

The dimensions of the MMI model most applicable to the doing (me) research theme are both representational (how the experience of FGGSs is represented or not represented in research and the desire to have that representation) and experiential (how the narratives about FGGSs and their communities are constructed and how this influences the experience of FGGSs in graduate school). Doing (Me) Research illustrates how FGGSs use research to explore their social identities and lived experiences through their research projects and experiences in graduate school. However, this theme also illustrates how there may be costs for FGGSs who choose to pursue topics that are linked to who they are and their home communities. The first subtheme, Employing Funds of Knowledge, illustrates how they have been able to use their social identities and lived experiences to advance research while being able to give back to their home communities. The second subtheme, Intellectual and Emotional Labor, demonstrates that when a FGGS pursues this type of research, it may not be rewarded by the academy and can cause additional stress.

Doing (Me) Research: Employing Funds of Knowledge

There is a delicate balance between doing research around identity and community and also being a member of these communities. The subtheme Employing Funds of Knowledge recognizes the ways FGGSs can use these experiences as a framework that enhances their research, teaching, and coursework during graduate school. This subtheme names how FGGSs must negotiate connecting their communities and experiences to academia. Many FGGS participants explored their identities and connections to power structures and revealed ways of improving the experiences for people like them and their home communities. With these frameworks and insider knowledge, these students could advance the work by naming biases and gaps in existing research and prioritizing the narratives of those experiencing what they study. It was through this prioritization that they were also able to ensure their research was nonexploitative of the participants. Employing Funds of Knowledge also influenced their teaching methods. They placed high importance on ensuring their teaching methods were equitable through providing accommodations or investing time to get to know students and what they needed for success in their classrooms. Employing Funds of Knowledge names the ways FGGSs could use their experiences to advance research and give back to their communities simultaneously. By providing these funds of knowledge, the research by FGGSs provides nuance to how we can understand various topics and names opportunities for pursuing equity for all.

One way FGGSs applied their lived experience to graduate school was to explore their identities as FGGSs and the intersections of their other identities. Often what they chose to research was closely aligned with how they were investigating parts of themselves while examining the structures of power. Adam, a white man, described how he could explore topics he always had questions about: “This is a construct. This is something that really kind of explains what I was feeling and what was going on with me that I could never really put my finger on.” This desire reflects intersections of identity and wanting to understand why things are the way they are. Danao is an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, and Filipino woman from a working-class, low-income family. She described the illusion of the American dream and how it related to her understanding of her indigenous and Filipino identity. She wondered, “What does that mean for

me as a Filipino? 'Cause we have our own history of colonization…but also want the American dream. What does it mean to fight alongside the indigenous community?" Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, stated that being first-generation itself is tied to structures of power, so this investigation may be an inevitable part of being in academia, sharing further:: "There's almost no way to engage in critical scholarship without investigating or thinking through the circumstances or the context that made you a first-generation scholar." Adam and Danao discussed the intersections of their identity in their interviews and reflected on how they were using research opportunities in graduate school to investigate the interactions of their identities as they connected with structures of power. For FGGSs, this may be a specific type of tension in graduate school, given how closely aligned being first-generation is with having access to specific opportunities and resources.

Many FGGS participants described how they bring their knowledge from their home communities into academic spaces and value it as highly as what they learn in the classroom. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, explained how he reminds himself: "My grandmother had just as much to tell me about such-and-such theory, as say Foucault, and then I try to embody that inside the classroom." Placing value and reinforcing the importance of the knowledge they have from their communities can ground FGGSs in their purpose during graduate school. Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, described how important it is for him to remain grounded to ensure that his research is accessible to the communities involved in this research by employing language and crafting his message in ways that are "[not] too wordy" to "drive people away from this type of work…in ways that allow it to be legible to home, to the people, to my baby brother…not necessarily to academia."

FGGSs' previous lived experiences and understandings of how identities and structures of power interact grant opportunities to reveal biases or opportunities for change in research, policy, and teaching. In classes, students may review assessments or other tools researchers and universities use to learn about the general population. However, if people from diverse backgrounds have not vetted these tools, they may be biased or even create unintentional harm. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, serves on the bias and sensitivity review committee for K-12 assessments. One math question provided a visual of an empty lunch tray. Cesar described how his lived experience influenced his reaction to the question:

> As someone who grew up food insecure and on free and reduced-price lunch, that's pretty damning to wanna ask a student that question because they're probably gonna be reminded that…I don't have money for lunch and I probably won't graduate because I can't afford my lunch.

He reflected on how these questions were likely created by college-educated people, which further exemplifies a bias and lack of understanding for how other people who do not come from those backgrounds may interpret this type of information. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, asked, in assessments on patients, if the normative sample included bilingual and multicultural populations. She reflected on how other students have the privilege of not being concerned with how these types of formal assessments may affect their loved ones. She described how assessments may be biased and not accurately represent all populations.

> I've noticed that I am a lot more into the research on if the normative sample includes bilingual, multicultural populations. Because a lot of that data won't... appropriately represent those patients. So I've noticed that I care a lot more about that than other people do…because the privilege of them not necessarily having to care if it affects maybe their loved ones. Whereas I know that

> if my grandpa, who is a full native speaker…, if he had a stroke and needed a formal assessment, those results may not properly identify him because he doesn't fit the normative sample.

This is one example of how a nuanced understanding and connection to communities that are affected by research benefit everyday practices.. FGGSs shared how perceptions of members of the research team can shape and bias interactions with communities. FGGSs who draw on their lived experiences to inform their research, coursework, and fieldwork have a heightened awareness of the implications for themselves and their communities.

FGGSs who have experiences that are proximal to the content, topic, or community being researched view this work through a personal lens. Several FGGS participants described how having lived experiences reinforces a more substantial commitment to the topics and subjects of study because the results influence them and their communities. Anna, a white woman, reflected on this critical motivation: "Who is gonna feel the most passionate about it, and who's gonna put in the most hours around it if not somebody that has lived somewhat of a similar experience and could be empathetic toward it?" Their intimate knowledge of the communities they study affects process and application to real-life settings. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, described how, when discussing topics that some students have experienced only in the classroom: "I find myself caring too much about little things because I see the significance in it that others might not see." They also acknowledge how important understanding the context is to doing this research because they understand that access to resources is not an individual issue. Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, does research closely aligned with the Indigenous community, and he is very conscious of how to best do his research in a way that does not harm his home community. He described how he wants to "do work in a way that's respectful of their boundaries and of the culture without co-opting the culture or what people offer up to me for my research." This strong commitment not only employs empathy and understanding but also places a strong emphasis on the well-being of research participants, which is a consequence of the student's understanding of, and experiences with, the negative impact research can have. FGGSs make these choices because they are personally aware and understand the cultural trauma and harm, both historically and currently, of research conducted by institutions on marginalized communities. Their care and empathy are informed by the ways they have seen this harm play out in their communities and throughout history.

A critical way FGGSs' lived experience influences their time in graduate school is their emphasis on giving back. Several FGGS participants shared their experiences and insights on applying to and getting into college with their home communities or research participants. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, would do outreach to K-12 public schools: "Depending on the age group…[I'd] talk to them about college and tell them my story…or if they're smaller kids, it's just trying to get them excited about science." It was essential to her that she share this information, and she talked about how she wanted to make this a priority after graduating. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, would do home interviews for her research team. She would ask the families she interviewed if they had any questions about college. She described her internal conflict on how sharing this information was not regarded as part of the research. Still, she said:

> It's what I deal with myself as a member of a greater community.… I know my parents didn't know where to get this information or what to do with this information. My responsibility as the individual and the identities that I carry to be able to do that for other people,

> [because] I know that doing that for other people…it'll be tenfold for the next generation.

They see the choice to do this, and to make a difference, as something that is even beyond the individual conversations that give insights into navigating the system for their communities.

Many graduate students take on teaching positions for teaching experience and to help cover the costs of graduate school. FGGSs saw being in front of a classroom as an opportunity to share information they may not have had access to during their undergraduate experience. Many FGGSs undertake teaching roles as opportunities to bridge educational gaps and support their students who may not have had the same access to resources or experiences to prepare them. FGGSs strive to create inclusive learning environments that acknowledge the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and create equitable learning opportunities for everyone in their classrooms.

Ji, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, discussed how, during office hours, students would ask questions and he could identify gaps and advise them on managing the course content, improving their study skills, or seeking out external resources to ensure they were successful. Sophia, a white woman, also talked about how she could tell when a student had never written a research paper before. When the deadline for the research paper was close, she worked with one student to identify appropriate sources. Where other professors may expect students to know the steps of writing a research paper, she wanted to make sure every part of the process was straightforward and explicit. Several FGGS participants also described how they aimed to understand the students' experience before making assumptions. Participants were aware of the additional demands that COVID-19 and virtual learning had for undergraduate first-generation students. Brian, an Asian/Pacific Islander and white man, discussed how he did not want to make assumptions about students' time and resources, such as access to a laptop, internet, or uninterrupted time for engaging with class. Anna, a white woman, specifically structured her course to have multiple assignments and various opportunities to earn points for their grade and offered leniency in her course syllabus. She described how "we're gonna get a lot of students that are living at home and have other demands on their lives that are way more complicated" in comparison to students who may have the ability to attend class and have access to everything they need to be successful without additional responsibilities.

Doing (Me) Research: Emotional Labor

When FGGSs pursue research or topics closely aligned with who they are, their communities, or lived experiences, there is an additional layer of intellectual and emotional labor. This labor may relate to having a heightened awareness of the inequities that are perpetuated in research and how these inequities affect their home communities. In addition, if FGGSs choose to cover topics that focus on systematically marginalized groups or underresearched issues, they may have to articulate the importance of this research to their professors, classmates, and departments to a greater extent. For FGGSs, emotional labor requires managing the emotions the students may have about covering topics from an academic lens as well as managing how they process the value placed on these topics by higher education institutions. Whereas intellectual labor may require brokering relationships with communities that professors or departments do not have while arguing why it will make an academic contribution to the field. By constantly advocating for (Me) Research, the participants demonstrate the value of their research and are charting their own path as FGGSs. Overall, this exemplifies the emotional and intellectual labor FGGSs experiences when endeavoring to validate themselves and their research. Pairing this with the everyday stressors of graduate school, FGGSs who choose to study topics through (Me) Research must balance their overall well-being with navigating the already nebulous graduate

school environment to a greater extent than their continuing-generation peers.

Intellectual labor is primarily related to having to articulate why something is important as well as having to establish the connections to the community that are required for FGGSs to do their research. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, described how before coming to her current university, she constantly argued about why the research was important to her department and advisors who had other priorities. She described this experience:

> It was really frustrating having to constantly vouch for my community that we need to be heard in research as well… So every single time I had to [be]...the spokesperson for Hmong people.

This extends beyond the traditional requirement of having to articulate a research gap common in graduate school and required Maiv to be the spokesperson when the faculty could not understand the importance of the research. Upon coming to her current university, she was able to connect with professors and a department that she felt understood her study, whom were also able to provide connections and resources for her to pursue her topic.

Emotional labor came about when FGGS participants focused on issues close to their experience and would have to consider whether it would be disadvantageous to their emotional well-being in the long term. Makayla, an American Indian/Native American and Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, described how an assignment for her immigration course "was to go to the detention hearings and actually go over their health in custody, and that was really hard." She prepared for this experience by bringing a friend and ensuring she could rest afterward to process the experience. Although the topics may be difficult and emotional for any student, when a FGGS has had a personal experience with the topic, additional layers of emotion need to be considered. Anna, a white woman, reflected on how she wanted to study topics close to who she was because it is crucial for her to improve the experiences of people from her community. However, she reflected on a shared belief about (Me) Research: "By studying things that you are close to, you're inherently biased in the ways in which you interpret them." The emotional labor resides in her need to consider whether her research will be valued or viewed the same given her personal experience related to the topics and if future employers or universities "might not think of my work as critical." For FGGSs, the emotional labor they experience in conducting research closely aligned with their personal identities has broad implications for their academic trajectories and professional opportunities after graduate school.

Summary

This chapter delved into Doing (Me) Research and examined how FGGSs use personal experiences and community connections to enrich academic inquiry while grappling with the intellectual and emotional labor inherent in research topics closely aligned with their identities. Through the subtheme Employing Funds of Knowledge, FGGSs intersperse their research and teaching with their personal perspectives and lived experiences, endeavoring to challenge biases and advocate for the representation of underrepresented voices and experiences. The subtheme Intellectual and Emotional Labor reflects on the burdens FGGSs face as they navigate systemic inequalities and experience tokenization, where they must justify the significance of their research and balance the demands of graduate school with their own personal well-being. (Me) Research can be a source of empowerment and advocacy for FGGss. (Me) Research can also demonstrate FGGSs' important contributions to academia and their advocacy for equity and inclusion for their communities through their scholarly work.

Questions to Consider

- How are first-generation students in undergraduate experiences introduced to the idea of graduate school? How can faculty and pregraduate programs build key supports for the exploration and application process?
- Before pursuit of a graduate program, what opportunities are available for students to receive guidance on the purpose of graduate school, and to help them demystify the graduate application process?
- How do graduate students build relationships with their peers? With faculty? In what settings? How are these settings structured to facilitate relationship building and resource sharing?
- Are these formally or informally structured settings? Are the value(s), goal(s), and purpose(s) of the relationship building being explicitly discussed?
- How is the purpose of the relationships graduate students are expected to create with peers and faculty explicitly defined? Are resources available to assist with this that delineate the purpose of the relationships?
- Are university resources (mental health resources, support groups, writing groups) available to support students through their time in graduate school where they can talk about the intersection of their research, coursework, and teaching as it relates to their lived experiences and identities?
- How do departments support students who focus on specific topics, including systematically marginalized populations and historically underresearched groups? How do they ensure that faculty support is accessible and conducive toward promoting community connections?

Chapter 6: Jarring Juxtapositions, Family Role, Financing Education, and Mental Health Management

This chapter explores four themes that resonated across the experiences of the students in this study: jarring juxtapositions, family role, financing education, and mental health management. The jarring juxtapositions are what FGGSs experience as they continue their academic journeys and how they respond to the ambivalence and disequilibrium that accompany the transition from undergraduate to graduate school. Next, we focus on exploring the complex family role and relationships in the experiences of FGGSs as they embark on graduate school, yet another unknown (and often intimidating) new terrain. Inextricably linked to family, the next theme is the role of financing education and the ways that FGGSs experience graduate school funding (or, more accurately, attempt to cobble together funding semester by semester). We conclude with the ways in which FGGSs manage their mental health and the many assets that they bring to the intense and frequently demoralizing climate of graduate school.

Jarring Juxtapositions

The first-generation experience is replete with contested identities and bewildering dilemmas, those countless moments of feeling caught and confused between worlds. The theme of jarring juxtapositions explores the experiences of FGGSs as they navigate the complex intersection of new and old identities, shifting familial and community connections, and increasing awareness of their positionality and precarity as graduate students. The students in this study consistently reflected on their sense of disequilibrium as they passed from their precollege life to university life.

The dimensions of the multilevel model of intersectionality (MMI) most applicable to the jarring juxtapositions theme are representational (that sense that FGGSs are expected to readily represent their intersectional identities while also experiencing pressure to code-switch and conform) and experiential (the consistent sensemaking and negotiating with oneself in various contexts). Jarring juxtapositions illustrate what FGGSs wrestled with as they negotiated their place and positionality at the university and at home, with peers and with professors, and how their sense of belonging was consistently challenged in these shifting contexts. The recognition of the disequilibrium caused by these juxtapositions is at the core of the findings of this study and continues to be a major challenge experienced by FGGSs across disciplines.

