First-Generation College Students: Factors That Impact Stress and Burnout, Academic Success, Degree Attainment, and Short- and Long-Term Career Aspirations

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Abstract

First-generation college students encounter increased challenges in college as opposed to their continuing-generation peers, including experiencing an increase in anxiety (PostSecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2021) and stress as a result of financial pressures, family obligations, and part-time work obligations (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). First-generation college students experience challenges in academic performance (Craft Defreitas & Rinn, 2013; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Upah, 2017; Vega, 2016), progress toward degree completion (Cataldi, Bennet, & Chen, 2018; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; PNPI, 2021), and clarification of career aspirations (RTI International, 2021a). Few research studies have examined perceptions of first-generation college students at the end of their collegiate journey about factors that have impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Previous research studies focusing on first-generation college students were quantitative studies and did not consider the lived experiences of first-generation college students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight and understanding into the perceptions of senior status first-generation college students about factors that have impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Ten senior status first-generation students (seven females and three males) enrolled at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution participated in the qualitative study. Seven major themes were identified from the analysis of the data: factors that contributed to stress and burnout, alleviated stress and burnout, made achieving academic success challenging, contributed to academic success, impacted degree attainment, helped shape career aspirations, and made short- and long-

term career aspirations challenging. The most common causes of stress and burnout

included academics, family, and finances. Campus engagement, relationships with

family, friends, faculty, and advisors were factors that alleviated stress and burnout in

participants. Three factors were identified that contributed to academic success

challenges: amount of study time, course delivery format, and financial constraints.

Participants cited curricular and co-curricular involvement, career readiness

competencies, and satisfaction with the degree program as factors that contributed to

academic success. Determination, lack of support, and the challenges surrounding

transitioning to a new phase of life were factors affecting degree attainment. Participants

shaped their career aspirations in college or before they attended college. Entering the

workforce and becoming more independent financially were concerns impacting short-

and long-term career aspirations. Higher education leaders may use the findings of this

study to support first-generation students as they navigate through college and embark on

preparing for their first destination after graduation.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who has supported me throughout this educational journey. My husband, Jason, provided tremendous support and encouragement to our family and me throughout this doctoral journey. Without your support, this journey never could have taken place. Our children, Elijah and Natalie, thank you for inspiring me to continue learning and not letting me quit. I learn so much from both of you daily; thank you! My parents, Tom and Judy, you have believed in me when I didn't always believe in myself. Thank you for challenging me to be a lifelong learner and never give up on a dream. To the team of family and friends, including my in-laws, Wayne and Karen, who stepped in to help when life was hectic, I am forever grateful for the love you have shown Team McCullough.

I also dedicate this study to the students I have met and had the privilege to serve throughout my time in higher education. Thank you for sharing your journey with me. It has been an honor for me to encourage and support you in reaching your goals and dreams.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2013, just under 11% of students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States identified as first-generation college students (Lang, 2015). In 2018, nearly 17% of all freshmen enrolled in baccalaureate institutions across the nation identified themselves as first-generation college students (Stolzenberg et al., 2018). According to Cataldi et al., (2018), the U.S. Department of Education (2018) reported that of new students enrolling in college in 2003-2004, 33% of first-generation students had dropped out of postsecondary education in 2006, three years after their first enrollment date. Of continuing-generation students who first enrolled in college in 2003-2004, 14% had left higher education by 2006 (Cataldi et al., 2018). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 2011) reported that 50% of first-generation college students had completed a degree in six years, while continuing-generation degree attainment was at 64%.

College can be stressful. Typical stressors for new college students include living away from home for the first time, adapting to academic coursework, performing well academically, finding a new peer group, and learning to manage time (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). As students continue in their degree program, choosing a major and career path, planning for the future, finding a job, and financial concerns can create additional stress (Beiter et al., 2015; Ghosh & Fouad, 2017). First-generation college students encounter increased challenges in college as opposed to their continuing-generation peers, including experiencing a lack of cultural capital, increased anxiety, and challenging social and academic transitions (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; PNPI, 2021). Additional stressors for first-generation students can also result from financial pressures,

family obligations, and part-time work obligations (Garriott & Nisle, 2018) as well as academic performance (Craft Defreitas & Rinn, 2013; Mehta et al., 2011; Upah, 2017; Vega, 2016), progress toward degree completion (Cataldi et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2009; PNPI, 2021), and clarifying career aspirations (RTI International 2021a).

Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021) reported that stress levels of all college students continue to rise. The American College Health Association (ACHA, 2018) reported in fall 2018, that 45.1% of college students reported moderate stress levels while 12.7% of college students reported tremendous stress. In spring 2019, ACHA reported that 45.3% of college students reported moderate stress levels. During that same semester, 13.4% of college students reported tremendous stress (ACHA, 2019). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the stress levels of all college students hit higher levels than seen in previous semesters (Ketchen Lipson, 2021). With an increase in the number of first-generation college students on college campuses and as stress levels increase over time, there is a continued need for the creation of programs and support services to enable first-generation college students to achieve success and bolster persistence and graduation rates (Petty, 2014).

Burnout, another term commonly used on college campuses today, first appeared in the academic literature in 1974 (Saville, Bureau, Eckenrode, & Maley, 2018). Freudenberger (1974) first studied this phenomenon in workers who exhibited signs of exhaustion and fatigue after at least one year of working in a medical clinic environment. Maslach and Jackson developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) in 1981 to assess levels of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). According to Maslach et al. (2001), since Freudenberger's initial research on burnout, three core dimensions of

burnout have been identified: exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Research on the phenomenon of burnout has been conducted on college campuses across the nation for almost 40 years.

Meier and Schmeck (1985) conducted some of the first research on burnout in the general-college-student population. Using the MBI, the researchers found associations in burnout correlated with learning styles, low self-esteem, and vocational self-concept crystallization in the population of college students who participated in the research study (Meier & Schmeck, 1985). Jacobs and Dodd (2003) continued research on burnout in the general-college-student population. Their early research on college student burnout focused on students in supervisory roles, namely residential life assistants (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003). According to Jacobs and Dodd (2003), the student's personality, lack of social support, and subjective experience of overload contributed to student burnout. Stoliker and Lafreniere (2015) reported a negative impact on student academic engagement and academic performance and higher perceived levels of stress in students who experienced feelings of loneliness and burnout. Leupold, Lopina, and Erickson (2020) found a strong correlation between burnout levels in college students with low core self-evaluations and perceived low organizational support.

Several variables are associated with college students' burnout levels including academic success, degree attainment, and career aspirations. During the past decade, researchers have examined stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and career aspirations in first-generation college students compared to continuing-generation students. According to Chen (2005); Redford, Mulvaney Hoyer, and Ralph (2017), and Upah (2017), first-generation college students struggle to achieve traditional measures of

academic success, such as high-grade point averages. Mehta et al. (2011) reported that first-generation college students struggle academically in terms of having lower GPAs and lower levels of academic satisfaction than continuing-generation college students. However, a small body of literature on first-generation college students indicated they can have resiliency and self-efficacy in their academic studies (Reyes, 2012) and are capable of academic success (Evans, 2013). Martinez et al. (2009) and Ishitani (2016) reported first-generation students have a higher risk of not completing a college degree in comparison to continuing-generation students. Martinez et al. (2009), Craft Defreitas and Rinn (2013), and Vega (2016) attributed lower rates of college completion to lower academic performance in first-generation college students compared to continuing-generation students. According to RTI International (2021a), the majority of first-generation and continuing-generation students who do complete college have jobs one year after graduation. However, only 44% of first-generation college graduates have a job that requires a baccalaureate degree (RTI International, 2021a).

Background

Recent studies have compared stress and burnout levels in first-generation college students with continuing-college students. Stress and burnout levels are either self-reported by undergraduate students to be high (Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2012) or statistically confirmed through research studies (Morgan, 2014; Pisark, 2009; Saville et al., 2018; Valoy, 2012). Students found to have high levels of stress and burnout experienced low academic performance and withdrew from coursework (Hunt et al., 2012); amotivation and lack of passion for academics (Pisark, 2009; Saville et al., 2018); and a reduced network of informal and formal support systems (Valoy, 2012).

Hunt et al. (2012) noted first-generation college students were more likely than continuing-generation peers to indicate family was not supportive of their enrollment or success in college. According to Hunt et al. (2012) first-generation students indicated family obligations interfered with college attendance, and that they had financial concerns about attending college. Although the findings were not statistically significant, Valoy (2012) reported that female first-generation college students experienced higher levels of burnout than continuing-generation women college student peers. Morgan (2014) noted no significant differences in how first-generation college students coped with stress as compared with continuing-generation peers.

Researchers have defined academic success in numerous ways. Through their research, York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) identified six factors that commonly relate to academic success: academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, attainment of learning outcomes, persistence, and career success. Vega (2016) and Craft Defreitas and Rinn (2013) found first-generation college students with successful completion of high school advanced placement courses and higher self-concept in math and reading had higher academic achievement than first-generation college students not completing high school advanced placement courses. Optimism and pessimism levels have been found to influence life satisfaction in college students (Tuckwiller & Dardick, 2018). Student motivation has also been found to play a significant role in students' achievement of student learning outcomes (Taurina, 2015).

Students persisting to graduation are likely to find employment opportunities after graduation (RTI International, 2021a). However, Martinez et al. (2009) found first-generation college students are at risk for not completing college. Ishitani (2016) found

first-generation college students are most likely to drop out during their second year of college. Cataldi et al. (2018) reported that first-generation college students graduate at lower rates than continuing-generation peers. Lee and Mueller (2014) reported that first-generation college students rely more heavily on financial aid to finance their degree than their continuing-generation counterparts. Eighty percent of continuing- and first-generation college graduates reported finding a job within six months of graduation (RTI International, 2021a).

Tate et al. (2015) noted limited research existed on first-generation college students and their career development and experiences. These authors conducted a qualitative research study interviewing 15 first-generation college students regarding external influences and internal beliefs regarding their career development. First-generation college students included in this study identified their family as a prominent external influence in career decisions (Tate et al., 2015). Based on study findings, Tate et al. (2015) suggested family experiences, which included career and financial struggles, contributed to students' motivation to succeed in college and beyond.

Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) and Eismann (2016) compared career aspirations of both first- and continuing-generation college students. Overall, post-college graduation aspirations for both populations were similar, with first-generation college students desiring to work for non-profit and governmental agencies at a higher rate than continuing-generation peers (Eismann, 2016). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) reported first-generation college students reported experiencing higher levels of educational and career barriers than continuing-generation college students.

Most quantitative studies focusing on burnout have been designed to investigate variables related to the general-college student population (Pisark, 2009; Saville et al., 2018; Valoy, 2012). Research conducted with first-generation students has focused on factors contributing to stress and failure in college (Mehta et al., 2011; Morgan, 2014). Kundu (2019) noted limited qualitative research on the topic of stress and burnout in first-generation and students of color. Kundu's (2019) qualitative research involving 12 students indicated burnout was most associated with college students who were experiencing challenges with goals, college experiences, and feelings of lack of self-worth. While researchers continue to study stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and career development in first-generation college students, research is limited.

Statement of the Problem

Forbus et al. (2011) examined first-generation students and their motivation, academic success, and satisfaction with the university experience. Their research confirmed the necessity for university administrators to understand the unique life experiences and academic supports needed for first-generation students (Forbus et al., 2011). Previous research studies have focused on first-generation students and the reasons for their failure in college (Mehta et al., 2011). According to Mehta et al. (2011), first-generation students were less involved, had less social and financial support, reported less social and academic satisfaction, and earned lower grades than continuing-generation peers. Limited studies have examined stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and career aspirations of first-generation college students. Tate et al. (2015) recommended further study of first-generation college students' to better

understand the complexities surrounding this unique group. The majority of the studies that have been conducted have been quantitative. Few research studies have examined perceptions of first-generation college students at the end of their collegiate journey about factors that have impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. With an increasing number of first-generation college students enrolling in undergraduate degree programs, additional research is needed to understand the experiences of this unique population of students.

Purpose of the Study

Four purposes guided the current study. The first purpose was to explore perceptions of senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution (University X) about factors that impacted stress and burnout during the four years of college. The second purpose was to investigate perceptions of senior status first-generation college students at University X about factors that impacted academic success. The third purpose was to investigate perceptions of senior status first-generation college students at University X about factors that impacted degree attainment. The fourth purpose was to investigate perceptions of senior status first-generation college students at University X about factors that impacted short- and long-term career aspirations.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to existing literature related to first-generation college students and perceptions about factors related to stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations after college. The results of this study may be of interest to university academic and career advisors, faculty

members, mental health providers, and administrators charged with providing academic and career support to increase the persistence and success of first-generation college students. Results from the current study may encourage university leaders to implement targeted support services to first-generation students as they transition through the undergraduate degree program. Targeted support services may result in an increase in graduation rates of first-generation college students.

Delimitations

As defined by Lunenburg and Irby (2008), "Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (p. 134). The delimitations for this study included the following:

1. The study was conducted at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution.

2. The participants included male and female first-generation college students.

3. The participants were classified as seniors, with a minimum of 90 earned credit hours.

4. The participants were full-time students during their collegiate experience.

5. Participants had completed their undergraduate coursework in on-campus courses for all of their academic courses except those that had to be offered in a hybrid or online format due to COVID-19 in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Assumptions

"Assumptions are postulates, premises, and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of the research" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 135). The current study was based on the following assumptions:

1. All participants understood the interview questions and responded honestly.

2. All respondents' self-reported demographic information was accurate.

3. The interpretation of the data accurately reflected the perceptions of the

respondents.

Research Questions

RQ1. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public,

Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact stress and burnout?

RQ2. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public,

Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact academic success?

RQ3. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public,

Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact degree attainment?

RQ4. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public,

Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact short- and long-term career

aspirations?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are provided to allow for a common understanding of the

terminology used throughout the study.

Burnout. Freudenberger (1974) defined burnout as, "to fail, wear out, or become

exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (p. 159).

Continuing-generation college student. Choy (2001) referred to a college

student whose parents obtained a bachelor's degree or higher using the term continuing-

generation college student.

First-generation college student. University X (2015) defined first-generation college students as those "who either have both parents with a high school education or less or have one or both parents with some college but not a bachelor's degree" (p. 9).

Senior status. At University X, the classification of senior status is used when students have completed 90 or more credit hours of undergraduate coursework (University X, 2018).

Stress. Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) defined stress as the "interaction between stressors and the individual's perception and reaction to those stressors" (p. 312).

Organization of the Study

This study includes five chapters. The first chapter included the introduction, statement of the problem, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research questions, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature beginning with an overview about first-generation college students within higher education. An analysis of stress and burnout factors that influence the success of all college students and specifically first-generation college students is summarized. Next, student academic success and degree completion components for all college students and first-generation college students are reported. Finally, a review of research focusing on short-term and long-term career aspirations for college students and first-generation college students is presented. The third chapter explains the methodology for the study and includes the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations of the study. The fourth chapter presents the results of the study. The final

chapter includes a summary of the study findings, findings related to the literature, and

conclusions that include implications for action and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to first-generation college students, stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and career aspirations. The first section includes an overview of first-generation college students. The second section includes a review of stress and burnout in the general-college-student population and first-generation college students. Next, a definition of academic success in higher education is provided. Research on academic success for first-generation college students is summarized. The fourth section of Chapter 2 focuses on research related to degree attainment in the traditional student population and first-generation college students. The final section of Chapter 2 details literature related to career aspirations for the general-college student population and the first-generation college student population.

First-Generation College Students

According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2020), the number of first-generation college students attending higher education institutions has continued to rise. Although the term first-generation student may be new to the general public, in higher education, the term has been used for decades (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020). Research focusing on the first-generation student population has increased because an interest in increasing graduation rates and educating a more prepared, skilled workforce is at the forefront of the federal government, state governments, businesses, and communities (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020).

Students identifying as first-generation college students are also likely to be the first to attend postsecondary education in their immediate and extended families. In 2015-2016, 59 % of first-generation college students indicated they were the first of their siblings to attend college (RTI International, 2019). Also, first-generation students tend to be older than their continuing-generation peers. Twenty-eight percent of first-generation students reported being aged 30 or older compared to 16 % of their continuing-generation peers (RTI International, 2019).

Many other unique experiences and traits create a complex living and learning environment for first-generation college students. One unique experience for first-generation college students may be that of family support and involvement. LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) analyzed a decade of research studies focusing on the family support of first-generation college students. Findings from their review of the literature concluded that past research examined family support systems using a deficit model, assuming first-generation college students were missing out because their parents did not attend college (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). According to the studies analyzed, first-generation college students reported higher levels of family achievement guilt, increased levels of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, decreased social support from family and friends, a perception of less emotional and informational parental support, and smaller levels of parental financial support (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021) than continuing-generation peers. The authors concluded that parents of first-generation students generally do provide support in terms of persistence and resilience in obtaining a college degree. First-generation college students reported family as one of the most critical support systems in their enrollment and persistence in college, although this support may

look different than the support desired by continuing-generation peers (LeBouef &
Dworkin, 2021). Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, and Jones (2014) also concluded that
most first-generation students' families supported their college attendance but lacked
knowledge of higher education systems and procedures. The authors suggested this lack
of knowledge may preclude parents of first-generation college students from fully
understanding their student's new college environment. First-generation students in the
Irlbeck et al. (2014) study cited parent/family encouragement, teacher encouragement,
and self-motivation as the most significant factors in their decision to enroll in higher
education.

First-generation students may not have the ability to connect and become engaged
in campus activities compared with continuing-generation peers. Of college graduates
who earned a bachelor's degree in 2015-2016, 65% of continuing-generation students had
participated in an extracurricular activity, whereas only 46% of first-generation college
students had participated in an extracurricular activity (RTI International, 2021b). First-
generation students participated at a lower rate than continuing-generation peers in
holding a formal research role, participating with a faculty member in research, being
employed in a paid internship, and studying abroad (RTI International, 2021b). Salvadge
(2019) cited the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *2018 Student
Survey*. NACE concluded first-generation students are less likely to participate in
internships, with 46.5% of first-generation students completing an internship compared
with 53.5 % of continuing-generation students.

Researchers have postulated several reasons first-generation students are less
frequently involved in engagement activities on-campus than their continuing-generation

peers. Carnevale and Smith (2018) found first-generation students from low-income families disproportionately enroll in college classes and work more hours, sometimes over 40 hours a week. Dong (2019) studied first-generation student engagement at private liberal arts colleges. According to Dong, first-generation college students participated as frequently as continuing-generation peers in study abroad, internships, and faculty-sponsored research. Dong (2019) concluded the success of these first-generation students was due to the commitment their institution played in removing barriers and supporting first-generation students academically.

DeAngelo and Franke (2016) also found first-generation students thrive at an institution committed to their engagement and success. The authors concluded first-generation students who begin college academically prepared are as likely to continue enrollment as equally ready continuing-generation peers (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). According to DeAngelo and Franke, first-generation students with lower levels of college preparation before starting college received benefits from attending a campus that emphasizes a climate of student success from faculty, staff, and administrators. These campuses tended to provide services to increase student potential, elevating the chance of enrollment for less-prepared students.