Jarring Juxtapositions: Acquiring Privilege

The students in this study reflected on how they negotiated a new sense of self as graduate students and the surreal experience of having new access to privilege and resources previously unobtainable. For FGGSs, these new privileges are often a sharp contrast to the realities of life in their communities of origin. Many FGGSs described a sense of survivor's guilt and a keen awareness of the disparities between their graduate student world and that of their community of origin. Anna, a white woman, shared:

> Part of me feels selfish because I went to college to get a good degree, to make money, to eventually help people and help my family, but now I'm in graduate school for 6 years and I make just enough money to get my life by. So there's some guilt there for not being able to help right away.… I study this stuff so I go home and I see all of the disparity sort of playing out.... My best friend growing up, her dad died a year ago because he couldn't get access to insulin because of...[n]ot having the knowledge base or the education to recognize how much of an injustice the heightened insulin cost really is.

Like many FGGSs, this participant described the common experience of feeling removed and unable to help at home as they spend years in graduate school hoping to secure a socioeconomic mobility structure for their families. A critical aspect of this participant's uneasy acquisition of privilege is that the inequities that they are studying in graduate school are exemplified by the disenfranchisement and hardships in their home community. Anna shared the dissonance she experienced between her graduate school life and home life:

> Having more of an upward trajectory, which I've worked really hard to have, but then going back to different types of problems and the weight of those problems, and how far removed I am.… I feel like it's just hard to see a lot of things go down and not be able to physically be present to help. So it's a reminder that I'm not there for those things, but it's also a reminder: This is your family. This is very different from my day-to-day life here.

Anna's description of the differential "weight of problems" between graduate school and familial life is consistent across FGGSs' experiences in our study. FGGSs are reckoning with a new sense of privilege and status while also navigating the very real challenges of graduate school, which may seem frivolous or incomparable to the hardships at home. Kyra, a Black/African American woman, shared:

> When you struggle...you can't really complain, 'cause this is still a really privileged place to be when you come from being first gen and low income. So it's hard to sometimes talk about how you feel, I don't wanna complain. You did all of this hard work. I'm here, things hopefully will be better when I leave. It's isolating.

The isolation and comparison we hear across these students' stories are central to the jarring experience of gaining access to privilege. Kyra said that "you can't really complain," and the students shared that you should keep your problems to yourself because they can't compare to what is going on at home. On the one hand, FGGSs are always aware of the disparities between home and university life and feel a sense of obligation and connection to their community of origin. On the other hand, students are very conscious of being removed from these daily struggles and what it means for their place at home. Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, Filipino woman, described this feeling:

> "I internalized a lot of things.… People can tell I'm not part of this community anymore and what does that mean to have a privilege, and be writing at this desk and…not deal with the everyday struggle of being back home?"

Danao speaks directly to the sense that, as an FGGS, connection and commitment to home community often become contested. There may be internal feelings of guilt and shame for not being directly engaged in the "everyday struggle," as the student described it. The student characterized

her life in graduate school as a privilege and collapsed it into one activity ("writing at this desk") while her community continued to struggle. We get a sense across the students' quotes that there are problems and challenges in graduate school but that there are real problems back home. This jarring juxtaposition often instigates guilt, shame, and urgency to leverage success as soon as possible to benefit family and community. For many FGGSs, acquiring privilege becomes yet another source of isolation and disequilibrium.

Jarring Juxtapositions: Duty to Family

In the previous chapter, we explored the emotional and intellectual labor undertaken by FGGSs and the ways that their lived experiences make them better researchers, teachers, and graduate students. A significant aspect of FGGSs performing this labor is fulfilling a sense of duty to their families. These duties are often interwoven with cultural and community obligations that exert a sense of expectation and critical connection for FGGSs.

FGGSs often used metaphorical language to describe their graduate school experiences—"journey," "map," and "battle" are examples. One common metaphorical symbol was a door. They described the experience of walking through an open door to academia, leaving precollege life and identity behind, only to find that the door back to familial contexts and community of origin was either challenging to find or closed altogether. The participants in this study consistently noted a sense of duty to family and community of origin and a tension in balancing family and graduate student roles. Many FGGSs are also keenly aware that they are never not of their family, but their family is not of the world of academia.

Duty to family, and the accompanying survivors' guilt and pressure to succeed, was described by virtually all of the participants in this study. Many reflected on a common dilemma: When things are hard or challenging, the pull of obligations is a swinging door that can become one's only motivation to continue in the struggle of academia. The blurry line of "but who am I doing this for?" becomes a point of tension and dilemma for many FGGSs. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, shared:

> People that would love to be in grad school cannot get there, because maybe whatever barriers stand in the way…. I recognize that a lot more than other people do. That even if you don't like the class, value the class...you are able to do this when other people that would love to cannot.

Megan noted that, because she is a FGGS, she had a stronger understanding of the barriers that exist not just for herself but for others. This awareness constitutes a sense of motivation and pressure for FGGSs. When they didn't like a class, they moved through that hardship by remembering "you are able to do this when other people cannot." This is a central dilemma and core motivation at the heart of the FGGS experience and is captured in the words of Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman: "My parents didn't have an opportunity to receive higher education.… It's not something that they chose. Nobody chooses that.... My success is not just my success but my family's success." Leonora was acutely aware of the lack of opportunities and agency available to her parents. This became her motivation to succeed not only for herself but on behalf of her family.

Many FGGSs make key choices in academia with their family's prosperity and mobility in mind. From what discipline to study to where to go to college, they are thinking collectively, not individually. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, reflected on the tension of being from a collectivist culture while navigating the individualistic culture of academia:

> I have to juggle…the sense of agency and individualism versus

> family and the stress that comes with that and how to cope with that. You have to really just power through for the better of family or community kind of thing.

Maiv described these collective decisions as "group coherence." This is a thread across the students' stories.

Many graduate students in this study shared that, if not for their sense of duty to family, they would have most likely chosen a different graduate program more aligned with their academic interests and professional opportunities. Maiv described her selection of a master's program:

> The deciding factor for me…was "What is the closest school to home that I can do this program too? And what kind of research were these professors doing that matched, or at least somewhat matched, what I was doing?" I'm not going to go out of state because I have to stay home and I have to take care of my family and my siblings.

The sense of familial duty and responsibility were at the center of this student's program decision, a distinct factor for many FGGSs. Like most continuing-generation graduate students, the student was also considering the professor they want to collaborate with and the research interests, but this is not the only consideration. There are also deeply rooted cultural dimensions to collective decision-making and group coherence. Maiv linked her strong cultural identity with the way she approached graduate school:

> I think something that is a really big part of me is being Hmong… 'cause I think with any intersecting race or culture with the Western world where your views are so different, it's always something that you're just trying to balance between two worlds.… My grandparents stressed that I shouldn't have gone so far away because who's gonna take care of my family? Education shouldn't come first and family should always come first. I had to juggle with that for a long time.

This student described a process of collective individuation: taking into account the cultural roles and expectations that are central to their identity while choosing to pursue an education that allows them to fulfill some of these roles. This is a constant tension for many FGGSs. The choice to not only become the first in the family to go to college but even go beyond and attend graduate school represents a complex intersection of agency, duty, and determination.

Jarring Juxtapositions: Code-Switching

A common experience for students from marginalized identities in academia, including students of color, low-income students, and others, is that of code switching. Now recognized as a strategic form of resistance capital (Yosso, 2005), code-switching is a skill set and a creative practice that is honed across generations. While academia has rapidly diversified in recent decades, the dominant white and middle class culture of higher education and all of the rigid expectations of how to show up as a "serious scholar" remain intact. One subversive way to show up is to employ code-switching, skillfully traversing between worlds with vastly different normative standards. As FGGSs straddle the dichotomies of home and university, they develop highly attuned metaphorical and literal sets of language, presentation standards, and self-care strategies that allow them to navigate family and academic expectations.

Many FGGSs described developing specific strategies for talking with their families about life in graduate school and having accessible anecdotes prepared for when family members ask that anticipated question, "How is school?" Camila, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared that she

intentionally talked about specific experiences that are easier to understand:

> I talk to them a little bit more specifically about things that are a little bit more attainable for us to understand together.… I talk more about a certain class or a certain grade in a class, or a certain opportunity that I'm being presented…. They know I'm taking, let's say, like, [the] Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), they don't know what comes with that. They know I'm applying to a certain program; they don't really know what's underneath, what does applying mean, what does it mean to talk to different professors and determine what program is good for you…. Even the word for doctorate in Spanish is kind of different.

Camila is reflecting on one of the core strategies of code-switching: navigating language differences, both verbal language and the cultural language of academia. This practice entails the active choice of where and how to use specific linguistic codes. For Makayla, an American Indian/Native American and Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, the shifting among language and codes happens at home and at school:

> There's definitely been different parts of my identity that I think I show at different places. And even when I'm in my classroom with my peers, I'm one of the few students of color, so it's very hard.... It's easier to assimilate to their language base.

Makayla's sense of hypervisibility about being one of a few first-gen students of color became a motivation to code-switch and revert to the dominant language when with peers. This is a common assimilation strategy: reflecting the dominant culture in language and reference as a bid of visibility and acceptance. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, shared that in her role as a teaching assistant (TA), she tried to balance code-switching with "cultural sharing":

> The class that I was TAing was a freshman class…. I tried to be kinda, like, positive, I tried to be humorous, I tried to be who I am… doing a little bit of culture sharing. 'Cause that's just who I am, from another culture.... But they talk a lot about pop culture.… I feel like it's really hard for me to kinda catch up and get the cultural references, and I guess that has more to do with the fact that I'm from another culture.

Despite Wei using positivity and humor and sharing aspects of her culture, the dominant culture references still had an othering impact on her in her role as a teaching assistant. The pressure to bifurcate home identity and academic identity and determine where and how to "be yourself" is a common dilemma for FGGSs. Many participants shared experiences of the pain of bifurcation and code-switching, about feeling that they were "hiding out" in their identity as graduate students. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, shared:

> Especially with my family, it makes me feel maybe less connected to them, because they haven't been able to understand what I'm going through or be able to really help a lot, so that actually makes me feel a little bit more isolated…from my family or friends who haven't gone through college. But then on the other hand I also don't feel like I quite fit in with the people who have come from families that they all went through college, because it seems like there's a lot of my story I try to hide.

As Miya straddled both worlds, she described a sense of not fully fitting in either place. The language of "hiding" came up repeatedly across the students' stories. Miya continued to reflect on her experience of feeling like

her family/community roles and grad student roles were incompatible and bifurcated:

> It's a lot of just these different roles that are separate…. People in the different areas of my life don't quite understand the other area, but they also don't seem to want to understand it, so I just try to hide different little parts of myself.… Am I at work? Am I with my colleagues from the University? Am I with my friends, am I with my family? They are kind of these four separate bins.

Miya described a pressure to hide aspects of identities and experiences in both worlds. While code switching is often an act of agency and resilience, it can also have an impact of loneliness and shame. Sara, a white woman, reflected on her choice not to share about her sibling with her graduate school peer group because she felt her sibling's story would be judged by peers:

> My younger sister has a baby and she's in school, and she works full-time. That doesn't sound normal to someone who's not first gen.… I don't even tell my sister's full life, which she's incredible and she should be honored for what she's doing.… So I just feel like I try to hide that and keep that separate a little bit.

Sara's active choice to code switch about her familial experiences reflects the shame and alienation experienced by many FGGSs as they move among separate worlds.

Sophia, a white woman, shared the complicated experience of code-switching at home as a way to increase connecting with family and how it exacerbated her sense of going back and forth between two worlds:

> It's tricky with my family. They do support that I am in grad school.... It's a lot of that code-switching between the way that I talk in the school, and the way that I talk to my professors, and the way that I talk to my family. I try to use not simpler words, but smaller words. I definitely change my vocabulary with my family. And there's a huge cultural thing.... Adults and elders know more. So when I'm home, I have to kind of switch to that like, "Don't question, don't speak back," even though I've learned more and I feel like I know more sometimes than a lot of my family members.… It can be difficult trying to switch back and forth between those two worlds and that identity.

Tricky indeed. Like most things in the FGGS experience, code-switching is complex. It can serve as a strategy of subversive belonging within institutions and a way to make grad school discernable for family and friends. It can also increase FGGSs' sense of isolation both within university contexts and in their home communities. The skillful and complicated ways that FGGSs employ complex languages and knowledge bodies are a distinct aspect of their experiences, which they continued describing as they discussed the role of family in their graduate school life.

Summary

This theme, jarring juxtapositions, explores how FGGSs navigate the many tensions and dissonances at the heart of the first-generation experience. The subtheme acquiring privilege illustrates the intense process of identifying as a scholar and having access to and expectations of the privileged, hierarchical world of academia. At another level, the subtheme of duty to family and code-switching explores the ways that FGGSs maintain a sense of identity around their familial roles as well as exhibit skillful autonomy in moving between and amongst disparate worlds of academia and community of origin. These juxtapositions and skill sets will continue to

be unpacked in the next section focused on FGGSs' roles in their families and communities.

Family Role

Is it any wonder that the word family was said over 400 times in the interviews with FGGSs? By definition, the first-generation student identity is inherently contingent on family and familial status. It's not only about being the first in a family to go to college; it's about an evolving understanding of the ways that higher education participation impacts the connection with family and community. As discussed in Chapter Four, FGGSs have a strong sense of generational influence and being a 'good ancestor', described by Salis Reyes (2019) as "being part of a cycle…taking and making use of one's gifts, then passing along the products of that work to the next generation" (p. 603). Many FGGSs seek higher education with a collectivist, intergenerational awareness that college attainment is an opportunity to increase educational attainment and social mobility not just for themselves, but for future generations of their families and communities. This chapter explores FGGSs' experiences with their families and how it influences their identities as graduate students. The stories reflect common dynamics and dilemmas of maintaining their familial bonds and identities while navigating a context worlds apart from their community and culture of origin. While many families are supportive and proud of their FGGS, there is often discomfort and distance as the student becomes part of this new and strange world of academia. Parents and caregivers may feel limited in their ability to understand and guide students as they navigate the highly complex, formal, and specific context and expectations of higher education. Others feel alienated from the children that they sent off to college. The connection and disconnections between FGGSs and their families exist across four subthemes: family support and expectations, community upbringing, valuing hard work, and the impact of generational educational experiences and expectations on first-generation graduate students.

The dimensions of the MMI most applicable to the family role theme are intersubjective (how FGGSs negotiate shifting connections and dynamics with family, navigating when and how to share about their experiences in academia) and experiential (the ways in which FGGSs draw on their community cultural wealth as an asset while also experiencing shame and exclusion related to lack of knowledge and status, and the sense of conflict about whether their academic work is valuable and worth the sacrifice and struggle for self and family). These themes operate simultaneously and independently. The findings of this study illustrate the ways in which FGGSs perceive their evolving sense of connection with family, as well as their identity as FGGSs, and offer a critical dimension to what is often assumed to be a simple story of parental pride and unlikely achievement.

Family: Support, Pride, and Pressure

It is not uncommon for FGGSs to reflect on the challenges of sharing about college life with their families. These challenges are often intensified at the graduate school level. While many family members have a sense of collegiate life and expectations after supporting their family members throughout the undergraduate experience, their awareness and understanding of the experiences and challenges of graduate school is significantly more limited. Additionally, there is a comparative lack of representation of graduate school in popular culture as well as limited access to programs such as TRIO and other programs that support FGGSs and their families as they navigate the undergraduate process. So the onus is on FGGSs to fill in the blanks for their families and share their knowledge of the graduate school experience while also being conscious of the pressure and expectations that accomplishments represent for both themselves and their families.