Stress and Burnout

The Center for Collegiate Mental Health's (CCMH) 2017 annual report indicated self-reported college student stress, including depression and anxiety, consistently increased from 2013 to 2017 (CCMH, 2018). The 2020 CCMH annual report noted anxiety and depression continued to be the top concern for students visiting the campus counseling center (CCMH, 2021). According to CCMH (2021), the 2021 yearly report

included data from 153 college and university counseling centers. The prevalence of

mental health concerns, including stress and burnout, affects many students in the college

student population. The sources of stress are numerous. Researchers have identified

significant life transitional events, such as leaving home, becoming more autonomous

and self-sufficient, and identifying career pathways as sources of stress for students

(Baghurst & Kelley, 2014; Martin, 2021). Researchers have also found the college

academic environment places pressure on students. Campus involvement, academic

coursework, and group projects add stress to college students (Karaman, Lerma, Cavazo

Vela, & Watson, 2019).

Burnout is a psychological occurrence caused by drawn-out exhaustion and

disinterest (Alarcon, Edwards, & Menke, 2011; Gonzalez-Roma, Schaefeli, Bakker, &

Lloret, 2006). Cynicism (negative, cynical attitude) and lack of efficacy (evaluating one's

performance negatively) are also indicators of burnout (Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2006).

Pisark (2009) found burnout is prevalent on college campuses, with students in burnout

studies suffering from decreased mental health and decreased academic performance.

Lin and Huang (2014) studied whether or not specific stress predictors indicated the onset

of burnout in college students. Their research showed academic stress, self-identity

stress, future development stress, and interpersonal stress were top predictors of academic

burnout in the population of students they studied (Lin & Huang, 2014). In addition,

Stoliker and Lafreniere (2015) found feelings of loneliness, academic and personal

pressures such as homework, co-curricular involvement, family issues, and other factors

contributed to academic burnout in college students. Leupold et al. (2020) found that

when college students do not feel their school values their contributions and struggle with

low self-esteem, low efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control, they are more likely to suffer from academic burnout.

Limited research has been conducted on stress factors reported by college seniors compared to stress factors reported by first-year college students (Schriver & Teske, 2020). As college students successfully matriculate through their degree plan and embark on their final semester or two before graduation, increased factors for stress and burnout may arise. Beiter et al. (2015) found academic success, pressure to succeed, post-graduation career plans, and financial concerns were top stressors for college students. Indicators for depression, anxiety, and stress were higher for upper-level students than first-year students in Beiter et al's. study. Schriver and Teske (2020) noted college seniors perceived career and financial concerns as top stressors during their senior year. Ghosh and Fouad (2017) studied 205 senior students and reported that when these upperclassmen could plan and control career decisions their ability to cope and manage stress increased.

Spring 2020 introduced a new challenge for college students, faculty, and higher education administrators – a worldwide pandemic (Schroeder, 2021). In March 2020, campuses across the country closed and shifted to online learning (Hess, 2020). The pandemic changed the landscape of higher education during the 2020-2021 academic year as well. Due to increased infection rates in the U.S., most higher education institutions implemented COVID-19 safety protocols, limiting or eliminating face-to-face courses and offering smaller, face-to-face hybrid courses and online courses (Tromp, 2021). College classrooms were not the only areas of campus affected by the pandemic. Residence halls and co-curricular activities such as study abroad were altered or not

offered during the academic year (Burke, 2021). The pandemic continued to upend

higher education as new virus variants were identified in 2021 (Schroeder, 2021).

College Pulse surveyed 2,002 college students in spring 2021 to understand how

the COVID-19 pandemic affected students (Ezarik, 2021). Twenty-nine percent of

students indicated that their mental and physical health was unhealthy. Over 50% of

students reported more headaches due to increased screen time during the COVID 19

pandemic. Almost 45% of students reported getting less exercise than before the

pandemic, and 35% reported getting less sleep than before the pandemic began. The

Boston University School of Public Health, the Mary Christie Foundation, and the Health

Minds Network studied faculty perceptions regarding student mental health. The survey

of 1,685 faculty members at 12 colleges around the country found 87% of faculty

members believed college students' mental health worsened or significantly worsened

during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ketchen Lipson, 2021). Almost 81% of faculty

members had a conversation through technology with college students regarding their

mental health and personal wellbeing (Ketchen Lipson, 2021). Historically, researchers

have reported that college is a stressful time for college students, and current researchers

have reported increased stress and mental health concerns during the COVID-19

pandemic.

Researchers (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Garriott &

Nisle, 2018; Holden, Wright, Herring, & Sims, 2021; Irlbeck et al., 2014; LeBouef &

Dworkin, 2021) have indicated that first-generation students are more susceptible to

stress and burnout due to several factors including decreased emotional family support,

greater concern about finances, a need to work part-time or full-time while taking

courses, decreased levels of engagement on-campus, limited social and cultural capital, and less developed coping strategies. Holden et al.'s (2021) research indicated first-generation college students receive less emotional support from families. As first-generation college students are the first in their families to attend postsecondary education, they feel an increased burden of demands and expectations to achieve high levels of success academically and in pursuit of career choices (Holden et al., 2021). These feelings can increase stress for first-generation college students and cause them to feel they cannot meet the demands placed on them by family members (Holden et al., 2021). First-generation college students' social and cultural capital on-campus is diminished in comparison to continuing-generation peers (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). Due to lower social and cultural capital, first-generation college students must rely more on institutional supports to achieve academic success and lower stress levels than continuing-education peers (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

The coping strategies of college students also play an essential role in minimizing stress and burnout. Garriott and Nisle (2018) found that first-generation students who used reflective methods of coping had lower stress levels. In contrast, Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021) found first-generation students utilizing emotional support such as the campus counseling center as a coping mechanism had lower stress levels than first-generation students who used reflective coping methods. Both Garriott and Nisle (2018) and Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021) confirmed first-generation college students who utilize several different student support initiatives, pre-college bridge programs, mental health resources, and academic tutoring programs have lower stress levels.

Hunt et al. (2012) researched first-generation and continuing-generation college students who stopped out of their degree program during their senior year. First-generation college students indicated stress, anxiety, and burnout as reasons to discontinue work on their degree. Seventy percent of first-generation college student respondents, in comparison to 55% of continuing-generation college student respondents reported stress, anxiety, and burnout prevented them from completing a degree (Hunt et al., 2012). Research conducted on college students who dropped out of college within 15 credit hours of completion also showed mental health concerns as a contributing factor related to the decision to leave college (Rerko, 2016).

Academic Success

Hossler and Bontranger (2015) defined academic success in higher education from the perspective of retaining students from year to year and having them persist through graduation. According to Varlotta (2016), academic success for U.S. higher education students is defined by retention and graduation rates. Varlotta (2016) encouraged universities to strive for a broader definition of academic success, including analyzing student intention, self-reported accounts of success and satisfaction, the accomplishment of direct learning objectives or demonstrated outcomes, self-directed learning, and student financial/career status. York et al. (2015) analyzed 20 peer-reviewed articles related to academic success to more narrowly define factors that contribute to academic success. Based on their literature review, York et al., (2015) proposed six factors related to academic success: academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, attainment of learning outcomes, persistence, and

career success. Each of the York et al. factors are described in greater detail in the following sections.

Academic achievement. Martinez et al. (2009) found first-generation college students lagged behind continuing-generation peers in both lower college entrance exam scores and grade point averages (GPAs). These factors indicated first-generation college students are at a higher risk than continuing-generation students for not completing college (Martinez et al., 2009). Craft Defreitas and Rinn (2013) studied academic achievement of first-generation college students related to self-concept on math and verbal concepts. According to Craft Defreitas and Rinn, first-generation college students with a higher self-concept in solving math problems or in reading comprehension had higher academic achievement. Conversely, first-generation college students with a lower self-concept in those same skills had lower levels of academic achievement (Craft Defreitas & Rinn, 2013). Vega (2016) conducted qualitative interviews of high-achieving junior and senior first-generation Latino college students. The students interviewed indicated they felt prepared for college-level studies as they completed advanced courses in high school (Vega, 2016). At the time Vega's (2016) research study was released, eight of 10 students interviewed for the study had graduated from college. Six of the eight students graduated with honors (Vega, 2016).

Satisfaction. Life satisfaction, a subjective, holistic assessment of one's life, is a component of wellbeing (Holinka, 2015). Stress and mental health concerns have been shown to decrease life satisfaction in college students (Holinka, 2015; Tuckwiller & Dardick, 2018). Tuckwiller and Dardick (2018) found optimism and pessimism levels influenced life satisfaction in college students. College students with higher levels of

optimism showed more significant life satisfaction, whereas college students with pessimistic tendencies showed lower levels of life satisfaction (Tuckwiller & Dardick, 2018). Research studies on life satisfaction in first-generation college students have indicated mixed outcomes. Jenkins, Belanger, Londono Connally, Boals, and Duran (2013) and Mehta et al. (2011) found less life satisfaction in first-generation college students. Mahan, Wilson, Petrosko, and Luthy (2014) found no difference in the satisfaction levels of first-generation and continuing-generation college students regarding campus relationships, support for student success, higher-order thinking skills, and varied educational experience. Mehta et al. (2011) found first-generation college students had less satisfaction with the academic and social aspects of the college experience.

Acquisition of skills and competencies and attainment of learning outcomes. Lattuca and Stark (2009) identified several reasons for assessing student learning outcomes. Guiding student progress, improving course planning and teaching, helping students understand the purpose of educational activities, demonstrating accountability, and gaining a theoretical understanding of how students learn and grow are several reasons for assessing student learning outcomes (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU, n.d.) developed four areas of essential learning outcomes which are used to define the knowledge and skills students gain with a liberal education. Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning skills comprise the competencies college students need to prepare

for success after graduation. The essential learning outcomes also provide a framework for students' cumulative progress during college (AACU, n.d.).