As FGGSs approach and navigate graduate school, they frequently reflect

on how to communicate with their families about grad school life and remain connected to their communities of origin. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, reflected on how the challenges of graduate school affected her relationship with her family:

> I'm very close with my mother and my sister, but they did not understand what I was going through. I could not just call and talk to them because it would make me more frustrated because they didn't understand what I was going through. I think the biggest barrier was just not having anyone close to me that I could depend on for help.

Megan's quote reflects the added pressure or labor that many FGGSs experience when trying to explain common graduate school challenges to their families. While many students in this study expressed a deep sense of connection and closeness with their families, the graduate school experience presented a new barrier in their sense of connection with home. Still, despite these challenges, a consistent theme across the participants in this study was the sense of support that they received from their families as a crucial motivation. This was particularly significant when they experienced hardships and ambivalence about their future in graduate school and academia. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, described his family's support as both an important motivation and a significant source of pressure:

> I'm super lucky to have not just my immediate family's support but my extended family's support. Every time I go back home and see my extended family, they're like, "Oh, we can't wait for you to graduate because we really wanna celebrate." It's on one part very uplifting, but at the same time it's stressful to have that expectation of being the very first PhD student in the family and you really don't wanna let them down. So as great of a motivator as it is, it can be very detrimental just because culturally the expectations that I feel from my family and how much I let that weigh on me.

Cesar's experience illuminates another consistent theme across the participants' reflections on their engagement with family during graduate school: the particular intensity and pressure experienced by FGGSs. Graduate school already presents significant stress and pressure for all students, but FGGSs are often affected by the simultaneous pressure coming from both the institution and the familial expectations.

Family: Community Raised

The MMI delineates the experiential dimension as a critical aspect of identity development; this was a consistent aspect of FGGSs' understandings of themselves in relation to their families. FGGSs in this study frequently described being raised in a community context beyond the traditional nuclear family, often comprising extended family members, intergenerational households, and ethnic neighborhood enclaves. In this manner, their definition of family was expansive and multidimensional, not limited to dominant culture definitions of relations and biology. They often described this community-reared experience as critical to their sense of support and success and a cultural asset that differentiated their experience from that of their continuing-generation peers.

Cesar reflected on his extended-family upbringing being crucial to his academic success, despite switching schools and moving frequently as their parents sought employment:

> We were just still trying to get our grounding as a family, so we had to do a lot of moving around and transitioning to different places. Thankfully, we had our nearby family, so I always grew up being

> close to my extended family and my immediate family.… As an adult I realize how immensely important that support structure was.

For Cesar and others in this study, the sense of precarity and instability in their nuclear household was remediated, at least in part, by the sense of being raised by a community. Other students made direct connections between their familial experiences of migration and immigration with their sense of being welcomed and supported within ethnic/cultural enclaves. This is a common cultural asset of many immigrant communities in the United States (Purgason, Honer, & Gaul, 2020). Caitlin, a white woman, described her experience of being raised in a traditionally Italian American neighborhood. While her parents were often unavailable because of work, she was raised in a collective environment of extended family:

> I'm from a big Italian family, so when everybody was in the same state, we would all get together and do the big dinners and stuff together; so they were always around. Someone always making sure I ate and did my homework, that type of thing.

Similarly, several FGGS participants reflected on being raised in communal and cultural enclaves as a result of being members of the new immigrant community. Tan, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, shared his family's refugee immigrant story and how his family prioritized moving to places in the United States where they had extended familial relations as a strategy for seeking support:

> We came to the U.S. in 1984 as refugees from Cambodia. I was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. So when we came over, we traveled a little bit.… We moved up to Maine because of relatives and family friends from my mom, and there were job opportunities. It's the first time being in that state, but also experiencing winter, and being the few people of color in Maine, especially.

Tan described the importance of having those family connections in new places and environments as crucial to feeling a sense of belonging and stability in a new and different environment. While Tan consistently experienced racism and xenophobia in his new school, he described his extended family and Cambodian community as a place of refuge and understanding. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, who identifies as a member of a collective culture, shared her experience of how being raised intergenerationally shaped her sense of support and motivation:

> I'm from a very typical Chinese family. So I have my grandparents, my parents. While I was growing up, we literally just lived together 'cause it's like an extended family, and my family.... It's kinda like a generational thing going on.

Other students shared the importance of being community raised because their immediate family was experiencing hardships and instability. A common theme in these experiential reflections was being collectively cared for as a result of addiction and/or incarceration of parents and primary caregivers. These themes reflect substance abuse disparities in disenfranchised communities, an issue exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ways in which college students are affected by familial addiction (Panchal et al, 2020; Vernarde & Payton, 2011). Sophia, a white woman, shared that her parent's substance use affected her living situation: "My dad's not in the picture. He has a lot of substance abuse problems. My mom is a single mom so I grew up in a single-parent home.… I actually lived full-time with my mom and my grandparents." It is notable that Sophia and others named their intergenerational and extended families as their immediate family, disrupting the dominant emphasis and assumption of

nuclear family support. Chris, a white man, reflected on the challenges of navigating family addiction and seeking familial/community-based support:

> Mom was in and out of my life because of addiction: opioids and alcoholism. And we have a family nearby, too. My grandparents, who spent a lot of time more or less raising me, and my aunt and uncle on my dad's side also lived nearby. Just because addiction's crazy, so you need guardians like that.

Other FGGSs reflected on being community raised as a result of parents' incarceration or intergenerational impacts of addiction. Sara, a white woman, shared, "My dad, when I was really little…he ended up getting involved in drugs, and kinda went down that path, so he was out of our household for a little bit. And then he got clean. He did his time." While Sara did not share this with her graduate school cohort, she described a sense of pride in what her family had survived. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared how the intergenerational trauma of addiction affected the family culture and her sense of work ethic:

> My grandfather essentially wanted my dad to quit high school to continue to work to support the family, just because my grandfather was an alcoholic. And so my grandmother had to do a lot of the work to make up for the income that he was [using by] drinking, and to take care of the children.

While the participants explored many aspects of being community raised, from cultural enclaves to navigating challenges such as immigration and addiction, they all consistently connected this experience to feeling more, not less, supported as a FGGS. While their familial structures may have been less recognizable within the dominant culture, they counted many people in their support structure. This expansive, collective family dynamic was reflected across FGGSs' identities, cultures, and communities.

Family: Value of Hard Work

A consistent theme across the FGGS participants in this study was reflection on a culture of hard work within their families. The students frequently shared that watching their parents, grandparents, and siblings engage in hard labor and challenging, erratic workforces was a significant influence and motivation on their higher education journeys. Maiv, an Asian/Pacific Islander and Hmong woman, described the common FGGS experience of watching her mother balance multiple jobs with single parenting:

> Ever since I could remember, she's always worked night shifts. Because during the day, before I knew how to drive, she would be the one that had to drive all of us to school. So her usual, normal routine for the longest time would be she'd work at night, she would come home, and then it would just start. I had to get everyone ready and then she would take us all to school. My youngest sibling right now is only 5, so we're all different ages. There was usually a baby that she still had to take care of at home even though she came home from work and she was tired. So that's been her normal routine for the longest time.

Maiv's experience of caring for siblings and being responsible for driving them to school was common among the participants. FGGSs shared that this familial culture of hard work extended to their own experiences and identities. The FGGS participants shared their own experiences with employment and labor as part of the larger family economic survival. Adam, a white man, discussed the responsibility of working in his dad's electrician shop as part of family expectations:

> Whenever I wasn't at school, I was helping him. And it was much more of a full-time or part-time job than it was a fun thing for me. And so my after-school activities were really limited because he required me to help him. I was one of seven children. My mom never had any education past high school, but she worked as his secretary for the business, but she also ran home with seven children, and so all of us seven children were expected to pitch in and help.

While Adam struggled with balancing work and school, sacrificing activities and extracurricular involvement, his story reflects a commonly expressed pride among FGGS scholars in contributing to the family and carrying on the value of hard work. For many, this pride connects with their ability to bring something to graduate school that distinguishes them from their peers: an identity of being a reliably hard worker. This value becomes an identity that sets them apart. Adam shared:

> My identity was always wrapped up in my ability to work hard, and up until graduate school, I thought that that's all that really mattered: If I could show people that I work hard, I can figure out anything.

Similarly, another student reflected on their ability to balance work, school, and family obligations as a singular asset. Rather than bifurcating aspects of their home and university lives, FGGSs in this study embraced the value of hard work in their families and attributed it to their success. Elisa, a multiracial woman, reflected:

> I've always been able to distinguish myself through my work ethic, whether that was working as a housekeeper or working as a server in a retirement home or as a waitress in a Mexican restaurant, through the research that I do now with the university. My identity as a first-generation graduate student does not influence the quality of work that I strive to bring to what I do. I think, maybe, it makes my story a little bit more impressive.

The FGGSs in this study were acutely aware and often proud of the fact that their work ethic gave them a unique asset in graduate school and that their internalized identity of being a hard worker set them apart.

Family: Generational Educational Experiences

Several of the FGGSs in the study reflected on the challenges of knowing when and how to talk about graduate school with their parents, especially when there are comparisons and pressure to "just be grateful" for the opportunity to attain higher education than previous generations. Jenny, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, reflected on how her identity as a graduate student caused points of contention with her immigrant parents:

> Sometimes it's hard to talk to my parents about it…. I like to talk to my mom about things, but sometimes for college or university stuff, it's really hard, 'cause she just doesn't have [experience with the subject or discipline]...but she always downplays it. I feel like she's a smart woman, but she said it a lot, "Stop complaining about college. You're lucky that you go to undergrad, even grad school now. I never even finish high school." She always put it that way.

Many FGGSs expressed an acute awareness of the lack of opportunities for previous generations. This serves as both a motivator and a possible source of pressure and stress for FGGSs. Aleisha, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, reflected on not just the previous generation but also how her grandparents' relative lack of educational opportunities continues to affect her family.

> As Hong Kong Chinese, we believe that pursuing higher education is the way to climb the ladder, and my parents [did] not [have] super-high education, just finishing middle school. My grandparents finished primary school. They wished for my parents to study higher education in order to have a better living. Similar thing happened to my maternal grandparents. Both of them barely finished primary school.

Aleisha attributed her parents' and grandparents' experiences directly to her choice to pursue higher levels of education and to break generational cycles of educational disenfranchisement. FGGSs often have a conscious awareness of their role as cycle-breakers in their families and communities of origin.

Summary

This theme role of family examines how FGGSs perceive, understand, and negotiate their roles in their families during their graduate school experiences. The sub themes of support, pride, and pressure and the value of hard work demonstrate both the distinct assets (work ethic, pride, and motivation) that FGGSs attributed to their families as well as the challenges (pressure, overidentification with work). Similarly, the sub themes of community raised and generational educational experiences illustrate the unique collectivist and generational emphasis within the FGGS experience. The next theme, financing education, will focus on the ways that FGGSs utilize their familial attributes to navigate the challenges of funding in graduate school.

Financing Education

A major concern from all FGGSs and their families/communities is financing higher education.. There is a strong correlation between being first-generation and being of low socioeconomic status (SES; Kezar, 2020; Williams & Martin, 2022), and even FGGSs who have financially secure families are influenced by debt aversion and tuition escalation (Bleemer et al, 2021; Long, 2022). The majority of participants in this study discussed funding as a significant source of stress and uncertainty at every level of the higher education ladder. Many reflected on the strong distinction between the undergraduate and graduate financial aid processes, which made graduate school funding less affordable and more ambiguous. Several FGGSs reflected on the comparative lack of availability of undergraduate financial aid options, including federal funding such as the Pell Grant and federal student loans, and the hidden curriculum of applying for financial aid as an undergraduate and later competing for funded positions as graduate students. They also frequently shared about the impact of the precarious nature of graduate school funding, the experience of seeking funded positions semester by semester or year by year, a lack of funding during summers, and never feeling fully secure in their funding. Beyond the experience of seeking financial aid and funding, many FGGSs shared about navigating shifting abilities to financially support their families while in graduate school and how the decision to seek higher education is connected with family resources or lack thereof.

The dimensions of the MMI most applicable to the financing education theme are organizational (the consistent resistance and precarity that FGGSs experience in navigating the financial aid and funding processes and how this is mediated at multiple levels of the institution) and experiential (the emotional and mental health impacts of navigating financing education and having a position at the institution be contingent on seeking funding). The two sub themes reflect FGGSs' experiences with applying to college (navigating financial barriers such as application fees, campus visits, strategically taking advantage of community college and/or postsecondary enrollment options, and the collective familial experiences of completing

financial aid applications) and graduate school funding challenges (seeking fellowships and recurring funding, meeting gaps in funding, and meeting basic needs as a graduate student). The financing education theme demonstrates what FGGSs intuitively and experientially know to be one of the most formidable aspects of the hidden curriculum in higher education: paying for college.

Financing Education: Applying to College

While almost all of the students in this study reflected on financial stressors and barriers, they also shared about important financial assistance that made it possible for them to apply and/or visit colleges. Many FGGSs were participants in programs such as TRIO McNair. The funding provided through McNair for seemingly small expenses like application waivers and GRE and other exam fees proved to be critical for FGGSs. Sara, a white woman, shared:

> I was really lucky with McNair; they paid for my application fees. So I only applied to two schools because they said that they would pay for the two, or that they'd help me find ways to get two of them paid for. The financial barrier was huge.

The availability of assistance such as fee waivers and travel stipends makes a significant difference for FGGSs not only materially but also mentally, as it becomes one less barrier in an overwhelming myriad of stressors related to money and funding. Caitlin, a white woman, reflected on the difference between FGGSs and continuing-generation students when faced with barriers such as application fees:

> The money was a huge limiting factor. I heard that people's parents paid for their applications for them, which is insane to me. I just did it all myself. It didn't even occur to me that I could ask my parents to do that for me.

Many graduate programs emphasize the importance of participating in campus visit days once admitted to programs. Visits are advantageous not only in giving admitted students a sense of the culture of the campus and department but also in giving them crucial exposure to faculty they may work with and/or opportunities to obtain assistantships and fellowships. FGGS participants in this study discussed the financial barriers in participating in visit programs and the role of assistance from their support programs. Elisa, a multiracial woman, reflected:

> So the TRIO program at KU actually paid for my expenses associated with doing one of the spring visit days. It made a huge difference for me to be able to go on the visit. I met my advisor and could see myself here.

Despite the availability of some support programs or academic departments to sponsor travel to visit days, for many FGGSs this type of funding was not available and/or they were unable to get time away from work and caregiving responsibilities to participate. Sara, a white woman, shared:

> I think it wasn't reasonable for me to even go and travel, to pay for the flights to go to all of these places. So if it did look good on the website, then that was the deciding factor for those out-of-state ones.

Sara's experience reflects those of many who face difficult choices in strategically using resources to make graduate school possible.

FGGSs often shared creative and resilient strategies for navigating financial hardships, including using community college programs and postsecondary

enrollment options to transfer in credits not only as a way to save money but also as a way to establish state residency to take advantage of in-state tuition. While they may be limited to financial resources, FGGSs used considerable navigational capital to overcome financial barriers. Danao, an Asian/Pacific Islander, Hawaiian, and Filipino woman, shared, "I had to take some classes at (community college). I should've gone more with that route; it was a lot cheaper to try to get residency. 'Cause I didn't know (it would help fund) grad school too."

In addition to strategic and creative approaches to navigating financial issues, FGGSs noted how distinct their graduate school financial journey was from their undergraduate experience of applying for financial aid via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a fairly standardized process for high school students that has undergone several simplification initiatives to make it more accessible (Davidson, 2015; Mungo & Klonowski, 2022). There is a vast difference in the ways that graduate students are funded, primarily because the process is adjudicated by institutional and departmental policy and depends greatly on the fluctuating expenditure of funding that may be available to graduate students. When asked what the most important factor in their program selection was, Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, shared:

> Money. I wasn't sure how I'd pay for everything 'cause I already have loans from undergrad. My main concern was "How do I pay for this?" I think I could see more support if it could be based on financial need. So in our department, fellowships and awards are all based on just research.... Like in college, you could get the Pell Grant or you could get all these other things (that are need based) that could really help you.

The connection between the undergraduate financial aid process and their sense of concern about paying for graduate school was a common theme among participants. Tan, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, shared:

> When I was applying in undergrad, it was like, "There's plenty of funds and you could get grants and other stuff." But when I was applying for grad schools, it's like, "I don't know.…" My main concern was funding, just wondering how I was gonna pay for it, especially because I worked my butt off during college so that I didn't have any student debt.

The distinct and often uncommunicated difference between undergraduate and graduate school funding is an important aspect of the hidden curriculum of graduate school. FGGSs begin the process of financing graduate education with a significant number of barriers, both materially and experientially, and the process is opaque and stressful. FGGSs use multiple approaches to seeking support and clarity as they navigate challenges in securing funding.

Financing Education: Graduate School Funding Challenges

Many FGGSs discussed the ambiguity and precarity of navigating graduate school funding as a distinct and ongoing source of stress. The process for seeking and securing funding was often unclear, and the hidden curriculum of maintaining funding was a significant barrier for FGGSs. Elisa, a multiracial woman, shared, "I didn't receive any notification about scholarships, and so I was pretty much days away from declining the offer when I got a notification that I had been awarded a fellowship." Caitlin, a white woman, also mentioned the lack of transparency about processes and notifications:

> There was not really knowing how funding works in grad school. I remember for my first semester, my tuition aid package hadn't

> come in yet. So I got a bill from the university…. It was like a $30,000 bill.… I ran to my parents, and I was like, "Oh, my god, I owe $30,000. Nobody told me this.… Am I even gonna go to grad school anymore?"

There is also a lack of awareness about gaps in funding. Several students reflected on the impacts of not being given summer funding and the limited resources for teaching and research opportunities. This, coupled with the lack of renewable and consistent funding, had a negative impact on FGGSs' sense of security in graduate school. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, shared:

> The issue of funding and fellowships, and especially if you're first-generation and if you don't have any outside sources to really rely upon, it could become a difficult thing to navigate, especially during vulnerable times like the summer where you're not guaranteed funding, and even more so, not having guaranteed funding and also you know being first-generation, so not necessarily having a ton of resources to rely on.

The lack of material resources, combined with navigating the hidden curriculum of graduate school funding, led to a sense of differentiation between FGGSs and their continuing generation peers. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, referred to this distinction as she reflected on the intensive labor and support networks required to even apply for funding:

> I definitely feel first-generation students are kind of at a disadvantage compared to [continuing-generation students]… [applying for funding], it's just a lot of time filling them out and there's no help from family about how to [navigate the application], or what to include there, and the references, the recommendation letters, they can get more sources. Because [continuing-generation students]...have those networks and... whereas it's like, first-gen, there's just a lot to navigate.

FGGSs can also feel alienated from graduate school socialization experiences due to material barriers. Linda, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, discussed feeling excluded from her cohort because the social activities often required money, and many students have expendable income:

> I really don't have all this money to spend like my fellow students in my cohort. They can get coffee every day. There's this big discrepancy. "My rent got paid" [versus] "Oh, well, my house and all the bills for my kids got paid."

In addition to this labor of securing and maintaining funding, many FGGSs find that the typical graduate student funding package, which includes tuition coverage and a stipend, does not cover living expenses. Many reflected that the stipend amount assumes that graduate students have partners or family members who can defray living expenses, which is often not the case for FGGSs. Chris, a white man, shared:

> We're not adequately supported. We're not even given summer.… Me and a couple other cohort [members] did the math, and we're basically being paid minimum wage for our labor, even though the entire program would fall apart without us. If the grad students all stop teaching, there would be no program. And so, we're being paid very little to do this.… I genuinely do not see how, even with full funding, even with the stipend, even with health insurance, how this could be feasible.

Similarly, another student shared that their basic expenses were not covered by the graduate school stipend and necessitated seeking additional employment, a common experience for FGGSs who are trying to assist their families while supporting themselves. Rachel, a multiracial woman, described this struggle:

> A lot of bills that I have weren't covered by the amount that they're giving.... I receive[d] the paycheck for the RAship and then the stipend [for the] semester, but still wasn't able to kind of cover my basic living, so I had to get another part-time job.

Beyond living expenses and tuition, important graduate school milestones, including conference travel and other professional development experiences, are significantly expensive and may or may not be available to FGGSs. There is a strong expectation that "serious" graduate students will present their work at conferences, attend summer institutes, or obtain competitive internships. Rachel reflected on the intensity of these expectations and the financial pressure that accompanies professional development in graduate school:

> In my department, they provide funding for going to a conference. It's all based on refunds; you have to pay for everything up front and then you have to get reimbursed after. I don't have the support to be able to come up with $1,500 up front to go to a conference that is great for me and is encouraged, you know? I feel like there's very little support in that aspect, even thinking, can somebody have that or assuming that people have credit cards, so they can just put it on their card and get reimbursed a week later?

Despite the many financial precarities FGGSs experienced, they consistently expressed gratitude for the funding and recognized that accessible funding was critical to continuing their studies. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, shared a compelling story about her ability to access emergency funds through her department when facing housing insecurity:

> I was living with a partner and they were supporting me financially, to get through school, that was kind of the plan. But we ended up breaking up and I ended up kind of not having a place to live and I didn't have a job because I didn't think I needed to have a job. And the college gave me like $1,500 of...they called it "emergency money." And I didn't really have to do much to get it.… That helped me move and gave me a little extra money before I could find a job.

Financial considerations will always be paramount in the FGGS experience. FGGSs work to employ their significant navigational and resilience capital to fill in the gaps by working many jobs, making hard choices about how and when to participate in costly experiences, and always being "on the hustle" for next semester's funding. The FGGS experience can provide a funding blueprint as institutions seek to make funding more accessible and consistent for those with the greatest need.

Summary

This theme, financing education, offers a critical exploration of the financial barriers that FGGSs experience in a new way at the graduate level. The subtheme applying to college illustrates a holistic awareness of the layers of financial stressors that FGGSs face, beyond the immediate focus on tuition and living expenses. Similarly, the subtheme graduate school funding challenges demonstrates the ambiguity and precarity experienced by FGGSs as they seek stable, renewable funding at the graduate level, which is so different and unfamiliar in comparison to the undergraduate financial aid process. The scarcity and instability of graduate school funding is a significant stressor for FGGSs, and the next theme will explore the

role of mental health and the strategies FGGSs utilize to manage their psychological well-being.

Managing Mental Health

Psychological safety is crucial for the persistence and well-being of first-generation students (House et al., 2020; Stebleton et al., 2014). Across all the themes in this study, we consistently see the importance of managing the stress of graduate school life as an FGGS. The theme managing mental health explores the ways in which FGGSs' graduate experiences have affected their mental health and well-being and the strategies for improving mental health. The students in this study demonstrated an advanced ability and awareness of the importance of managing their mental health, even with the significant stressors and setbacks that they experienced along the way. Going beyond the cliché and consumerist self-care practices of bubble baths and candles, FGGSs took active steps to recognize when they needed to shift their resources and time to care for themselves with compassion and connection.

The dimensions of the MMI most applicable to the managing mental health theme are experiential (the practices that FGGSs used to care for themselves and the ways in which FGGSs build an armor of protection to survive and thrive in institutions that were not built for them) and intersubjective (the strategies that FGGSs use to resist dominant expectations that undermine and minimize mental health and the ways in which FGGSs advocate for themselves and their needs in institutional contexts). Managing mental health illustrates the navigational and resiliency capital that is inherent to the first-generation experience. While many FGGSs reflected on navigating mental health setbacks and struggles as a core experience in graduate school, they also detailed the ways that their experience with hardships and barriers throughout their lives gave them critical awareness of managing and advocating for their mental health.

Managing Mental Health: Building an Armor of Protection

Many FGGSs in this study described in great detail the ways that they struggled with their mental health as they transitioned to graduate school. They also shared the importance of building an internal armor of protection from the stressors inherent in graduate school life. This armor of protection often involves giving permission to practice self-care and learning strategies that are distinctive for coping with the intensity of balancing a competitive academic environment, work expectations, and familial and community connections.

Many FGGSs are often accomplished and confident scholars. When they arrive at the graduate school level, many FGGSs experience a new sense of impostor phenomenon as they are positioned to compete with their peers for opportunities and funding. Adam, a white man, reflected on how the competitive academic environment in graduate school had a negative impact on his mental health:

> I was constantly, constantly anxious about getting things done, about being good enough. Part of the process of graduate school is beating you down to get you to think that you don't know anything. Well, to get you to realize that you don't know anything. You thought you knew things but you don't know anything. But they don't really do a good job of building you back up.

Several FGGS participants reflected on this sense of being mentally torn down and built back up. As they acclimated to a new sense of otherness in graduate school, many described navigating their own subjectivities and internalized anxieties. Sara, a white woman and McNair scholar, shared:

> I think I've had to just say, "Go with the flow," a little bit more. And I think that when I was a McNair scholar, we talked about impostor

> syndrome quite a bit. And I just feel like sometimes I'll act like everything is all together. And inside I'm like, "I'm gonna bomb it." There is a lot of internal worry and struggle. Like, "Will I make it through this program? Am I capable?"

One of the primary ways that FGGSs learn to manage their mental health is to recognize and reframe perfectionism. This is particularly challenging for FGGSs because one of the ways that they were able to become so accomplished in the first place was to strive for perfection at all times. However, many FGGSs shared that becoming aware of their perfectionism and embracing self-compassion were key to managing their mental health. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, said:

> I've learned to be more forgiving of myself about not getting something done in time.... For some deadlines of assignments, I'm just like if I turn it in a day late, it's a day late. I don't have to stay up the whole night and finish it by a deadline.

Similarly, Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, reflected on becoming aware of her perfectionism and learning how to cope with it.

> I can overwork myself like crazy. I am a perfectionist. I am a people pleaser. I will sit on my laptop doing the same assignment for hours just to get it perfect. And I think I just got better at recognizing it's done when it's done. It is what it is. Submit it, you're fine. Take a break, go for a walk.

Another crucial strategy for FGGSs was understanding how the high-pressure environment of graduate school is not conducive to promoting mental health and well-being. Several students noted that the climate of graduate school needs to shift to encourage students to care for themselves. Wei, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, shared:

> I really wish the school could be more realistic.… I don't know how we can make it happen, but I do feel a lot of actions are required to—concerning workshops of mental health and open conversations, recognizing the power dynamics, and real concrete plans—make the schedule more reasonable and work hours more reasonable.

While the onus of self-care is so often put on students, in reality the expectations and pressure of graduate school affect all students and are often institutionally reinforced. FGGSs have long advocated for departmental and institutional transformation, and there is significant work for institutions to do to create a climate shift such as the one Wei described. Alongside advocating for coordinated efforts to shift the climate of graduate school, FGGSs in this study also developed multifaceted self-care strategies to navigate graduate school.

Managing Mental Health: Forms of Self-Care

FGGSs often come into graduate school with experience at navigating stress and hardships as well as community-based understandings of how to resist institutions and hierarchies that are exploitative. Some of these strategies include reclaiming time; being in community; and engaging in food, movement, and cultural activities that are restorative. Several students shared that they intentionally structure their time to give space for rest and a psychic break from the daily pressures of graduate school. Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, reflected on resisting the urgent pace of graduate school life:

> I'm very invested in the slowness. Sometimes I just spend a lot of

> time on my couch playing video games, and cooking. I love to cook a lot…picking up a book to read that's not related to the writing of my dissertation…and just being social with friends, those are my everyday mechanisms.

Many of the FGGSs in this study also reflected on their experiences using therapy and counseling to cope with the challenges of both navigating graduate school and dealing with existing stressors and pressures from their families and communities. While FGGSs may feel pressure to bifurcate these aspects of their lives, the competing challenges continue to affect their overall mental health. Makayla, an American Indian/Native American and Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared how she experiences a constant stress and precarity related to her family situation and how counseling gave her a new sense of relief:

> I'm always in a state of chronic stress, just because of my family's immigration status.… I decided to try going to counseling and find someone that would be able to understand and just listen to a lot of what's been going on in my life, and I never had that before.

Other FGGSs shared the importance of agency and autonomy when deciding to engage in therapy. This demonstrates the skillful micro resistance that many FGGSs use to navigate the insider/outsider feelings inherent to institutional life (Sue et al., 2020). For Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, this meant choosing not to use university-sponsored therapy:

> Eventually I started going to therapy. It was very important to me that it not be connected to the university, so I went and called an outside therapist.… So, definitely all of the experiences of being first gen, and the difficulties of doing coursework and navigating fellowships, and navigating the relationships with faculty and colleagues and other members of the department definitely contribute or have contributed to my mental health, both negatively and in positive ways.… And it was also great to be able to talk to someone who didn't have ties to the university or have stakes in my progress about all of the nuances of doing prelims and writing a dissertation.

Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, also described the agency that they employed to select a therapist based on identity affinity:

> I picked a Black therapist who's been through this.… It helped me realize, "[Graduate school] is weird, you'll get through it, and then your career won't be like this, you don't have to quit." What I was really worried about for a while, I thought, I've made a huge mistake getting into this field; I don't want this to be my career. So having these people, like the therapist who has a PhD.… That helped improve my mental health.

As explored in the theme of building capital in Chapter 5, the final strategy on which almost all of the FGGSs reflected was the importance of having enclaves of social support. For some, this looked like creating and sustaining connections with cohort members. Other students made the intentional choice to seek out other graduate students across departments who were members of their affinity communities. Still others struck a balance between remaining connected at home and fostering new relationships with students and mentors in their departments. Jenny, an Asian/Pacific Islander woman, reflected on the role of her peers and advisor in processing the stress of graduate school:

> When I'm stressed out, I know that I don't have to just talk to my parents about this, because I have my cohort and my other friends to talk to.… So I don't feel trapped.… I think about it as if, Well, I have a problem in grad school, I can just talk to my advisor about this or I can just talk to my friends about this in the program.

Similarly, Rachel, a multiracial woman, reflected on the scarcity of time in graduate school and the importance of allocating resources toward connecting with others as a crucial mental health strategy:

> Carving out that time to have a social life, and really make time for it.… We can vent to each other, and have these discussions around academics, but also that's not our main identity. So, yeah, social connections are really important for me as far as coping and dealing with what's going on.

Rachel specifically noted that connecting with others serves as a reminder that mental health and well-being are not contingent on status and position within institutions and academic disciplines. The expansive and resistant strategies that FGGSs used to manage their mental health demonstrate the agency, creativity, and resilience so common among first-generation scholars (Rodriguez, 2013; Roe, 2019).