Taurina (2015) conducted a literature review on student motivation and its influence on learning outcomes. Through this research, Taurina (2015) found student motivation plays a significant role in students' achievement of learning outcomes.   A positive learning environment, supportive student and teacher relationships, and using applied learning instruction techniques also influence students' learning outcome achievement (Taurina, 2015). Similarly, Trolian and Jach (2020) found a correlation between high academic motivation and several applied learning instruction techniques. York (2013) found participation in service-learning initiatives encouraged the development of academic learning outcomes and career acculturation at a higher rate for low-income, first-generation college students compared with low-income, first-generation college students who did not participate in service-learning initiatives.

Persistence. The U.S. Department of Education's 2018-2022 strategic plan included expanding postsecondary educational opportunities and increasing access and completion of college (U.S. Department of Education., 2018). According to Ishitani (2016), historically, persistence and completion rates for first-generation college students have lagged behind their continuing-generation peers. Ishitani (2016) researched the timing of when first-generation college students discontinued their studies. This research indicated first-generation college students are most likely to drop out during their second year of college. Ishitani (2016) theorized institutions focus support efforts for students during their first year of college. Once students successfully transitioned to the second year of study, the college refocused retention efforts on the new class of incoming

students. Vega (2016) found successful first-generation college students felt a high level of support from college personnel, family, and friends and that these individuals contributed to their persistence in college.

Career success. It is well researched that employers desire college graduates with a well-developed set of skill sets. Both NACE and AACU periodically survey employers to assess the skills and competencies desired by employers when hiring recent college graduates (Finley, 2021; NACE, 2021b). NACE (2021b) defined career readiness as "a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college-educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management (p. 1). NACE also identified eight top career competencies employers desire when they hire college graduates. These eight competencies are career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology.

NACE (2019) also defined career success for graduating undergraduate students as securing full-time or part-time employment, engaging in volunteer services (i.e., mission work or Peace Corps), military services, or continuing education within six months of graduation. College graduates have enjoyed success in finding employment six months after graduation over the past several years. In 2014, 53% of undergraduate college graduates secured full-time employment within six months of graduation (NACE, 2015). Sixteen percent of undergraduate college graduates continued their education within six months of graduation, and 20% of graduates were still seeking employment six months after graduation (NACE, 2015). Comparatively, in 2019, 55% of college graduates held a full-time job six months after graduation, with 19% of graduates

continuing their education and 14% still seeking employment (NACE, 2021a). One year

after graduation, 80% of both first-generation and continuing-generation college students

held a job, yet only 44% of first-generation college students had a job that required a

bachelor's degree, as opposed to 52% percent of continuing-generation college students

(RTI International, 2021a).

Degree Attainment

The U.S. has long held high regard for providing education to its citizens (Bok,

2013). As a young country, a robust system of public and private higher education

institutions was developed throughout the U.S. The missions of these higher education

institutions included conducting ground-breaking research, providing coursework to

prepare students for an occupation, or educating students through a liberal arts curriculum

(Lattuca & Stark, 2009). The U.S. became the first nation to move from education for the

elite to education for the masses (Bok, 2013). According to Zumeta, Breneman, Callan,

and Finney (2012), the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) noted the most significant

growth rate in the number of new jobs (4.1 million) and growth rate (17.8 %) from 1999

to 2008 came from professional and related occupations, which included the most

significant number of bachelors and advanced degree holders. Professional and business

services, health care, and social assistance sectors were predicted to have the largest

growth from 2008-2018 (Dickler, 2009). The U.S. BLS projected the largest sectors for

employment growth from 2019-2029 will be in the areas of healthcare and social

assistance sectors, estimated to add 3.1 million jobs over 10 years (Dubina, Kim, Rolen,

& Riley, 2020).

Historically, the labor market has rewarded workers with higher education degrees through higher wages and lower unemployment rates. This has not gone unnoticed by students preparing for a career. The Public Agenda (2016) survey tracked the percentage of Americans who feel a college education is necessary for success in today's economy. In 2000, only 31% of respondents felt a college education was essential for workplace success. This percentage climbed to 55% in 2009 but dropped to 42% by 2016. According to an American Public Media (2019) research study, 58% percent of Americans responded they believed a four-year degree was worth the cost.

U.S. BLS (2020) research confirmed graduates with bachelors and advanced degrees have lower unemployment rates than workers with little or no postsecondary education. Workers with less than a high school diploma had the highest unemployment rate at 11.7%, followed by a 9.0% unemployment rate for workers with a high school diploma, and an 8.3% unemployment rate for workers with some college but no degree (U.S. BLS, 2020). Workers holding a bachelor's degree had an unemployment rate of 5.5%, workers with a master's degree had an unemployment rate of 4.1%, and workers holding a doctorate had an unemployment rate of 2.5% (U.S. BLS, 2020). Over the years, the perception of whether or not a college degree is essential has risen and fallen. However, higher education continues to provide benefits to workers (U.S. BLS, 2020)

Research on differences in lifetime earnings for workers with a bachelor's degree and high school graduates is staggering. According to the Social Security Administration (2015), men with a bachelor's degree earn approximately $900,000 more in median lifetime earnings than male employees with a high school diploma. Women with a bachelor's degree earn approximately $630,000 more in median lifetime earnings than

female employees with a high school diploma (Social Security Administration, 2015). Although support is broad for obtaining a higher education credential, students' success in attaining a degree is not guaranteed.

In 2018, 62% of students completed a bachelor's degree at the same institution in which they initially enrolled in 2012 (NCES, 2020b). According to the NCES, institutional selectivity played a prominent role in degree attainment. Six-year graduation rates were the highest at the most selective institutions (an acceptance rate of less than 25%), with a 90% six-year graduation rate (NCES, 2020b). Four-year institutions with an open admissions policy had a 34% six-year degree completion rate (NCES, 2020b).

Degree completion rates also vary based on ethnicity. For students starting their four-year degree program in the fall of 2010, the 6-year graduation rate was highest for Asian students (74%), followed by White students (64%), students of two or more races (60%), Hispanic students (54%), Pacific Islander students (51%), Black students (40%), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39%) (NCES, 2019). In comparison, the four-year degree completion rate for combined ethnic groups was less than 50 % (NCES, 2019).

The degree attainment rate is also lower for first-generation students. Cataldi et al. (2018) reported that three years after first starting a degree program, 33% of first-generation students had left postsecondary education compared to 14% of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree. Ten years after finishing their sophomore year of high school, 20% of first-generation students had obtained a bachelor's degree compared to 42% of continuing-generation students (Redford et al., 2017). Alarmingly, 54% of first-

generation students noted they could not afford to continue school as a reason for dropping out, as opposed to 45% of continuing-generation students (Redford et al., 2017).

The cost of attending a U.S. college has risen sharply in the past several decades. Zumeta et al. (2012) noted the net college cost as a percent of median family income had increased 10 to 16% for families in the lowest two income tiers over the past decade. The College Board (2020) reported family income increased 56% for families in the top income tier, but only increased 21% for the lowest two income tiers between 1989-2019. Comparing tuition costs over thirty years, 1990-1991 to 2020-2021, the average published tuition and fees prices at public, four-year colleges grew from $3,800 to $10,560 (College Board, 2020). The average published cost of tuition and fees at private, nonprofit four-year institutions increased from $18,560 to $37,650 (College Board, 2020). Tuition costs reported by the College Board have been adjusted for inflation (College Board, 2020).

Increasingly, students are relying on federal and state financial aid programs to finance their education. In the academic year 2018-2019, 44% of students enrolling in a four-year public institution received federal financial aid (Statista, 2021). Fifty-eight percent of students enrolling in a four-year private, nonprofit higher education institution received federal financial aid. Statista (2021) reported 70% of students enrolling in a four-year private, for-profit institution received federal financial assistance. When factoring financial aid into college costs, the net average tuition and fees cost was lowest in 2009-2010 for first-time, full-time, instate students enrolled at public, four-year institutions ($2,830) (College Board, 2020). According to College Board (2020), the net average tuition and fees ($14,710) were lowest in 2009-2010 for first-time, full-time

students enrolled at private, nonprofit, four-year intuitions ($14,710). The net average

tuition and fees cost at public, four-year institutions was $3,230 in 2020 and $15,990 in

2020 for students enrolling at a private, nonprofit, four-year institution (College Board,

2020).

In 2020, student loan debt topped $1.56 trillion, with an average of $29,000

student loan debt for students graduating in 2018 (Friedman, 2020). The default rate on

student loan debt was 10.8%, $119.8 billion dollars, and affected 5.5 million borrowers.

Lee and Mueller (2014) found first-generation students relied more on student loans to

participate in higher education than their continuing-generation peers. The Association

for Institutional Research (AIR, 2020) found the rate of first-generation borrowing

surpassed that of continuing-generation peers from 2000 to 2016. In 2016, borrowing

rates for both first-generation and continuing-generation students converged with first-

generation students borrowing about $250 more on average than continuing-generation

peers (AIR, 2020). Not surprisingly, first-generation students often need to secure loans

from private lenders, with less favorable interest rates and payback options than federal

student loans (First-generation Foundation, 2020). For some students, using loans to pay

for college is not an option. Carnevale and Smith (2018) found low-income students are

not as likely to have checking or savings accounts and may choose to pay for tuition

using credit cards. Too often, the academic and financial pressures lead first-generation

students to drop out and disappear from college altogether, with students missing out on

the opportunity to better their families, communities, and world (First-generation

Foundation, 2020).

Career Aspirations

Why do students choose to attend college? Eagan et al. (2017) cited results from the American Freshman National Norms Survey conducted by the Cooperative Institution Research Program and the Higher Education Research Institution at UCLA in 2016. Almost 85% of freshman students indicated they chose to attend college to get a better job. According to Tucciarone's (2015) research, the primary reason students earn a degree is to secure a career with earning potential after graduation. NACE (2021a) reported that of the students graduating with a bachelor's degree in 2019, 50% were employed in full-time positions within six months of graduation. Nearly 19% of graduates reported matriculating to an advanced degree program after graduation. Overall, 86%, almost nine out of 10 graduates looking for a job or enrolling in advanced education were successful within six months of graduation (NACE, 2021a).