Summary

This theme, managing mental health, uncovers one of the most influential and yet unacknowledged aspects of the FGGS experience. The subtheme building an armor of protection explores the multifaceted strategies that FGGSs used to navigate the intensive stress and isolation experienced by the majority of graduate students. These strategies are reflected in the next subtheme, forms of self-care, which demonstrates the unique assets that FGGSs bring to graduate education from their prior experiences of adversity to enhance and prioritize their self-care. As concerns for mental health continue to grow in higher education, this theme offers critical insights into interventions that institutions can employ and expand to benefit all graduating students.

Conclusion: Expanding the Story

To enter graduate school is to attempt to ascend into the ivory tower, not only seeking a credential but also becoming an accepted member of the academy. This research on FGGSs expands on the typical stories about first-generation success in crucial and dimensional ways. As FGGSs reflected on navigating jarring juxtapositions, evolving family dynamics, a new terrain of financing education, and managing mental health with all the intensity, stress, and competitiveness of graduate school, we understand that the story of being first-generation in higher education is one of never-ending negotiation and adaptation. Even at the highest levels of academic accomplishment, FGGSs can rarely rest or feel secure in their positions within the academy. With this awareness, we pose a selection of critical questions that may empower us as practitioners, colleagues, advisors, and mentors of FGGSs.How can you identify the jarring juxtapositions within your own work spheres? Where do people get stuck or burn out? Where is there dissonance and disequilibrium in your programs, departments, and leadership structures?

Questions to Consider

- How can you identify the jarring juxtapositions within your own work spheres? Where do people get stuck or burn out? Where is there dissonance and disequilibrium in your programs, departments, and leadership structures?
- How has your role in your family and/or community of origin shifted and evolved as you have navigated your professional identity? Is there space in your collegial and mentorship relationships to explore this dimension of being a scholar/practitioner
- Are you aware of the familial and community responsibilities of the people on your teams?
- Graduate school funding is a notoriously opaque and competitive arena of higher education. Are your departments and units communicating with transparency about how aspiring graduate students can seek sustained funding? Where are the gaps in your department for supporting the material needs of graduate students?
- FGGSs often bring in an advanced skill set and stamina for stress and adversity. This can make it even more challenging for them to navigate the intensity and stress of graduate school life. What are the resources and culture for discussing mental health and well-being in your program/department?
- How can graduate programs consider the academic calendar and identify potential high-stress times and reflect on appropriate support offerings or dedicated space for conversation to connect with and support FGGSs?

Chapter 7: Making Meaning of First-generation Identity in Graduate School

So I think if we are able to get rid of the negative stigma of being first-gen then I think it's something that we should pride ourselves on and be open to talking about. You should represent yourself proudly. But I think it's just hard to do because of those negative reactions sometimes. —Kamari

This chapter explores the final theme from our study: Making Meaning of First-generation Identity. This theme captures the process of meaning-making in which FGGSs engage as they understand their first-generation identity and its relationship to other salient identities as well as the context of institutional culture they are negotiating throughout graduate school. This theme is complex and nuanced for several reasons. First, FGGSs see their first-generation identity not as singular but in relationship to other social identities including race, social class, gender, and immigrant and refugee identities. In their process of sense-making, FGGSs reference the deep impact that context has in which they negotiate their identities. This attention to context demonstrates the connectivity of meaning-making across all themes referenced in Chapters 4–6. For example, context is the institution with its norms, practices, and culture and how it manifests into practice as seen in the themes of black boxes and ivory tower socialization. Context is also reflected in the ways in which FGGSs both engage with and/or resist the practice of assimilation to find pathways to socialization that are more humanizing, as seen in the themes of Jarring Juxtaposition, Building Capital, and Doing (Me) Research. In addition, it is clear that race, racism, and racialization, as well as class and classism, are inherent to context in higher education. FGGSs of color, and students who identified as poor and working class articulated the layered challenges in naming and claiming their first-generation identity. Two key subthemes emerged in analysis: Choosing Invisibility and Claiming Visibility and Intersectionality These themes are reflective of the spectrum on which FGGSs range in their comfort, pride, or concern about sharing their first-generation identity with institutional agents and peers in graduate school.

The dimensions of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (MMI; Núñez, 2014) most applicable to Making Meaning of First-generation Identity are in the organizational (how first-generation identity is viewed in structures and socialization process of graduate school); representational (in that FGGSs are expected to readily represent their intersectional identities while also experiencing pressure to assimilate and conform); experiential (the consistent sensemaking and negotiating with oneself in different contexts); and intersubjective (the relationships between FGGSs and their peers, faculty, and other actors that may influence their path.

Choosing Invisibility

The subtheme of Choosing Invisibility encapsulates how FGGSs navigated risks and costs of revealing or concealing their first-generation identity and demonstrated the pervasiveness of the deficit narrative on their decision to choose concealment as an act of self-preservation. Embedded in this subtheme is the negotiation of first-generation as an invisible and contested identity. FGGSs had a variety of reasons for concealing their first-

generation identity, but at the center was the deficit narrative perpetuated by institutional context (organizational) and peers and faculty (intersubjective) in graduate school and their educational experience preceding graduate school. Second, FGGSs' reflections demonstrated the extent to which they grappled with both internalizing and resisting the deficit narrative (experiential) and how this push and pull was informed by race and class. Third, FGGSs' concealment was also shaped by how and when they became aware of their first-generation identity and to what extent they had opportunities to understand this identity from an asset- versus deficit-based perspective. Jenny, an Asian-American woman, shared her struggle to reveal her FG identity:

> I always hide my identity as a first-gen. I feel embarrassed about it. That's why I really never talk about it, at least with my friends here, because I don't want people to know. Maybe it's wrong? Maybe I should talk more about it, [and] I don't know what people will think of me? And at the same time, maybe I'm embarrassed about that as part of my identity; [it] makes me feel like, "Maybe your family is just stupid. Maybe you're stupid, too."

Jenny's comments also demonstrate how institutional narratives about first-generation students can be internalized and can create fear and embarrassment and perpetuate the impostor syndrome, particularly if FGGSs feel that they are outing not only themselves but also their family. Sara, a white woman, expanded on this feeling of judgment and how it extends to familial roles and expectations in her life:

> I almost feel embarrassed to go to the advisors. I don't want them to know that I struggle. I have a little bit of a fear that if they know that I'm first-generation and that I'm struggling, that there might be a little bit of judgment. It's kind of like, "Oh, she's a mom? Oh, she's in school? Wow, that's hard." Those kind of responses. Or even when I talk about going home, "Yeah, I made my parents' dinner and I helped them with their laundry, and my sister and I tried to clean the house as much as we could." That's like...that doesn't sound as fun as "Yeah, I went to Cabo" [chuckle]. I feel like I get a little bit judged. So I feel I just keep my whole life, my feelings and my worries, outside of the program. And I feel I have a good enough support system outside that I just don't even let them know really.

Two things underly both Jenny's and Sara's narratives. First, measures of class as shaped by social capital and generational wealth affect perceptions of who does and does not belong in graduate school. Second, seeking community and support outside graduate school is necessary when FGGSs feel that they have to hide who they are.

FGGSs shared the varied context and positionalities that affect when and how they revealed their first-generation status. Some chose selective invisibility, because they were keenly aware that their advisors or peer cohort didn't understand or want to understand their positions, history, or familial life. Megan, an American Indian/Native American and white woman, shares:

> People don't really see why we're expressing this [first gen] as a label for us. They don't understand the importance, the significance behind that label. I've actually had that conversation with people in my cohort and said that I am a first-gen student. My family never had well-paying jobs. They didn't have college degrees, so it was always a fight for whatever job they were gonna get. And then she kinda came back with, "Yeah, everyone in my family just goes to college. It's kinda just the thing." They all will say that they came from very privileged areas. And there's just not a lot of first-gen graduate students. I don't even know if there's another one in my

> cohort. And if there is, they don't talk about it. So we feel like we kinda shy away from sharing this part of ourselves.

Megan's comments are reflective of the ways in which discussion of social class continues to be relatively taboo and often relegated to the periphery of graduate school experience, even while it is debated and studied as a theoretical concept in these same spaces. In addition, because social class is tied to the American dream, FGGSs often felt that, despite having made their way to graduate school, their roots and generational poverty could be perceived as a character flaw rather than a reflection of systems that reproduce inequality (Bourdieu 1977; Williams & Martin, 2022).

Several students shared examples of practicing selective invisibility by determining spaces and places where revealing their first-generation status may be perceived as a lack or deficit. Conferences or professional meetings were one such place. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, shared:

> Especially at professional conferences—it is probably the place where I really try to hide it, because that's where I'm trying to meet people that could potentially become contacts. So that's when I really need to turn on the professional language and demeanor. Yeah, it just depends where I am, how much effort I'm gonna put into trying to put on this front of ultra professionalism.

While first-generation identity must not be conflated with race and class, it is also important to recognize that FGGSs recognize how racism and classism function both as microaggressions and larger gatekeeping mechanisms in graduate school. As such, the decision to hide first-generation identity was mitigated differently by FGGSs who identified as white and those who identified as Indigenous and students of color. Some white FGGSs, like Adam, shared an awareness of his white and male privilege and questioned whether revealing first-gen status would limit him in the eyes of faculty and peers:

> I never knew that first-generation was a thing until I came to college. I just thought that I wasn't as smart as people. So I never identified with it before college. I'm privileged in that my marginalized identity is very easy to hide…and so I can be that chameleon and navigate those spaces to be whatever they want me to be, but I always do feel like I'm not completely in the know. Because I don't wanna be treated any differently. I don't want any special treatment because of it. I also don't wanna be stigmatized. Like I said, I can hide it, so if they don't know it, I can hide it.

For some students like Caitlin, a white woman, who described the challenges of getting through college and graduate school without referencing her family background and first-generation status, keeping this label at arm's length was important:

> I really try not to talk about it. My advisor talks about it as an accomplishment, like you accomplished all of these things even though you're a first-gen. And so there's that. If somebody asked me point blank, "Do your parents have college degrees?" I went, "Why?" I don't just bring it up voluntarily, necessarily. And I think it comes from a place of concern that they're gonna be like, "Oh, she's first gen" and then think of me differently. It's just not one of those things that I'm trying to advertise.

For some FGGSs of color, there were similar references to harboring first-generation identity and caution around whom to trust with this information because of attribution to deficit in institutional spaces. Like Caitlin, Miya, a

Black woman said:

> I try to hide it if it's someone like a professor, someone who's higher up 'cause... Yeah, you just never know what you're gonna get. Some professors are really understanding and supportive and some like to treat you like you don't belong. So maybe once I get to know someone, if they seem like they're not gonna be too judgmental I might share that

So, while FGGSs, both white students and students of color, reported feelings of ambivalence, aversion, or caution about claiming first-generation as a part of their identity, their rationale reveals the intersectional nature of negotiating multiple marginalized identities in graduate school. For some white FGGSs, multiple forms of classism were barriers they navigated, but their whiteness could allow them to pass an initial litmus test of legitimacy in graduate school. As such, many, like Adam, learned to leave out narratives of their family or upbringing and schooling that would be perceived as a lack. For students of color, they reported already negotiating questions about their pedigree that were attributed to deficit assumptions based on race, immigrant status, and ethnicity. These racialized experiences gave them pause about revealing latent or invisible identities like social class and first-generation identities that could be seen as yet another reason to cast doubt on their ability, skill, and work ethic in graduate school. Camila, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, addressed the layered ways she felt compelled to hide many aspects of her identity:

> It's really hard to have a conversation about the fact that you don't know information, because then that means that you would have to elicit more of an explanation, right? I think sometimes I kind of hide the idea that my parents don't have that experience because my parents are immigrants. So I can say, well, the system here is different from the system that they're used to. I never have to explain that their lack of education has in some way also had its own effect on me. So often, I'm hiding it. It definitely triggers me in that sense. It's like this is where your identity starts linking up, being a child of immigrants and having a certain race and ethnicity, those are all the things that keep pushing to the forefront as opposed to that first-generation college student label, because, once again, it's like first-generation college students can mean so many different things depending on which group you're in.

In addition to nuanced differences in why or how FGGSs choose to conceal their first-generation identity, one key contributing factor was when and how they came to understand this term in relation to their own life. Most students who chose invisibility were not part of precollege programs like TRIO, College Possible, and BreakThrough. They were often at undergraduate institutions where they were unaware of or could not access first-generation support programs or where the term first-generation was not part of the lexicon.

Claiming Visibility and Intersectionality

> *I've never really thought about my first-gen identity as being separate from other identities; it seems more like it's just kind of a part of them. —Miya, a Black/African/African-American and multiracial woman*

This theme focuses on factors that influenced how FGGSs came to understand their first-generation identity from an asset-based perspective and cultivated resistance capital to push against the narrative of lack that they encountered in their programs, institutions, or peer groups. This process of internalizing the strengths of their first-generation identity did not come without growing pains, nor did they excuse the systemic barriers of hidden curriculum or university bureaucracy. Rather, their ability

to situate and feel empowered in claiming their first-generation identity was shaped by early positive associations with the narrative, use of the term first-generation in their undergraduate or precollege programs, and positive faculty and staff mentors. In addition, this process of meaning-making was an acknowledgment that while first-generation identity is unlike other social identities they held, it could not exist in a vacuum and was deeply intersectional; shaped by race, class, and immigrant status; and strengthened by capital from their communities.

Many FGGSs reflected on the impact of their precollege and collegiate experiences in educational opportunity programs, especially the McNair Scholars Program, and the role these programs played in framing their first-generation identity and giving them language to talk about first-generation status with agency. Elisa, a multiracial woman, shared:

> I was part of the McNair Scholars Program. So I think TRIO was essential to my owning my identity as a first-generation student and understanding the barriers that I will face in comparison to other students who haven't had that same background. The more time that I spent with other McNair scholars, the more comfortable I felt being upfront about the fact that I was a first-generation student, because coming from a community college, I think that there was a lot of discrimination that I felt like I experienced being a transfer student at a 4-year school. It was so very unwelcoming in some respects.… But I felt like TRIO was the best kinda community that I had, because I was with so many other people who had been through the same thing, who were facing the same financial barriers, and we figure it out, we push through the grind, and that's how we do!

Nate, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, echoed this sentiment and also shared the impact that access programs can have in cumulative capital for FGGSs:

> So I think the most support I've gotten in terms of my first-gen status has been not necessarily through my department but more so through the McNair Program and my [Fellowship Program]. If I hadn't been a part of those, or in the Summer Institute, I would not be where I am now. And it even goes beyond McNair. In high school, I was part of Upward Bound! It was just a long line of just being part of these communities that welcome minority students who come from underprivileged backgrounds and has gotten me to the point where I am today. And that's something I'm very thankful for.

Both Elisa and Nate address the importance of early introduction to asset-based narratives and the power of spaces and programs that allow for academic and social integration and representation of peers who reflect the complexity of first-generation identities.

While some FGGSs had these early opportunities, many did not, and this meant they described how they came to understand their first-generation identity in relationship to and intersected with other social identities. Several FGGSs shared the challenges with conflating first-generation identity with race and class but simultaneously noted fluidity and confluence in occupying multiple identities; this multiplicity informs their personhood and the challenges they faced in graduate school. Tan, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, made the argument for attending to the intersection of his identity as a person of color, an immigrant, and someone who is first-generation:

> I know how to navigate the world as a person of color. I've been doing that my whole life. But now we are navigating college or grad

> school, as first-generation, it's like, "I don't know what I'm doing." There's other people of color who are living their people-of-color experiences, but sometimes they're not first-generation. Being a refugee or being an immigrant is seen like something of a journey. You're trying to navigate that, but then you're like, "Yes, I'm a refugee, but I've got all these accomplishments." So you're trying to push back on people's negative thought processes. And then you're like, "No, let me educate you with how that's not the narrative that we have." I think, for me, not just being a refugee, first-generation, but also LGBT...there's a lot of ideas and just a lot of intersectional identities that I have that I'm just trying to like.... I'm fine with all that.

Jason, an Asian/Pacific Islander man, recognizes living in the intersection and coming to understand his first-generation status in graduate school were about naming the ways his lived experience was different from continuing-generation students of color:

> I feel like, especially students of color because of just how the world works, they sort of subsume their first-gen identity underneath being a student of color. I feel like that happens a lot, too, even with people who just automatically assume that all people of color are first gen! I had to address this with one of my friends, where I had to tell them, "Listen, those other students of color are doing well only because their parents have advanced degrees; they have a doctorate or they have their medical license. They're gonna be okay, because they have that. You're struggling right now because you're a first-gen student; you don't have the same resources that they had.

This notion of thinking about identity as fluid and a process of aggregating and disaggregating the relationship between first-generation identity and race and class was something that FGGSs alluded to often. Camila, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, shared her journey negotiating varying perceptions of her identity as a poor and first-generation graduate student of color:

> I think it's important.... It just feels like it's an untapped identity. I don't know if people identify with it as their first primary identity.… I definitely think about my race and ethnicity identity way more on a daily basis. But, you have a lot of different identities, and so in some cases, one is more dominant or more prominent than the others…. With my identities intersecting, I like the part about negotiating. But people don't see how my first-genness is kind of a result of my other identities. So, in that way, I definitely feel like I have to navigate and advocate for myself from a first-gen space rather than as a person of color. If you don't disaggregate those things you won't really see the significance of them. As a first-gen student, you have to be really intentional and, when you add in the multiple layers of identities, you have to be really strategic about how you navigate this [grad school] space.

Kamari, a Black/African/African American man, expanded on Camila's observations, arguing that first-generation status does not exist in a vacuum and is informed and deeply shaped by race, class, and queer identities. It is an experience of being othered but resisting the stigmatized narrative by finding community:

> Well, there weren't a lot of African Americans on campus or Latinos or other people of color. And then there also weren't a lot of LGBTQ+ people. So the mere existence at the intersection of that could be difficult at times. But I pulled together a nice tight circle of friends who also were existing at various intersections, and were also going through the experience of being first-gen. And so that was really critical to the development of identity as a first-generation

scholar.

Many FGGSs named the ways in which poverty as well as social class norms and mores affected their trajectory in graduate school and were bound up in their meaning-making of first-generation identity. For some, like Miya and Jenny, it was working part-time outside of the academy and being perceived as less committed than their continuing-generation peers.

Miya, a Black/African/African American woman shared:

> My advisor would give me a hard time about not taking four classes at a time, 'cause that's what most students did, and I would normally take two or three. And I would tell him it's because I'm working, I just can't take on that class load. And he's like, "But it's taking you too long. You need to hurry up." And so I didn't always appreciate it! He also really pushed me to do my summer technician jobs for credit instead of pay for the same reason. He's like, "Well, you'll get credit and you'll get out of here faster." And I would tell him, "But I'm actually relying on that money, so I just can't do it and that won't work for me."

Adam, a white man, reflected on how the structures of graduate school center linear progression and benchmarks without recognizing that not all students have the same familial resources and not all graduate programs provide the same financial support to students:

> Because I have a 40-hour-a-week job and I write my dissertation only on the weekends or whenever I have free time, I have a lot more going on and I can't be as connected, and that sort of makes me anxious.

Sara, a white woman, drilled down on how assumptions about access to money shape so many expectations in graduate school, and it is often FGGSs who must make a choice to pass on professional development or networking:

> That's $700 just to go to the conference! You're not talking about flights or stay. And so that's something that I will not be experiencing because I just can't afford something like that. So I miss out on the bigger picture of grad school because I can't afford those things.

Anna, a white woman, expanded on the relationship between the first-generation identity and her lived experience as a low-SES graduate student:

> I feel like being a first-generation college student also means something different from being a first-generation college student from a super-poor background. I'm just very honest about navigating these pieces, but I think disclosing the poverty piece has been harder. Just reminding yourself that you have value and that despite the fact that you've had to work really hard to get here, you're behind in any sense. Amplifying voices is super important. Because by not talking about [poverty], it inherently builds up some shame around it. But by talking about it, you can sort of ultimately be prideful in those identities and try to cultivate a culture in which other people are willing to listen to you about it.

Chris, a white man, addresses how he had to navigate both shame and resentment about the way graduate school is not always the vehicle of social mobility but rather a reminder of out group status, particularly for low-SES first-generation students:

> And that definitely put a little bit of a chip on my shoulder, especially since I was in the type of school where there's legacy students. Seeing how others could be super-free with money, where I had to

> work through school and had to really hustle for scholarships and grants, definitely made sure that I felt class-conscious the whole time, aware of the fact that it's very tenuous that I'm here to begin with. I was always a very good student, good grades, all that type of stuff, but I definitely always felt like I was on a bit of a razor's edge. It could be taken away pretty easily. And then I identify myself under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. And so that adds another layer of being otherized. I'm a white cis male, so I have a lot of privilege, and being otherized isn't common for people who read like I do. But between this burgeoning sense of queerness and always feeling like the poor kid, it really played into my relationship with education.

This acute awareness of how social class shaped and informed how FGGSs perceived their first-generation identity was connected to their immigrant and refugee experiences. Being first-generation took on layered meaning for Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, who shared his family journey to the United States as a metaphor for his path into graduate school:

> I always wear my first-gen identity as a kind of a badge. Like, yeah, I'm the first to do this in my family. I hope that if I have kids someday that I can tell them that. In a lot of ways I empathize…my journey as an academic has been very similar to what my parents' journey has been as immigrants, because they left Mexico to seek better opportunities elsewhere, economically, socially. And so they, in a lot of ways, had to do the same thing that I did where it's like you had to leave your whole family. You didn't even have a family. You had to go to this place where you've never been. You don't really connect with the culture. You can't really see your family all that often. And I talk about that with my mom now. I'm like, "Yeah, it's kind of crazy what we did, just uprooted ourselves and trying to do something better for ourselves."

While Cesar named the challenges of the unknown and the inherent risks of both the immigrant and the FGGS journey, he also alluded to the immense sense of hope and pride that he felt in his identity. Leonora, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, built on this feeling and expanded on how her family's journey and labor as migrant workers are part of her strength and her community capital:

> My first-gen identity is one of the leading identities that I have. So my family lived in poverty, they also lived as migrant workers. My grandmother had only what is considered second-grade education. My grandfather, he really didn't have an education; they were farmers. And my grandmother had 10 children. So they came to the United States to do migrant work and they would go back down to Mexico when the season was over. Carrying that identity and understanding that in my entire family so far, including my cousins, there are only about 10 of us that have a college education! And I have 92 first cousins. So that's where my identity stemmed from. Being first-generation is how I live that identity and how I view life through that lens. Being able to say that I'm a first-gen and to do that, I think, is just definitely something that's empowering.

Naming both the constraints and strengths of negotiating and honoring multiple identities and finding peers and mentors with whom to walk were key for FGGSs who claimed visibility. These students also demonstrated their ability and willingness to sit in the discomfort of making meaning of their first-generation identity, and with that came a sense of agency and empowerment. Many FGGSs talked about how they felt compelled to be role models not only for their extended family but for peers and undergraduate students whom they hoped would follow in their footsteps into graduate school. Miya, a Black/African/African American and multiracial woman, shared:

> I don't know that I could hide my first-gen identity if I wanted to! I just try to be forthcoming with it and just tell people that I'm a first-gen student. But I think it's important, mainly just to show other young people.… I have a niece and two nephews and I hope they'll go to college. My younger nephew says he wants to be a biologist. I don't know if that's true, 'cause he's 7, but the fact that he thinks about it, and I didn't even know what a biologist was at that age, it kind of reinforces me! When I encounter new students in my department I'll usually tell them, because if they are first gen, too, they can tell me that. Or at scientific conferences, I try to go to undergrad talks and just kind of tell them like, "Oh, yeah, I'm a first-generation student," and then they'll ask you lots of questions about "What's grad school like? How do you get in?" So I try to just put it out there. Usually, it's in an attempt to help other people.

Camilla, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman, addressed how visibility and representation are critical. Early opportunities for first-generation undergraduate students to interact and see FGGSs in key roles in labs or as teaching assistants create positive asset-based narratives:

> It influences everything! I feel like I am the first of many, and there's been so many first-gen students before me, and there will be so many after. And so trying to do my part to make sure people know we're here, we're not going anywhere, we need support, we need community. When there's opportunities to advocate for myself and my peers, I'm there for it, trying to do my best. For example, when looking for jobs I emailed professors and I was like, "I really enjoyed this class. I learned a lot. You made me feel valued." And I'm a first-gen student, and I want to be able to support my peers too and be a good example; being able to be a representative in that way matters. I want to make sure when I am a TA for that class or labs, I focus on and center everyone's experiences, but especially ours is one that sometimes isn't always acknowledged.

FGGSs who engaged in the process of meaning-making toward an intersectional view of first-generation identity were able to name all the structural, economic, racial, and class barriers in higher education while also laying claim to their specific and particular strengths because of, and not in spite of, their first-gen identity. First and foremost, they argued for an institutional necessity to push against a deficit narrative and name first-generation identity in graduate spaces.
Elisa, a multiracial woman, shared:

> I feel like there's a huge narrative out there that exists about what it means to go to college, what it gets you, how it influences the way that you work, operate, whatever. And I feel like the narrative that doesn't get told enough is from the people who were super, super-successful, and they started at a community college, or they started from really humble beginnings, without a lot of financial support. I feel like I have a responsibility to tell that story, to make it known to all of these high school students who are like, "I don't know what I wanna do with my life. I don't wanna go into too much debt." And I always say, "That doesn't have to be your story."

Part of changing the narrative is how FGGSs articulate their familial, navigational, communal, and linguistic capital and recognize that these skills can be translated into graduate school. Cesar, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic man, shared:

> From start to finish, we're unique in our adaptability. And I think that's something that I admire, and I'm always very happy to see other first-gen college students have, is that we're super-adaptable. Yeah, we've had to really adapt to a bunch of different rapidly

changing situations. It's really fascinating. I had to adapt to moving around a lot, and then having my home lost, to having to learn English, to being a first-gen college student and to adapt to a totally different environment all before I had to start grad school. So a lot of the perseverance and resiliency that some first-gen college students are probably experiencing, have experienced, or are more likely to experience, to me, makes them the perfect graduate students in a lot of ways.

Cesar's words are an apt closing to this chapter, as he eloquently described that claiming visibility is not about some sort of individual grit but rather a process of becoming shaped by the community capital and influenced by the context of institutional narrative, peers, and institutional actors. The decision to claim this first-gen identity is also deeply influenced by assessing risk and determining who and what environments are worthy of vulnerability. As noted in the previous themes of Jarring Juxtaposition and Doing (Me) Research, first-generation identity developments live in the ecology of their familial roots and their positionalities with regard to race, social, class, ethnicity, and queerness.

Conclusion

I describe myself as a female scientist who is Latina. So I started in community college. When I first started, I would say, "Hey, I'm a first-generation" as an excuse for "I don't know what I'm doing." And then I think it changed eventually as I became more confident in what I was doing and what I love doing, it changed to "Hey, I'm a first-generation student. Look what I'm doing."
—Linda, a Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic woman

The theme of Making Meaning of First-generation Identity in graduate school demonstrates the impact of context, institutional narrative, and representation in faculty, staff, and peers on the process of sensemaking about first-generation identity before and during their graduate school journey.

The ways in which students positioned this invisible identity in their own narrative were affected by the intersectional positionality they occupied and the extent to which culture, expectations, and language around first-generation students were seen as an asset or a stereotype threat. Even for students who viewed their journey to and through academia as a testament to their communal and familial capital, selective invisibility was a response to hostile environments or the risk of confirming negative stereotypes, particularly if they already felt constrained by raced and classed climate. Others cultivated a resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) that pushed against these stereotypes and felt a deep responsibility to wear their first-gen identity as a badge to ensure the path is smoother for those who come after them. Jehangir and Collins (2021) acknowledged that "first-generation identity formation is often an individual process for each student, one that is shaped simultaneously by resonance and dissonance, visibility and invisibility, aversion and affinity" (p. 307). This observation was reaffirmed by the data in our study and, in turn, raises questions about how we move toward revising our approaches to socializing first-generation scholars to graduate education in ways that are affirming. Graduate education is inherently challenging, so how might lessons learned from the lived experiences of FGGSs inform an approach to socialization, mentoring, and institutional narratives that are universally more accessible and humanizing? Similar questions in undergraduate education have been raised as scholars and practitioners alike have argued for a socialization process that invites and engages the lived experience of first-generation students. Graduate education must be poised to engage in the same dialogue.

Questions to Consider

- What are ways departments, colleges, graduate schools, and institutions can facilitate forward dialogue about humanizing graduate education?
- What are ways to operationalize the value of humanizing graduate education by engaging faculty in tailored professional development as they prepare for new cohorts of graduate students?
- How can departments and programs partner with pregraduate programs that support first-generation students who are at the intersection of multiple social identities to build intentional pathways and a sense of belonging for prospective graduate students?
- How might graduate schools create annual events that foster collaboration between institutional agents like faculty, directors of graduate studies, and student affairs practitioners in pregraduate programs (McNair, Summer Institute, Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program)?
- In what ways could intentional partnerships between graduate school, programs and undergraduates with potential cost-sharing of resources support exploration and transition to graduate school?
- In what ways does your program, department, college, and graduate school include the experience of FGGSs in your articulation of supporting diverse students?
- How can existing inclusion programs ensure that first-generation students are included in programming, support, and resources by explicitly naming this identity and recognizing intersectionality with other marginalized identities?

Chapter 8: Applying the Theoretical Model to Recommendations for Change

The students in this study consistently reflected on the complex layers and intersecting dimensions of their experiences as first-generation graduate students (FGGSs). Their stories demonstrate the profound complexity of simultaneously navigating institutional hierarchies and histories, individual identities, and interpersonal relations. By examining the experiences of FGGSs through the layers of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (MMI), we enhance the intersectional lens by acknowledging and exploring both micro- and macroinfluences on the FGGS experience (Anthias, 2013; Collins, 2015; Núñez, 2014; Winker & Degele, 2011). In this chapter, we revisit the MMI model in the context of this study's findings and explore how the themes illustrate intersectionality across multiple levels of the FGGS experience. We then provide recommendations for better supporting FGGSs to and through graduate school. This chapter provides a useful scholar-practitioner lens through an in-depth connection to the theoretical model and research-informed suggestions.

Review of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality

As discussed in Chapter 3, the first level of the Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (MMI), social categories and relations, centers on social identities and how they overlap, connect, and compound to create unique intersectional identities and experiences for FGGSs. As demonstrated by the demography of this study, first-generation scholars are significantly diverse in characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, citizenship status, gender, and sexuality. MMI's focus on intersectionality underscores the importance of both recognizing the distinct experiences of singular identities and acknowledging the confluence and convergence of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Jehangir et al., 2015). For example, many FGGSs reflect on culture in relation to their ethnicity while also describing distinct experiences of being racialized in graduate school. MMI acknowledges this range of diversity while connecting the experiential dynamics of social identity with macrocontexts, including history, subjectivities, and organizational structures.