Although most students attend higher education to prepare for a future career, many students struggle with selecting a major. A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2017 report analyzed longitudinal data from students enrolling for the first time in 2011-2012. Within three years of initial enrollment, about 30% of students who had initially declared a major changed their major at least once (NCES, 2017). Further, one in 10 students changed their declared majors multiple times (NCES, 2017). For some students, declaring a major when they enroll can be too overwhelming. Buford and Nester (2019) stated that at the University of Cincinnati approximately six percent of the undergraduate population declared a major of exploratory, allowing exploration of different majors and courses before committing to study one.

Researchers have described reasons why college students struggle to identify a major and a future career path. Chronic indecisiveness and high trait anxiety, limited access to career information, interpersonal conflicts and barriers with others, and lack of readiness to make a career choice may make choosing a major and career difficult for students (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996; Hacker, Carr, Abrams, & Brown, 2013; Lent, Wang, Morris, Ireland, & Penn, 2019). Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, and Schedin (2014) researched career concern differences in decided and undecided students. Their research indicated that undecided students had significantly lower career decision-making self-efficacy, increased overall negative career thinking, and difficulties in career decision-making (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014).

Research has shown anxiety is not exclusive to students struggling to determine a major or career path. Career anxiety is defined as the anxiety of individuals experiencing career concerns as they undergo the career development process (Pisark, Rowell, & Thompson, 2017). Pisark et al. (2017) conducted qualitative research exploring career anxiety factors in college students secure with their academic and career decisions. Their findings indicated college students with a normal career development trajectory experienced high levels of career anxiety (Pisark et al., 2017). Seven themes of career anxiety emerged from qualitative research respondents: general symptoms of anxiety, existential concerns, pressure, lack of career guidance, cognitive distortions, social comparisons, and economic and occupational uncertainty (Pisark et al., 2017).

Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) compared the career aspirations of first-generation and continuing-generation college students. Overall, no significant differences between first-generation and continuing-generation college students' career

aspirations were found (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). However, first-generation college students reported more educational and career barriers than continuing-generation college students (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas also indicated the socio-economic status (SES) of the students' families played a role in career aspirations. According to Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016), first-generation and continuing-generation college students from lower working-class SES families indicated less family support in the career development process as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation college students from upper-middle SES class families.

Eismann (2016) reported on a NACE (2016) examination of the career aspirations of first-generation college students as compared to continuing-generation college students. Forty percent of the graduating college seniors identified as first-generation students (Eismann, 2016). Post-graduation plans for both first-generation and continuing-generation college students were similar, with 23% of each population of students planning to continue education and 60% of each population of students planning to enter the workforce. A higher percentage of first-generation college students planned to work for a nonprofit or government agency, 44%, whereas only 33% of continuing-generation students planned to work for a nonprofit or government agency (Eismann, 2016). A higher percentage of continuing-generation students planned to work in the private sector, 65%, as opposed to 53% of first-generation college students (Eismann, 2016).

Summary

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the unique traits of the growing population of first-generation college students. Taking an in-depth look at the experiences of students

who are the first in their families to undertake a post-secondary education helps create a better understanding of the challenges and strengths first-generation students embody. Next, a review of stress and burnout in continuing-generation and first-generation college students was provided. While all college students experience anxiety, first-generation students may encounter higher levels of stress than continuing-generation peers (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Factors of academic success, including academic achievement, satisfaction, success, acquisition of skills and competencies and attainment of learning outcomes, persistence, and career success, were highlighted. Learning more about academic success helps create a context for practices leading to degree attainment and positive career outcomes. The degree attainment of continuing- and first-generation college students were compared. Cataldi et al. (2018) reported that first-generation college students graduate at lower rates than continuing-generation peers. Finally, a review of career aspirations, including determining a major, experiencing career anxiety, and career outcomes of first-generation and continuing-generation college students was reported. Overall, post-graduation college aspirations for both populations were similar. However, first-generation college students reported more educational and career barriers than continuing-generation college students (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in the current study, including the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researcher's role, and limitations.

Chapter 3

Methods

This qualitative study investigated first-generation college students' perceptions of factors that impacted their stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Chapter 3 provides a summary of the methods used in the current study. This chapter includes a description of the research design, setting, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and trustworthiness, researchers' role, and limitations of the research study.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used in the current study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) indicated the purpose of qualitative research is to "study people in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena and experiences in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (p. 42). Qualitative research generally follows a naturalistic research approach, guided by a social constructivist framework that focuses on how the participants "perceive their worlds and interpret their experiences" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 2). Creswell and Creswell (2018) reported common characteristics shared in qualitative research studies to include data collection occurring in a natural setting, the researcher as the key instrument in the study, the utilization of inductive and deductive data analysis, a focus on participant meanings, and the creation of a holistic account of the issue under study.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research involves "the researcher describing the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as

described by the participants" (p. 13). Saldana (2011) noted the phenomenological research design captures "what goes through one's mind and what one feels as the phenomenon occurs" (p. 8). The current study allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the first-generation college student population and their perceptions of the phenomena of stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations through participants' descriptions of their lived experiences.

Setting

The setting for this study was University X, a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution. The choice of this institution was purposeful due to the university's enrollment of a large number of first-generation college students. University X offers instruction in three modalities: on-campus, online, and international partner programs. These modalities combined for a total fall 2021 enrollment of 14,104 undergraduate students, including 972 Hispanic students (University X, 2021). Seventy-one percent of the undergraduate students enrolled at the university were under 24 years of age (NCES, 2020a). During the fall of 2021, 51% of students attending University X were first-generation college students (University X, 2021).

Sampling Procedures

Criterion sampling was used to select the sample in the current study. Only senior status first-generation college students at University X who had completed 90 or more undergraduate credit hours of coursework were selected as research participants. Additionally, only senior status first-generation college students who were enrolled in on-campus courses for all of their academic courses except those that had to be offered in a

hybrid or online format due to COVID-19 during the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year were included in the sample for the current study. A list of 45 students meeting these criteria was obtained from the university student information system.

Instrument

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher is the key instrument in qualitative research, collecting data through observation and interviewing. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) explained that qualitative research interviewing "has the potential to elicit rich, thick descriptions," [which allows the researcher to] "clarify statements and probe for additional information" (p. 193). A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for the current study. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to describe "the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 91).

The interview protocol for this study was designed to allow the participants to share their undergraduate college experiences regarding burnout and stress, academic success, degree attainment, and short-term and long-term career aspirations. The interview protocol included four descriptive and demographic questions, followed by 11 semi-structured interview questions aligned with the research questions. The demographic questions included the following:

IQ1. What is your current classification?

IQ2. What is your declared major?

IQ3. What is your current GPA?

IQ4. When is your planned graduation date?

The research questions and semi-structured interview questions included the following:

RQ1. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact stress and burnout?

IQ5. What (if any) factors have contributed to stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

IQ6. In what ways (if any) have friends, family members, or university staff contributed to stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

IQ7. What (if any) factors have alleviated stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

IQ8. In what ways (if any) have friends, family members, or university staff alleviated stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

RQ2. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact academic success?

IQ9. What factors have contributed to your academic success during your college years?

IQ10. What factors caused challenges to your academic success during your college years?

RQ3. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact degree attainment?

IQ11. Having gotten to this point near the end of your degree program, what factors have helped you finish your degree?

IQ12. Having gotten to this point near the end of your degree program, were there any factors that made finishing your degree challenging?

RQ4. What do senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution perceive as factors that impact short- and long-term career aspirations?

IQ13. What are your short- and long-term career goals?

IQ14. What factors helped shape your short- and long-term career goals?

IQ15. As you have pursued your career goals, have there been any factors that have made the pursuit of your career goals challenging?

To ensure the validity of the interview protocol, before conducting the study, the researcher asked two individuals familiar with first-generation college students and qualitative research to review the interview questions for clarity and wording as well as alignment with the research questions. Peer reviewer #1 was an Assistant Vice President. The reviewer had 15 years of experience in student affairs and was employed at a Midwestern state university. Peer reviewer #2 was an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator in a graduate program in student affairs with nine years of experience in higher education, teaching, and research and was employed at a Midwestern state university. The reviewers indicated the interview questions were aligned with the research questions. Wording of the interview questions was updated to reflect a more natural, casual conversational tone familiar to college students as suggested by the reviewers.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher submitted a request to conduct the study through the Baker University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on September 29, 2021. The researcher was approved to conduct research from the Baker University IRB committee on October 4,

2021 (see Appendix A). In addition, a request to conduct research was submitted to the IRB at University X on October 5, 2021. Approval was granted from the University X IRB committee on October 7, 2021 (see Appendix B).

Prior to conducting interviews with research participants, two pilot interviews were conducted. Two first-generation students who had recently graduated from the institution participated in the pilot interviews. Pilot interview participants were asked to provide feedback about the clarity of the interview questions, the interview process, and interactions with the interviewer. The researcher recorded the pilot interviews to ensure consistency between interviews and to allow review by the researcher in preparation for the study interviews.

A list of participants meeting the specified criteria was collected from the university student information system at University X. Upon receipt of potential participant information, an email invitation to participate (see Appendix C) was sent to 45 potential participants. The invitation to participate in the study included an overview of the study, the research questions, and information that described how participant confidentiality and anonymity would be assured. Also provided in the invitation to participate was information regarding voluntary participation and an indication that participants could withdraw from participating at any time during the study or could choose to not respond to any interview questions. The amount of time the interview would require, and the assurance there would be no compensation, no risk, and no discomfort from participating in the study was included in the invitation to participate in the study. Prospective participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and that the interviewer would be taking notes during the interview. In addition, potential

participants were informed that a transcript of the interview would be provided to review for accuracy after the interview was completed. The invitation to participate indicated that after the study, participants would have an opportunity to review the findings and share comments with the researcher.

Once interview participants indicated an interest in participating in the study, the researcher contacted each individual to set up a date and time for an interview. Interview sessions were scheduled for 60 minutes at a time of day convenient for participants. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, University X protocols were followed. Participants were given the option to meet face to face with social distancing precautions or to meet through Zoom. The interview began with the researcher asking the participant to sign a consent form (see Appendix D) that included the same information as that provided in the invitation to participate (see Appendix C).

Rubin and Rubin (2012) advised qualitative researchers to establish conversational partnerships with participants built on "trust, understanding, and mutual respect" (p. 92). To begin the interview, the researcher built rapport with each participant through a conversation regarding the progress of the semester and the participant's plans after graduation. Next, four demographic questions were asked of the participants followed by the semi-structured interview questions. As needed, follow-up questions and probes were used to solicit additional details to more fully understand the participant's response to each question. During the interview sessions, the researcher took notes to indicate verbal and nonverbal responses like body language, sighs, laughter, and pauses.

The researcher used a recording device which promoted accuracy in the preparation of interview transcriptions and allow the researcher to focus on the responses,

body language, tone of voice, and engagement of the participant throughout the interview. The identity of each individual was protected by assigning a non-identifying code (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) to each audio recording. The same non-identifying code was also used on each interview transcript as well as data reported to convey the results of the study.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Creswell and Creswell (2018) presented five steps for analyzing qualitative data. The first step is to organize and prepare the data for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the current study, upon completion of the participant interviews, the researcher used NVivo to transcribe the data. The researcher then compared the transcription of each interview to the audio file to correct any errors. Next, the researcher emailed the transcripts to participants asking them to review and correct for accuracy, errors, and omissions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) referred to this process as member checking. After each interview transcript was returned by a participant any changes made were entered on the final draft transcript. The researcher then entered any notes taken during the interview and nonverbal responses like body language, sighs, laughter, and pauses in the margin of the transcript to prepare the data for analysis. To implement Creswell and Creswell's (2018) second step, reading and looking at all the data, the researcher read all of the transcripts several times to gather an overall impression of the responses. Creswell and Creswell's (2018) step three requires coding the data. To implement this step, final transcripts were entered into Dedoose to collate the data. The researcher looked for frequently used words and phrases and reoccurring vocabulary to identify initial concepts from all transcripts. The researcher used Dedoose to notate common or significant

differences in responses. These common words and phrases were then developed into categories. Step four, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), is to generate themes. A review of the codes resulted in the identification of themes across the interview questions. Step five is representing the themes according to Creswell and Creswell (2018). In this step, a sentence or several sentences were developed to represent each theme.

Once the coding was completed and themes were identified, the transcripts and data analysis were submitted to two peer reviewers. The same two peer reviewers who evaluated the interview protocol prior to conducting interviews examined the researcher's coding and theme identification based upon the transcripts. The reviewers concurred that the interpretation of data and identification of themes were accurate. All interview recordings and transcriptions were saved on a jump drive accessible only to the researcher and kept in a locked file. All data were kept for five years and then destroyed.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is a tool that allows researchers to understand and describe the human world of experience (Bashir, Tanveer Afzal, & Azeem, 2008). The validity of the research impacts the ability to extrapolate concepts and theories from the results. Validity in qualitative research means the extent to which the data are plausible, credible, and trustworthy; and thus, can be defended when challenged (Bashir et al, 2008). Two pilot interviews, member checking, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) were used to confirm the accuracy and reliability of the interview results. Two pilot interviews were conducted before beginning the research interview process to assess the interview process and ensure clarity with the interview protocol. Member checking was

used to confirm the accuracy of the research findings by allowing the research participants to review their interview transcript for accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, a peer debriefing was used to support the accuracy and add validity to the analysis of the research data. Two peer reviewers examined the transcripts and the coding and theme identification that resulted from the researcher's analysis of the data. Their concurrence with the data analysis and theme identification supported the credibility of the research.

Researcher's Role

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated qualitative researchers must develop trust with and have a responsibility to protect their research participants while ensuring the integrity of the research. Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated that because the role of the qualitative researcher is to collect data from participants, the identification of the researcher's values, assumptions, and biases must be described. The researcher for this study was currently employed at University X. The institution is a mid-size institution in which employees and enrolled students do not usually encounter each other. The researcher did not personally know or work with the research participants on-campus. The researcher personally attended college as a continuing-generation college student, not as a first-generation college student. The researcher took time to understand the complexities of being a first-generation college student as described by the research participants. To minimize bias in the study, the researcher continually practiced awareness, intentionality, and integrity through maintaining objectivity.

Limitations

"Limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings or on the generalizability of the results" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 133). Three limitations were identified in the current study.

1. Data in the current study relied upon self-reported perceptions of the study participants. The accuracy of data provided to the researcher was dependent on interview participants and their understanding of the questions and truthfulness in articulating a response.

2. Participants may have had biases that may have resulted in partial or exaggerated responses which were out of the researcher's control.

3. Participants in the current study attended one public Midwestern higher education institution. Participant responses may not be generalizable to individuals who attend different higher education institutions.

Summary

This chapter focused on the use of a qualitative research design that engaged participants in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Four research questions guided the study. An interview protocol that included descriptive and demographic, as well as semi-structured interview questions was used to ascertain first-generation college students' perceptions about factors that impact stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. This chapter described the methodology of the study including the research design, sampling procedures, instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, reliability and

trustworthiness, researchers' role, and limitations of the research study. Chapter 4

presents the results of the data analysis.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to gain firsthand perspectives from senior status first-generation college students about factors that impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. A total of 10 participants classified as seniors who were attending University X participated in the study. Chapter 4 includes a summary of demographic and descriptive characteristics of the study participants and the results of the data analysis.

Descriptive Demographics and Participant Backgrounds

Seven female and three male first-generation college students participated in the study. All participants were classified as seniors. Each participant represented a different major and college at University X. Majors included accounting, agriculture (teaching), agri-business, animal science, biology (natural resources), business administration, communication studies, organizational leadership, Spanish, physical education (teaching), and psychology. Two participants were pursuing double majors. Four participants' GPAs ranged from 3.6 to 4.0. Four participants' GPAs were between 3.0 to 3.5, and two participants' GPAs ranged from 2.5 to 2.9. Four participants transferred to University X from two-year institutions, and six participants began studying at University X as a freshman. Eight of the participants indicated they planned to start a full-time job after graduating with their undergraduate degree. Two participants planned to continue their education in graduate school after the completion of their undergraduate degrees. One of the eight participants planning to work after graduation had secured a full-time position at the time of the interview. One of the two participants

planning to enroll in graduate school had been accepted to a master's degree program at the time of the interview.

Two participants in the study indicated their parents had enrolled in post-secondary education but never completed their degrees. Participant 8 stated, "I've had the dream of completing my degree since I was five years old. My parents told me they met while in college. Neither one of them finished." Participant 3 stated, "My family's really supportive of school. My mom came to school and never finished. They really want me to finish, and so they just encourage me." Eight participants indicated neither parent had attended college. The lack of college attendance by parents impacted the support family members provided for some study participants to attend college. Participant 4 shared, "My parents didn't want me to go to college. So they were trying to convince me not to." Participant 7 shared, "Being a first-generation student has been very difficult. I've been having to do everything by myself. My parents have no idea what I'm doing." For some students, the stress of having parents unfamiliar with higher education has broader consequences. Participant 7 acknowledged, "Having an unstable relationship with [my mom] and her being the one I have to put down as my financial aid, if I'm not on her good side, it will take me months before I get my financial aid."

The following section explains themes derived from responses to interview questions. Seven major themes were identified from the analysis of the data: factors that caused stress and burnout, factors that alleviated stress and burnout, factors that made achieving academic success challenging, factors that contributed to academic success, factors that impacted degree attainment, factors that helped shape career aspirations, and factors that made the development of short- and long-term career aspirations challenging.

Direct quotations are included to highlight and demonstrate interview respondents'

perceptions about college experiences that impacted stress and burnout, academic

success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations.

Factors that Contributed to Stress and Burnout

Every participant in the study shared at least one factor that contributed to stress

and burnout during the college years. Participants varied on the types of stress and

burnout they experienced, and at which times during their college experience they felt

more stress and burnout. The most common contributors to stress and burnout were

academics, family, and finances. Most students experienced greater periods of stress and

burnout at the beginning of the college experience and again as they prepared to leave

college and enter the next stage of their lives, either working or attending graduate

school. Participant responses related to academics, family, and finances are provided in

the next three sections.

Academics. Each student interviewed indicated academics played a role in their

levels of stress and burnout. Factors mentioned included the transition from high school-

level courses to college-level courses, including the amount of homework, and study time

needed for college-level classes. A sense of increased academic workload was a factor

related to burnout and stress for five of the 10 respondents. Participant 7 summarized,

When I came to University X as a first-generation student, I just expected it to be

how high school is where they just give you the schedule and you just attend

classes. But here, it's very much being independent and figuring things out for

yourself.

Participant 9 indicated a stress factor was "the workload, especially the transition from high school to college." Participant 5 also expounded on factors contributing to stress and burnout, including "adjusting to the more challenging [college] curriculum, as opposed to high school and meeting those expectations along with deadlines."

Participant 3 recalled,

Professors and teachers, I would say, as far as contributing [to stress and burnout] would be assignments. I feel like this year has just been different. Teachers are assigning a lot more. I'm not used to having it. I have taken at least 15 hours, and in every single one of my classes, I have an assignment due, at least one assignment in every class, each week. That's different for me. I'm not used to that.

Participant 7 indicated,

I have one class that assigns like five different things for the week, and then I have another four classes that are assigning stuff. And I think they [the faculty] think the date they are assigning homework to be set in stone. They won't push it out or anything. And I think teachers have the expectation we are supposed to put education first. And I think a lot of us do try, but we also have a lot of different things we have to accomplish throughout our time at University X, that it is just kind of impossible to put academics first.