The second level of MMI, multiple arenas of influence, acknowledges specific domains of power that enact and reinforce inequity across social identity categories (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Friedensen et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2013). These domains are organizational (structural embodiments of social groups including workplaces, families, and educational institutions), representational (discursive processes that communicate who is included and who is excluded within organizations and systems), intersubjective (relationships between and among individuals and groups within an organizational setting), and experiential (using reflection, story, and narrative expression to make sense of our roles and experiences within social organizations). Like social categories, these domains frequently overlap and occur simultaneously in the FGGS experience.

The third level wraps the entire ecosystem of social identities and domains of power within the context of historicity, a macroanalysis that views the layers as historical perspectives and realities (Jehangir & Romasanta, 2021; Palmer, 1992; Posselt, 2016; Walsh et al., 2021). Historicity insists on situating contemporary understandings of power and hierarchies with an

understanding of the past and how the past echoes in the present.

The Organizational Domain: Funding Education and Financial Sustainability

FGGSs frequently reflected on their positionalities within their institutions and how those positionalities affected their education and social opportunities. No theme was more representative of this positional/organizational consciousness than Financing Education, which reflects the tenuous position of FGGSs as they sought sustainable funding and material security for graduate study (Sabnis et al., 2023; Slay et al., 2019; Soria et al., 2022; Whitley et al., 2018). Several FGGSs specifically referenced that, by merit of their position as graduate students, they depended on institutions to unveil the hidden curriculum of graduate school funding. They compared their financial aid experiences as undergraduates and graduate students, sharing that, while the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and financial aid processes as undergrads were daunting, they were at least transparent and accessible to most students. By contrast, they described the graduate school funding process as opaque and intimidating and that institutions were limited in their communication and support regarding financing graduate education. The inequity of graduate school funding is perpetuated by the institution/organization and is frequently coupled with common FGGS social identities such as being low-income and working class, BIPOC, and/or an immigrant (McGee et al., 2022; Pumaccahua & Rogers, 2023; Wallace, 2022).

The lack of stability and resources continued beyond initial funding questions about tuition and fees and extended throughout the FGGS experience. FGGSs were keenly aware of the organizational expectations of their role as graduate students, including attending conferences, doing service in the form of mentoring new scholars and creating affinity spaces, and continually seeking funding each academic year and for summer breaks. The strong sense of material precarity expressed by FGGSs reflected their status as less-resourced within the organizational hierarchy. Participants described having to seek basic questions about finances, including the process to apply for fellowships, travel funding for visit days, and whether housing was available. This standard information was rarely shared or accessible via typical venues such as departmental websites and handbooks, or it was difficult to find. These barriers reflect the border landscape of haphazard graduate school funding and demonstrate how this study elevates the unique challenges of FGGS in not only seeking funding (Fernandez, 2019; Kalfa et al., 2018; Graddy-Reed et al., 2021) but also in maintaining it throughout the long years of graduate study. The labor and vulnerability required for FGGSs to seek and understand financing education were a significant theme in this study and are maintained at an organizational level by administrators and faculty who rationalize the precarity as the way in which graduate funding has always operated. Not only was the information not readily available, but the steps were also cumbersome, which created unnecessary barriers and undue burden for students.

The Representational Domain: Doing (Me) Research, Jarring Juxtapositions, and Making Meaning of First-generation Identity

The representational domain of the MMI exerts a significant influence on the experiences of FGGSs, reflecting the struggle for visibility and inclusion within institutions that were not built for them. Focused on the discourses and narratives that communicate who is included or excluded in academia, the representational domain embraces the complexities of the FGGS experience. On the one hand, it is vital for FGGSs to feel acknowledged and important in the dominant culture; on the other hand, there is persistent pressure to prove oneself and assimilate into the academic community (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2008, 2009; Grady et al., 2014). The themes of Doing (Me) Research, Jarring Juxtapositions, and Making Meaning of First-Generation Identity capture these tensions and complexities.

A key aspect of the representational domain is being aware of and actively

shaping the prevailing narratives around inclusion and exclusion. By engaging in (me) research, FGGSs actively contribute to the discourse and praxis of inclusion for nontraditional and multimarginalized students in higher education. FGGSs bring significant funds of knowledge to graduate school that have been largely unrecognized in the ivory tower (Jack, 2016; Purgason et al., 2020; Wallace, 2022). By merit of their presence and engagement in research agendas, FGGSs have a powerful impact on how they, and their communities, are represented both in the literature and in university narratives. Doing (Me) Research requires an exhausting amount of emotional labor at every level of graduate school, but the FGGSs in this study were resolute in their commitment to telling their stories and expanding inclusion not only for themselves but also for other first-generation scholars and students from marginalized communities.

While FGGSs described in detail the power of representation in research projects and in campus spaces, their experiences navigating the Jarring Juxtapositions between grad school and home life were more complicated. FGGSs struggled with the sense that their families and community members had a shifting perception and narrative about them and that it influenced their sense of belonging and inclusion back home. They had not only earned a college degree, a notable accomplishment that made them stand out in their families, but they had also entered the mysterious and complex world of graduate school. As FGGSs acquired privilege, their sense of connection and duty to family was a source of both support and preoccupation as the slow sense of distance and difference crept in. To manage these complexities, many FGGSs described employing skillful code-switching to cope with moving between worlds. Such strategies are inherent to the representational domain, as FGGSs navigate otherness and exclusion with an increasing subjective awareness and cultivation of capital, mental health, and familial resources.

The Intersubjective Domain: Building Capital, Role of Family, Managing Mental Health, and Making Meaning of First-generation Identity

The intersubjective domain featured prominently in the experiences of FGGSs. Participants frequently reflected on their sphere of relations and how these connections (or lack thereof) influenced their opportunities, sense of self, well-being, and general sense of belonging in academia. A key aspect of the intersubjective lens is an emerging saliency of one's own identities and how this awareness affects relationships and sense of connection within groups and organizations. The participants in this study described in detail how their emerging awareness of their first-generation identity evolved as they became graduate students and how their FGGS identity influenced their relationships with cohort mates, professors, advisors, and organizational entities within their departments (Hamilton, 2023; Karp et al., 2020; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022; Wofford et al., 2021).

One of the primary relational spheres in FGGSs' stories was that of family. Many FGGSs shared that as they ascended the ladder of academia, their familial connections shifted and evolved as well. A common dilemma described by FGGSs was whether and how to discuss their graduate school challenges and opportunities with family members who don't understand the language, culture, and intense expectations of the academy. For several participants, this dilemma compounded an already common FGGS experience: the pressure to bifurcate their graduate student identity and their roles as sons, daughters, siblings, cousins, and so on. This pressure influenced FGGSs' subjectivity as a scholar and family member and increased the sense of traveling in and among different (and often competing) worlds.

One of the strongest arenas in which FGGSs engaged was subjective awareness, particularly describing how they built capital in the graduate school environment. Because FGGSs don't have access to typical and traditional graduate school capital (financial assets, generational wealth and knowledge, existing social networks), they demonstrated the ability to build multiple forms of capital as a self-determination strategy (Gopaul, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Recognizing multiple forms of acquired capital is foundational

to understanding the full breadth and depth of FGGS assets in higher education (Yosso, 2002). This often began before their higher education experiences, as they sought out pathway and pathfinder opportunities such as college access programs, bridge experiences, and spaces to build research skills. FGGSs come to graduate school with a subjective and experiential awareness that institutional and community resources are a critical component of persistence and success at all levels of academia.

Peer relationships—particularly positive peer relationships that provided camaraderie and solidarity in navigating graduate school pressures—proved to be a critical form of capital. FGGSs shared that spaces such as writing groups, affinity enclaves based on shared identities such as ethnicity and culture, and student organizations gave them a sense of empowerment and connection. Similarly, building relational capital with faculty was a strategy used by FGGSs to seek support, opportunities, and guidance beyond baseline advising focused on course selection and milestone progression. While FGGSs still experienced isolation within the peer culture and challenges connecting with faculty, they demonstrated a strong commitment to, and skill set around, fostering relationships.
FGGSs in this study demonstrated a strong subjective awareness of managing mental health as central to surviving (and thriving) in graduate school. They shared myriad strategies for practicing self-care, including rest, connection, therapy, and movement. Crucially, FGGSs described the importance of autonomy in seeking mental health resources, such as intentionally finding therapists outside of the institution and/or pursuing affinity spaces reflecting their multiple marginalized identities (e.g., a FGGS BIPOC space). They often described a blend of personal practices (meditation, cooking, sleeping, taking time away) and critical resources (counseling and a support network). FGGSs engage in mental health practices that reflect their subjectivity as “nontraditional” scholars in the intense world of graduate school.

The Experiential Domain: Doing (Me) Research, Jarring Juxtapositions, Role of Family, Financing Education, Managing Mental Health, and Making Meaning of First-generation Identity

The experiential domain encompassed and intersected with the majority of themes across the FGGS experience. Focused on the use of story and the creation of narratives and counternarratives, the experiential lens makes sense of roles and experiences in new and strange environments. FGGSs shared their stories of Doing (Me) Research, navigating the Jarring Juxtapositions of home and academia, their shifting role within their families, the challenges of financing their advanced degrees, and how they managed their mental health throughout it all. The experiential domain across the themes revealed threads among the FGGSs’ stories as well as critical counternarratives that talk back to dominant narratives about their potential to engage and succeed in graduate school (Breeden et al., 2024; Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021; Gopaul, 2019; Saichaie, 2023).

While FGGSs in this study represent multiple intersectional identities, backgrounds, and cultures, they engaged in storytelling as sensemaking to create a common story about their experiences in graduate school. They told stories of being passionate about their disciplines and intimidated by the hierarchies and Black Boxes of elite academia. They reflected on building capital in the forms of peer and faculty relationships and shared the disappointments of precarious funding and inattentive advisors. A core story was that of resilience and determination throughout these struggles and an emerging awareness of the singular contributions that first-generation students bring to graduate education.

Just as important as the narrative FGGSs constructed in their experiential reflections were the counternarratives they created to interrogate the dominant archetype of the successful graduate student. Their experiential skill sets, fountains of knowledge, and adeptness at adapting to new environments proved to be essential to their perseverance and set them

apart from their peers. They constructed a counternarrative that reframed the assumed deficits about FGGSs (i.e., lack of knowledge about the culture of higher education, less sophistication in understanding and navigating elite social spheres, limited agency due to lack of material wealth) as a story of a remedy to the woes plaguing contemporary higher education (fostering connections with diverse communities, bringing fresh perspectives and flexibility, prioritizing mental health and strong relationships). This counternarrative reflects the potential of the FGGS community, with all its abundant diversity, complexity, and idealism, to remake the upper echelons of academia.

The Historicity Layer: Naming and Negotiating Black Boxes and Ivory Tower Socialization

Wrapping around the first and second layers of MMI is the historicity domain. Historicity creates a macroanalytic container for the second layer (organizational, intersubjective, representational, and experiential domains) and the core social categories and relations layer at the center of the model. It is crucial to analyze and understand the FGGS experience through the historicity lens, which views contemporary phenomena through historical perspectives and contexts, because the academy is itself a historically constructed ecosystem, replete with traditions, expectations, and rituals that have excluded FGGSs until relatively recently. Two themes in this study, Naming and Negotiating Black Boxes and Ivory Tower Socialization, resonate with this history of exclusion and contemporary impacts for FGGSs.

FGGSs in this study frequently reflected on the barriers they encountered in naming and negotiating the Black Boxes of graduate school education. This study significantly expands existing conceptualization of graduate school socialization (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2008, 2009; Weidman et al., 2001) by focusing on the unique experiences of FGGS as they sought to become integrated into the echelons of academia. Many described the graduate school socialization process as akin to learning a new language and being expected to acclimate into the culture of the institution. FGGSs shared that the vast hidden curriculum of graduate school includes a historically attuned and rigid etiquette such as expectations on how to communicate, how to present oneself in certain environments, and how to negotiate processes and milestones, all of which are largely uncommunicated by academic departments and rooted in university history and the historical construction of the academy at large. This lack of transparency about the Black Boxes culminates in a pressure for FGGSs to rapidly navigate gaps in awareness by hustling for opportunities, identifying resources for themselves, and working overtime to understand and negotiate the institution.

Many of the challenges that FGGSs face in socializing to graduate school can be attributed to a prevailing sense in the academy that “this is how we’ve always done things,” the specific ways that the academy remains entrenched in specific rituals and expectations of Ivory Tower Socialization. FGGSs in this study consistently shared that as they went higher in the ivory tower, they experienced an increasing sense of othering and exclusion, a sense that this place was not built for them. This manifested in graduate school spaces that felt sanitized of culture and connection, making it difficult for FGGSs to feel that they could “show up as their full selves,” and increased their sense of erasure and isolation. Many FGGSs shared that they adapted to the dominant culture as a means of survival and as a persistence strategy. Despite this, FGGSs retained critical practices of microresistance, including building affinity communities and attending to the mental health impacts of dealing with daily microaggressions and chilly climate. In this manner, FGGSs resisted the historically constructed, and contemporarily reproduced, expectation of becoming wholly consumed by the academy.

Connecting Theory and Practice

The connections between themes and the MMI provide a mechanism for connecting the first-generation student experience with intersectionality

that highlights the complexity of the identity and how systems and structures influence the experience of the identity. As scholar-practitioners, we recognize the importance of grounding our scholarship in the lived experience of participants and informing our practice with models that represent the complexity of those experiences while naming the gaps the research has yet to fill. Ties to theory allow practitioners to reflect on how evaluation and effectiveness are measured based on theoretical concepts. Theory grounded from practice recognizes that, without the stories of participants and connection to recommendations, we cannot shift and change with the needs of our students. Our goal with the following section is to provide suggestions and recommendations derived from this study to anyone interested in supporting FGGSs.

Recommendations

The first question from many administrators, staff, faculty, and students interested in supporting FGGSs is "Where do I start, or what can I do now?" Based on our themes and the understanding that supporting students happens in individual interactions and systemic restructuring, these recommendations provide a map for supporting FGGSs based on specific goals or outcomes. Each section highlights who or what entity may be able to carry out the recommendation, but it is not limited to that group. The recommendations are structured in this way to provide tangible next steps to anyone interested in supporting FGGSs. Before implementing these recommendations, the acting entity should consider an audit of the available supports and resources. An audit, focus group, or other data collection methods will enable the identification of gaps and opportunities for implementing these recommendations. Depending on institutional culture, history, and context, these maps may have different starting points. Still, they can be used to audit the status of FGGSs on your campus.

Building Equitable Learning Environments

Equitable Learning Environments describe opportunities for making graduate school accessible to first-generation students by naming and providing information about the processes, structures, and assumptions that create challenges for FGGSs. These recommendations focus on sharing information early and often with opportunities to discuss what support is available in navigating the structures and processes of graduate school. The recommendations reflect stages before graduate school, transitioning to graduate school, and succeeding while in graduate school. The section directed to students focuses on how those who lead learning environments, either as teaching assistants or graduate student instructors, can create equitable learning environments for their students. Although these recommendations benefit all students, they highlight how the hidden curriculum is built into the structures of graduate school. For FGGSs, it is necessary to provide clear expectations and information because, even if this information is available in one place, it may not be easy to locate or access. Many of these recommendations also highlight the balance needed for success in graduate school, so if a student is unfamiliar or has limited information about what the experience of graduate school is, it is important to proactively provide this information.

Schools, Colleges, and Departments

Applying to Graduate School

- Share detailed and transparent information about the application process and outline any fees associated with the application.
- If your program uses the GRE either as a requirement or optionally, ensure that applicants understand the role, purpose, and impact of GRE on the admissions process and accessibility of your graduate program.
- Outline the definition and importance of the first-generation graduate student identity and provide resources related to the experiences.

Transitioning to Graduate School

- Recognize the transition of entering graduate school in terms of workload but also moving to a new city and readjusting life (including individual routines, family routines, and caregiving) in this environment.
- Identify employment opportunities tailored to graduate students, childcare options, and affordable graduate student housing.

Succeeding in Graduate School

- Outline the definition and importance of the first-generation graduate student identity and provide resources related to the experiences.
- Orient students to the jargon used that is specific to both graduate school and the discipline.
- Provide awareness and guidance around professional etiquette both in graduate school and in professional environments outside of graduate school (conferences, fellowship interviews, job applications).
- Provide clarity about the expectations for students' time (how many hours they will spend in class, the time they are expected to work at an assistantship, and the time to pursue extracurricular or professional development activities) and how they will balance these expectations.
- Lay out a clear path of the milestones in the program, how students will know if they are on track, and with whom they should talk when questions arise. Provide information on whether this is a cohort program and whether students can attend graduate school part-time or while working outside of the program.
- Reflect and adjust to the ways graduate school is built for a particular type of learner and what adjustments are possible to create a more equitable environment for students who may not fit that expectation . Consider giving options for milestone completion (eg., options for the format of comprehensive exams, allowing students the choice between a paper, presentation, video, etc.)

Climate of Graduate School

- Examine the culture and climate of your graduate program and department to identify the implicit power dynamics, culture of perfectionism, urgency and individualism and expectation of competition.
- Provide information about the hierarchy of decision-making (e.g., what an advisor decides versus what the director of graduate studies decides).

Faculty and Advisors

Prospective Student Engagement

- Provide detailed information about the process of applying for and attending graduate school at the beginning and direct students to the necessary resources available in the department or graduate school.
- Discuss your expectations of working with students as an advisor or faculty and how this may compare to others' expectations.
- Share your advising philosophy with prospective students.
- Share your own first-generation identity, intersectional identities, or experiences with allyship.

Succeeding in Graduate School

- Discuss your expectations for interactions, check-ins, and how directed or autonomous a student can be in the process. Provide documentation so students can refer to these expectations.
- If there are competing responsibilities for your time, convey to students how they should connect with you if they perceive you to be unavailable or busy.
- Be explicit about expectations related to milestones and name your role in how you will help the student navigate these compared to when and where they should seek outside support. Note where previous students have had trouble seeking out resources or skills/methods that are particularly helpful.
- Describe how and when you will give feedback and grant opportunities for students to discuss how/if this process works for them.
- Provide information and resources about experiences graduate

students should have and connect students to these as they progress.
- Reflect on biases related to how students work or interact with you, perceptions related to an undergraduate degree, and proximity to certain prestige (quality of the undergraduate program, publications, depth of students' understanding of the field).

Climate of Graduate School

- Reflect on and identify if there is a culture of competition in the department and/or with students you supervise.
- Create opportunities for collaborative learning and resource sharing in your interactions with graduate students (both inside and outside the classroom and within and between departments and colleges).

Students

Applying Lived Experience to Create Equitable Environments

- Apply your lived experience to your graduate school experience and identify opportunities for changes to make environments more equitable for FGGS.
- Consider and co-construct your classroom and learning environments to determine what equity means in these spaces.
- Name the assumptions other instructors may make when appropriate, and share resources and personal experiences to name the hidden curriculum in the classroom for other instructors.

Creating Support Networks Through Community-Building

Creating Support Networks Through Community Building demonstrates the importance of having a variety of support networks both among peers and faculty and external to the graduate school environment. Many of these recommendations highlight formal (structured, advertised, and supported by staff or students who facilitate the spaces) and informal (events or opportunities to meet and get to know people without specific expectations about the relationships that form) community-building spaces. These recommendations demonstrate the many ways relationships and community-building can happen and how everyone is responsible for demonstrating the importance of these relationships for student success. Many FGGSs mentioned how community support and connections to other students were critical in helping them navigate the graduate school process (see Building Capital in Chapter 5). For FGGSs, these connections provide immediate information when changes in structures and formal support systems can take time in higher education. Providing formal and informal opportunities not only creates a support system through the challenges of graduate school but also serves as an important information-sharing space that many continuing-generation students already have.

Schools, Colleges, and Departments

- Provide structured opportunities for students to connect with other students, faculty, and staff in their degree program or department that are focused on building relationships to share information and provide support:
  - Writing groups
  - Identity-based groups
  - Mentoring program
  - Orientation with community-building activities
  - Regular events that focus on program-, department-, or discipline-specific community-building
- Secure short-term and long-term sustainable funding for faculty, staff, and students to create these opportunities for relationship-building.
- Provide and encourage cohort-based interactions among students at similar milestones in their programs, and encourage interactions between these cohorts to share information and provide formal or informal mentoring.
- Emphasize the importance and purpose of relationships to students.
- Establish clear processes for negotiating situations where relationships dynamics are challenging or harmful (e.g. change of advisor process)
- Create opportunities for feedback (anonymous and attributed) from

students, staff, and faculty on how these events and structures are helpful or could be revised to better fit the needs of the participants.

Faculty and Advisors

- Create opportunities for advanced advisees and/or lab teams to mentor and share resources with new graduate students
- Use group project work in the classroom to encourage connection between students.
- Create informal opportunities to connect with students and get to know them outside of their roles and responsibilities to support them holistically.
- Reflect on how your own identities and experiences influence how students perceive you, and name this when it is appropriate.
- Uncover and describe the hidden curriculum in academic/professional spaces and provide insights on navigating it.
- Confront any assumptions about first-generation college students and reflect on how you can be developmental in your approach to advising (eg., create feedback loops such as mid-semester check-ins and evaluations).

Students

- Seek out and build relationships with students in your year or at the same milestone as you in your department.
- Seek spaces outside your department that may align with your research or provide more general support. These may be identity focused, topic related, or general interest, which creates an opportunity to build a broad support network that meets multiple needs regarding types of relationships and their purpose in your life
- Try to create a balance of academic, professional, and social spaces that can provide support and create opportunities for building relationships.
- Identify and reflect on the types of environments in graduate school that aligns with your values (e.g. collaborative or competitive) and consider how this aligns with your goals for this space.
- Offer other students your perspectives on valuable resources, opportunities for connecting with peers, and advice on navigating challenges.

Facilitating Community Engagement and Ethical Research

Guiding and Facilitating Community Engagement and Ethical Research describes the importance of building relationships with communities and consideration of how students' lived experiences may inform how they pursue and understand ethical research. These suggestions reflect how students described departments as lacking in knowledge, compassion, and care around the communities they research. They also reflect how students use their lived experiences to guide their research topics and design their research studies and academic pursuits. Students place a strong emphasis on the value of home communities and communities that may not be connected to academia. By focusing on and exploring these topics, FGGS provide valuable contributions that inform research and how research can connect to practical application. Many FGGSs decide to focus on topics and research areas connected to their personal experience and communities; however, they may not have experience with or understand how the academy views their experiences or communities. These recommendations provide a bridge for FGGSs to pursue their research and create supportive environments to ensure success.

Schools, Colleges, and Departments

- Prioritize and name ethical research practices around building relationships with partnerships and understanding the impact research has had and can have on communities.
- Recognize and name the ways that research can and has been exploitative and seek out opportunities to repair relationships and damage.

Faculty and Advisors

- Encourage students to investigate and research topics that interest them and are aligned with their experiences without relying on existing graduate students to teach this information; this should be an explicit role of advisors.
- Encourage students to bring the knowledge they have from their home communities into the research and name the ways in which this is a strength in research.
- Identify ways in which students can employ empathy and understanding with research participants.
- Investigate how research has been exploitative, and support students in understanding how to do ethical research and reflect on community impact.
- Recognize and advocate for students who must articulate why a line of inquiry in research is important beyond the standard expectation that it responds to gap in research.
- Consider the times when students are placed in a position to be a spokesperson for everyone representing their identities and how you can serve as an advocate and supporter to avoid this experience.

Students

- Reflect on ways to think about how your identity influences your research and understanding of the world.
- Bring knowledge from your home communities and reflect on how you can make this information accessible to your research participants throughout your engagement with the community.
- Share your experiences and understanding of research that is close to your lived experience, and pay attention to the ways your topics and research contribute to building relationships with communities and mitigating harm.
- Connect with your home communities or others to model and share insights into how you pursued graduate school, citing information and your experience to demonstrate what is possible for students.

Navigating Financial Realities

Navigating Financial Realities reflects the challenges of identifying funding sources for graduate school and the questions students must ask to gain this information. Many funding sources in graduate school are department based, so departments must be up front with students about what funding is available, when and how it is disbursed, and information that may be unclear or difficult to find. In addition, more funding is always needed for living expenses and professional development opportunities essential to identifying positions after graduate school. Some graduate schools restrict whether students can obtain additional positions to fill gaps between their financial needs and the packages they receive from graduate schools. Considering how these policies negatively affect students who may have additional financial responsibilities and wish to pursue graduate school is essential. Many FGGSs described how financing graduate school significantly differed from financing their undergraduate education and that they were unaware of the differences until deciding to pursue graduate school. Given how various factors influence access to funding, this creates an additional barrier for FGGSs. They must relearn how the system and process work and may have to renegotiate it every year in graduate school. Many FGGSs come from low-income backgrounds, so funding concerns and ensuring their living expenses are fully covered create additional stress. Prioritizing the understanding of this reality before entering graduate school and receiving support around navigating these systems is critical for FGGSs.

Schools, Colleges, and Departments

- Provide funding for visit days for prospective graduate students.
- Share information about fee waivers up front and through the application process.
- Be explicit about the complexity of funding for graduate school and how

it varies by institution, program, and department.
- Discuss how the process for applying for funding may change throughout graduate school (not always renewable) and the expectations placed on students to navigate this themselves.
- Provide clarity about when there may be gaps in funding (e.g., summer, breaks) and if there are limited resources for specific types of assistantships (e.g., teaching and research opportunities).
- Explore administrative mechanisms that provide funding for professional development opportunities that do not require students to pay up front and then be reimbursed.
- Examine if the funding provided covers living expenses for students, provide options and information about outside funding or opportunities that align with students" professional development, and provide compensation.
  - Review policies that require students to work only their assistantship during their time in graduate school when it may not be possible to cover living expenses.
  - Consider how students who are caregivers have different living expenses.
  - Review and consider the oversight necessary for advisor-directed funding in creating equitable funding opportunities.

Faculty and Advisors

- Be explicit about the expectations for funding when discussing the process of receiving aid their first year compared to future years.
- Identify opportunities for students to find additional funding for tuition, living expenses, and other opportunities essential for professional development (e.g., conferences, networking opportunities).
- Share additional funding opportunities and resources that cover living expenses and reflect the needs of the diverse experience graduate students have, such as caregiving.
- Recognize how different forms of funding and availability of funding can affect milestone completion.

Students

- Inquire with prospective graduate schools about funding available for traveling to visit days and fee waivers.
- Talk with current students about their experiences with the funding package and the expectations around identifying and maintaining funding throughout graduate school.
- Inquire about when there may be specific times when funding is or is not available (e.g., summer, breaks) and how other expenses (e.g., fees, taxes) may influence their bill at the beginning of the semester.

Supporting Well-Being and Identity Navigation

Supporting Well-being and Identity Navigation emphasizes how well-being and support should provide for the whole student, their success in graduate school, and their life. By providing information about available mental health resources and examining the cultures of graduate schools and departments themselves, we recommend that support be both individual and systemic. In addition, graduate school allows students to explore their identities further as they relate to their research and how they understand their place in the world and their home communities. These recommendations balance identity navigation with well-being because of how FGGSs have described challenges and opportunities of thinking about how being first-generation influences their experience as graduate students. For FGGSs, graduate school provides a new opportunity to understand what it means to be first-generation. Managing overall well-being is critical for all graduate students; for FGGSs, balancing additional stresses in new environments is important as well. These recommendations highlight the balance of well-being with identity investigation and navigation and provide the additional support needed to ensure FGGSs' success.

Schools, Colleges, and Departments

- Host events where faculty describe their own experience navigating the hidden curriculum as graduate students and professionals and their approach to work-life balance.
- Emphasize the importance of mental health during graduate school, and provide resources for students throughout the graduate school process.
  - Share how not all support comes from one area and that students need to have people they can call who understand their experience; also, recognize the types of support families and home communities can provide.
  - Consult and discuss with students about how expectations and pressures from graduate school exacerbate stress, and examine how it may be institutionally reinforced and how these expectations can be resolved or revised.
  - Provide clear guidance on policies for taking time off for sickness, reprieves to create sustainable work environments, or other circumstances.
- Provide opportunities that share with families and communities and support what the experience of graduate school is like for their students and ways they can help them.
- Emphasize and demonstrate the skills of code-switching and navigating different environments as essential to their success in graduate school. Recognize the isolation and shame that may be related to code-switching and balancing the strengths and reality of this experience.
- Recognize the emotional and intellectual labor involved in studying topics close to a student's identity and lived experience, and provide resources and support for students.
- Challenge departments' and universities' perceptions of bias around students studying topics close to their lived experience and home communities and naming this as a valid and essential contribution to the research.

Faculty and Advisors

- Discuss and provide guidance on the types of support students should have during graduate school, and highlight the kinds of support that family and home communities have offered to students in the past.
- Recognize the collectivist nature of FGGSs' desire to go to college and how connections to home communities and obligations at home may influence a student's availability and responsibilities. Discuss this with students and work with them to meet their goals given this context.
- Work with students on recognizing the skills of code-switching and navigating different environments as essential to their success while also understanding this can be an additional challenge for students. Recognize the isolation and shame that may be related to code-switching and balancing the strengths and reality of this experience.
- Discuss with students how to navigate the critique of bias related to students studying topics close to their lived experience and home communities, and validate the important contributions they will make while encouraging them to seek out additional support if they experience difficulties with studying these topics.

Students

- Be gracious about not understanding everything immediately. Recognize that this process is meant to challenge you. You have been through many challenges before and can do this.
- Recognize that mental health and well-being are not contingent on your status or position in the university, academic discipline, or milestones you have achieved.
- Examine perfectionist tendencies, be mindful of the expectations you have of yourself and the expectations others have of you, and practice compassion for yourself.

- Prioritize time for yourself outside of graduate school for activities that are restorative and replenishing. Prioritize time for rest and breaks from the daily pressures of school.
- Seek out counseling and therapy to assist with dealing with the stressors of this period of your life. Using campus resources can be beneficial, but seek outside therapy if campus resources related to counseling do not reflect your goals or priorities for counseling (finding someone who aligns with your identities or is not affiliated with the university so they can provide perspective outside of graduate school).
- When navigating disparities between graduate school and your community of origin, seek out spaces with other first-generation college students or with other students and people who have been through the experience to talk about and share this experience. Topics include the following:
  - Inequities between graduate school and hardships at home
  - Sense of duty to family and responsibility
  - Tensions between cultural roles and expectations that are central to identity and are motivations to pursue education
- When doing research that is close to who you are and/or about your home communities, seek out support from peers, faculty, and other resources, especially when you are studying something that reflects the structural inequalities and harms that persist in your communities.
- Share milestones with family and home communities to celebrate throughout the process of graduate school.
- Reflect on how hard work and the lessons of hard work from families and home communities are demonstrated in their commitments to graduate school and education.

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