Family. Seven students shared that family contributed to stress and burnout while they attended post-secondary education. Parents or siblings of some study participants had enrolled in some form of post-secondary education yet never completed an education credential. Most study participants indicated family members contributed to and

alleviated stress. Many of the first-generation students interviewed have a close connection to family members back home and felt the pull to return home to help and visit family as much as possible. Participant 5 recounted,

> I'm the first one to leave the nest. The first one to leave my small town and all of my siblings. Even though I was 45 minutes away, and that's nothing to some people, but that was kind of far for me personally. I found I was still going home on the weekends instead of staying in my new area because being so close to them. That led me to go back home."

Participant 10 stated,

> Another stressor would be that many people depend on me, especially my family, because they can count on me. So there have been times when I've had to go back home to help them or help them financially however I could. I've just taken some time off from school because I had so many things happen at home. So really, the stress is tied back to my family, which is conflicting because they are also my big support system.

Participant 8 said,

> My dad and I are really close. And the fact that his little girl is off to college is really hard on him. And I put a lot of that pressure on me. So I feel like, even now [as a senior], I still stress out when I don't go home on the weekends or even every other weekend to try to make time for them. I don't want him to think I'm pushing them out of my life because that is not the case.

Finances. College is expensive. First-generation students worry about how they will afford their education. While enrolled as a student, some participants worked one or

more jobs to pay for tuition, fees, and living expenses. Paying for college and working were factors causing stress and burnout as participants were also trying to focus on being full-time students. Participant 7 recalled,

> Being a first-generation student has been very difficult. I've been having to do everything by myself. I've also been having to multitask with schoolwork and working to make ends meet. I've also had to do financial aid all by myself. I do have one job. I'm supposed to be part-time, but it will range. Sometimes I will have 20 hours a week, or sometimes I'll have up to 40.

Participant 2 explained, "My freshman year, I did not enjoy college because I think I ended up being way too busy taking a job. That stressed me out, even though I only worked 20 hours a week." For study participants who worked, deciding how to manage time and responsibilities caused stress. Participant 5 recounted a scenario faced commonly as a student, "I have to work today. I have a test today. I don't have enough time. Should I call out sick?"

Factors that Alleviated Stress and Burnout

First-generation college students who participated in the current study experienced stress and burnout due to a variety of factors. Study respondents also indicated several factors that helped alleviate the stress and burnout they felt due to their enrollment in higher education. For all study participants, campus engagement, including curricular or co-curricular involvement was a primary factor in persevering through challenges created by stress and burnout. Participants also indicated support received from various campus services helped them during times they were overwhelmed.

Relationships with family, friends, faculty and advisors were other critical factors in students getting relief from the challenges of higher education enrollment.

Campus engagement. Participants shared experiences in which involvement and engagement on-campus helped mitigate feelings of stress and burnout they were experiencing. From participating in and holding leadership positions in on-campus organizations, utilizing support services, and participating in internships, these experiences helped students feel a connection to peers, faculty members, campus, and the community. These experiences also provided students with experiences they may not have otherwise had the opportunity to participate in as first-generation college students.

Participant 4 said, "I was on the judging team. And so it wasn't a huge team, but we got really close. We hung out a lot. We got to travel a lot. It was fun, and I made a lot of friends doing that." Participant 6 indicated, "The student organization I am most involved with is Circle K. I like it because it's super big. There are chapters from the state to the international level. I'm part of this district, so I'm involved with different chapters across the state. I get to work with students from other universities which is pretty cool."

Campus services have also helped first-generation students alleviate stress and burnout. Participant 7 stated,

> I think the counseling center has helped a lot. I didn't attend my first year, but my second, third, and fourth, I attended. It's helped me because the counselors there can hear you out and help with whatever stresses you have. I think it's very, very helpful."

Participant 5 shared, "All the career preparation activities at University X have been helpful. Either mock interviews, career fairs, the clothing closet, and professional headshots, all this stuff would be on my own if University X didn't have that. That was really helpful."

Co-curricular experiences were also mentioned by participants. Participant 6 recounted another stress-relieving experience, "My internships. I worked at two different non-profits. One of my biggest passions is to help people. I can use these experiences from my college career to help my future." Three out of 10 participants indicated the support and guidance they received during their freshman year participating in a living and learning community helped them learn more about university life and helped create a group of friends they continue to connect with, even as seniors. Participant 6 shared, "I am so thankful I joined the learning community. Because we were first-generation [students] we were not scared to tell each other we didn't know what was going on. We were 100% sure none of us knew what was going on in college." Participant 3 indicated,

> The learning community is where I met my current roommate and a lot of my current friends too. I liked it because it was small. I came from a small school, a small class, and our learning community was small. We hung out all the time, so we're still good friends.

Family and friends. For many study participants, family was a factor that added to the stress and burnout experienced during college, yet family also alleviated stress and burnout during college. The support of friends also helped respondents manage the challenging aspects of stress and burnout. Participant 10, who indicated her family was a primary source of stress for her, noted when describing factors alleviating stress and

burnout, "My family helps a lot, mainly more emotionally, I would say. I also get a lot of support from my friends. Emotionally too, and socially. It's really good to hang out with them." Participant 3 shared, "My family is really supportive about school. They really want me to finish. So they just encourage me. Texting once or twice throughout the week or calling me." Participant 7 recounted, "My significant other has helped me, because usually, with what is going on in the household, he's able to help clean. That way I can focus. Having the house messy - that definitely adds more stress."

For other participants, the support of friends has helped them alleviate stress and burnout. Participant 2 recounted, "I made a connection with one friend, and that opened up the door to meeting other people and getting involved in a campus ministry organization. They would share their faith. They built me up and encouraged me." Participant 8 noted,

> I guess my best friend. Sometimes she adds stress to me because I feel like I have to go and do things with her. But I realized that is not the case here. I could sit around and do nothing and be fine or we can go walk around or go shopping. I hate shopping but sometimes it is nice to get out.

Faculty and advisors. The relationships study participants developed with their faculty and academic advisors was an additional factor in alleviating stress and burnout. Participant 3 noted,

> Our teachers' help [relieve stress and burnout] too. Teachers that really understand. I have an accounting teacher right now. She's phenomenal. She tells us I've been a college student, and I know what it's like. The way she formats her tests are the way she would want to take a test. She doesn't trick anyone on it.

And she's not the only one that I've had like that. In my experience keeping good communication with teachers really, really helps. And forming a bond with them."

Participant 4 shared, "As far as the college staff goes, they were great. Once they found out my [first-generation] situation, they were always more than willing to help, and they always sent me to the right person to get help." Participant 7 stated,

The advisor that I have now has helped me a ton, and she's very supportive. And it makes it easier when I have to register for classes because she gives me the rundown of what I need to be taking instead of having me run around trying to find out what I need to take for the semester. I have had different advisors that weren't the best at that. So having her definitely changed the way I view advisors overall.

Factors that Made Achieving Academic Success Challenging

Study participants talked about factors that made the achievement of academic success challenging for them. Leading factors that contributed to academic success challenges included amount of study time and course delivery format. Several participants indicated the time they spend studying to receive good grades in coursework is more than their peers. Financial constraints were also mentioned as a factor that impacted succeeding academically. The following two sections elaborate on participant responses related to amount of study time and course delivery format, and students' financial constraints.

Amount of study time and course delivery format. Nine out of 10 study respondents indicated the amount of time spent studying and course delivery format

impacted academic performance in classes. Participants indicated the time they spend studying, in relation to their continuing-generation peers, was a challenge. Participant 1 said,

> I'm [feeling] a little personal about this, so let's do an example. Somebody who wants to get an A on the test, they just have to study for two hours. Somebody who wants to get the same grade on the test has to study for four hours or another person might have to study for eight hours. I didn't think it was true, but I'm the person who has to study eight hours to get an A on the test. That is quite a bit of a challenge.

Participant 2 shared a similar perspective, "I'm personally just not a fast worker. I'm pretty slow compared to when they [other peers] do their schoolwork, so it takes a lot of time."

For some study participants, technology and the pandemic caused challenges as they navigated moving from on-campus classes to online/hybrid courses and now back to on-campus classes. For study participants, the pandemic took place during their junior and senior years of coursework. Being students primarily in on-campus courses, pivoting to online courses for half a semester, and then to either face-to-face classes or hybrid classes for the duration of the next academic year was challenging. Participant 8 recalled, "The first semester we went home, I had chemistry that semester, and I was like, oh boy, this is stressing me out. I had to figure out how to teach myself. So basically, it felt like teaching yourself." Participant 10, when thinking about academic challenges during college, mentioned, "Of course, the pandemic." Participant 3 described challenges regarding each faculty member's personal ability to use technology,

I have some teachers that are open to using Zoom when we are not here, but

especially in my department, they're [faculty] like an older generation, and they

don't know how to use some of the newer technology. They don't understand it.

Then even sometimes, assignments or things with the course management

system doesn't work, and if it's down, what do we do?

Financial constraints. Like academic challenges, participants also mentioned

financial constraints as factors that contributed to stress, burnout, and academic

challenges. For five of the 10 participants, determining how to pay for classes while

attending school was challenging for their academic success. Participant 6 stated,

I'm an undocumented [student]. So I don't qualify for any financial help. I have

to keep applying for scholarships. My parents help me out a lot. But, they also

have their life, and they have to give thousands of dollars to me. I know all the

sacrifices they are doing, and I feel bad to ask them for help. But, I think paying

for college is one of my biggest challenges.

Participant 4 recalled,

College is expensive. Thankfully, I had people point me in the right direction to

get scholarships, and I had my high school counselor walk me through the

FASFA. But that was a big one. My parents didn't want me to go to college so

they wouldn't have helped pay for it. So I did all that on my own as well. So I

had to go to work, on top of classes and stuff.

Participant 7 indicated, "The triangle of school, work, and education has been very, very

challenging. It's probably one of the hardest things I've had to do in my whole life."

Factors that Contributed to Academic Success

At least one factor that contributed to academic success during college years was shared by each participant. Curricular and co-curricular involvement and career readiness competencies were both factors each respondent indicated contributed to academic success. Participants varied in the types of curricular and co-curricular involvement and career readiness competencies that contributed to academic success. Seven out of 10 participants indicated satisfaction with their degree program also played a role in their academic success. The next three sections elaborate on participant responses related to curricular and co-curricular involvement, career readiness competencies, and satisfaction with the degree program.

Curricular and co-curricular involvement. All 10 study respondents listed curricular and co-curricular involvement as one factor that contributed to academic success. Participant 9 indicated, "I think being part of a [student] organization really helped me become more competent in figuring things out [with my degree program] and staying on track in school and stuff." Participant 7 recalled,

> I feel like being involved in groups and clubs when I first came in helped alleviate some of that stress because it opened doors and opportunities for me. I think if I wouldn't have joined these groups and clubs when I first started, I wouldn't have known what to do [to be successful academically].

Participant 8 indicated, "Being able to do research and publish definitely has to make you feel satisfied and drive your academic performance." Participant 4 recalled, "Just knowing where to go to get help, especially my first two years. I was clueless and I was

embarrassed by that. And now, I'm still a little bit clueless sometimes, but I know that it's ok to not have all the answers and know where to go."

Interaction with faculty was another factor that contributed to participant academic success. Participant 10 indicated, "I'm used to working with many different teachers and educators because I play sports and everything. So I like the interactive component. I feel really comfortable with that." Participant 7 said, "My personality had one of the biggest impacts in the classroom. I'm always trying to participate."

Career readiness competencies. For each participant, building and using their career readiness competencies during their college path contributed to their academic success. Six participants indicated their communication skills developed during college and aided in their academic success. Participant 2 recalled, "I'm learning a lot, especially through my student teaching experience, but also my classes. It has opened the doors to be more outgoing and work on my communication skills." Participant 6 acknowledged, "I've learned to have conversations with people. And before that, I didn't really know how to keep up the conversation." Participant 8 indicated, "I'm still not the best public speaker, but I definitely feel more comfortable."

Five study participants indicated developing and utilizing professionalism assisted in their academic success during their college years. Participant 10 remarked, "I think it was something that was instilled in me in high school. Talent is not enough. You need to work hard. In the Hispanic community, it is a sentiment that is common. Working hard is very important." Participant 1 similarly stated, "You just put in the work." Participant 2 recounted,

I've always been disciplined in my schoolwork. I don't think I'd ever say I was

someone who was just someone who got things or was just naturally intelligent. I

don't think I ever scored high on standardized tests. I think mine was more a

sense of discipline. Of just getting stuff done, and thankfully, I think that's a big

part of college.

Participant 4 recalled,

Both my parents are really hard workers, and they made sure that me and my

siblings worked hard too. We were never lazy kids, and they just showed us.

They taught us how to work hard. And so I think that contributed a lot. I would

never have gotten to where I am if I had been taught it's ok to be lazy or just sit

back, and it will happen for you.

Satisfaction with degree program. For seven of the 10 study participants,

finding satisfaction with their degree program and faculty contributed to their academic

success. When asked what factors contributed to academic satisfaction, Participant 7

postulated, "I think they [satisfaction with the degree program] and academic success go

hand in hand. I think you can't have overall academic success without the other."

Participant 3 said,

The classes that go along with my degree. I'm engaged, I want to learn about it,

so it just makes it easier for me to learn and concentrate on that. Also,

communication with teachers. If you have a question, just being open and asking

if you don't understand.

Participant 8 indicated,

> The professors, really. There have been a couple of them. I can go to them all the
> time. They will help me out with anything. I am grateful to Dr. X because we did
> all this research stuff last year. It's awesome to think I'm going to be a published
> writer before I graduate.

Factors that Impacted Degree Attainment

Degree attainment for first-generation college students can be formidable.
Participants recalled several factors that had a constructive or challenging effect on their
degree attainment. Eight of 10 study respondents indicated a factor that contributed to
degree attainment was their determination. For some students, finishing their degree and
finding a good job has been their determination. For other students, completing a college
degree will fulfill a life-long dream. Two factors were mentioned that made degree
attainment challenging, including lack of support and transitioning to a new stage of life.
The following three paragraphs elaborate on participant responses related to
determination, lack of support, and the challenges surrounding transitioning to a new
phase of life and how these factors affect degree attainment.

Determination. For all 10 of the senior first-generation study participants, the
drive to finish their undergraduate degree is resolute. Each participant had a different
reason for striving to reach the finish line. Yet, the goal is the same for each participant.
Get to the finish line and graduate with an undergraduate credential. Participant 5
described a personal perspective of determination, "If I start something, I want to finish
it. It makes no sense that I could tell myself, 'You're just three classes away. Just drop it
and come back when you're ready.' To give up when I'm 90% there, no." Participant 1

mentioned, "What motivates me is the fact that I am close." Participant 8 indicated, "I am ready to get that degree. I can see it right at the finish line now. And I'm going to keep pushing until I get it done."

For Participant 6, finances have been a motivation to stay the course. "Really, I don't quit because I would end up paying so much money." For other study participants, the drive to make money and work after college is the force keeping them from giving up on their goal of graduation. Participant 10 indicated, "I want to have a job that I really like and that I look forward to going to. Participant 8 echoed, "I'm ready to start working. I've been ready since I was 16 or 17. Actually, I've been working since I was little."

Three participants shared their determination has been spurred on by faculty members. Participant 9 recalled,

> I talked to my degree analyst and my advisor at least once or twice a semester to make sure I'm on the right track [with classes]. I was making sure I had [taken] all the courses I needed and that I knew what courses I had left to take.

Participant 4 said,

> My advisor is amazing. Last semester I was sitting in his office at least once a week trying to get help and figure out what I was going to be doing. And he was so patient. He helped me figure out all of the [academic] stuff when I had no idea what I was doing.

Participant 3 indicated,

> Having professors willing to help me with cover letters and [serving as] references is helpful. In class, we're meeting with different companies that have

job openings, and they're explaining what they would expect from someone outside of college. That's been helpful to realize it's not going to be as bad as I think or as hard when I get out. There are options out there.

Lack of support. Six study participants responded a lack of support made degree attainment difficult. Three students indicated advising and faculty made finishing their degree challenging. Participant 1 stated,

I transferred from community college, which a lot of people do, and there are classes that I've taken and still need to take to sit for the CPA exam, and I can't do that in four years. So we are working out the kinks with the classes I have left.

Participant 7 recalled,

So every college student has those experiences where they have a teacher who is not great or maybe they're just not compatible. For the most part, I had really, really good teachers. Everybody has that one teacher where they just don't understand what that teacher expects or how they're just not compatible. And I had a couple of those times where a teacher and I just would not mesh well. And so I really struggled in the class.

Participant 3 recounted,

Advising. I know, especially right now, we're in a transition. I've been lucky to have a good advisor, but I have also been really proactive, as far as knowing what classes I've needed to take, and when I can take them. In Department X, and I know this can be true in other departments, some classes are only offered a certain semester. You have to make sure you're getting that class in and that you're

passing it so that you don't have to retake it and miss graduation or something like that. But I also did it myself, and then I was in contact with my degree analysts.

For other participants, their family has been a challenge to their degree attainment. Participant 8 indicated, "The family factor has been a challenge to degree attainment." Participant 10 shared,

So when I think of those things that may have stopped me from getting my degree, [it] goes back to my family. Like I said, it's like a conflicted relationship. I love them. But I also recognize that maybe my education would have been smoother or easier if they just had more knowledge of getting their life together.

Transition to a new stage of life. Four study participants indicated they felt transitioning to a new stage of life while in the final months of taking college courses has played a role in academic success challenges they have faced. Participant 5 indicated,

I am not the person I was at the beginning [of college]. I feel like I'm over the whole college scene and being associated with that. I'm trying to get past that. I'm in an awkward stage where I'm in a new career and job, but I'm still finishing my degree. It's just been mentally weird for me.

Participant 8 recalled her summer internship experience, while overall positive, was a challenge in the fact she had a real-world experience for a few months and experienced what working life is like. "[The internship] was definitely an adjustment. The first week or two of my onboarding, what do I do? I don't have time for anything now. I didn't have to, but I juggled home, working, and making time with my parents." Participant 6 faces a different struggle in transitioning to a new life.

The fact that I'm undocumented. Am I going to be able to pursue what I have

worked for? I went through my four years, and I know the challenges I went

through. To know that if I'm not going to be able to pursue what I want, would

my sacrifices be just a waste of time? That's just my biggest challenge is to know

what is going to happen after [graduation].

Factors that Helped Shape Career Aspirations

As they reflected on their career aspirations, study participants were split on

whether these developed in college or before they attended college. The following two

sections describe participant perceptions of how career aspirations were developed before

and during college enrollment.

Aspirations developed before college. For four of the 10 respondents, career

aspirations were developed through their family and childhood experiences. Participant 5

revealed, "I don't mean to be cliché, but I've always felt like [I've known] even as a little

kid. I remember counting my change in a jar and setting money goals for myself."

Participant 1 recalled, "When you're like me, and you have a dad that always asks you to

think about stuff and think about finances and ways to stabilize yourself and plan for the

future. Sometimes I don't think I'm thinking about it enough." Participant 8 recalled,

"My dad growing up was in the feedlot business, and then we were in the ranch business

and seeing what that was like, and I loved it. I realized I really love cattle and horses, and

I want that someday." Participant 3 added,

We have a family friend. She's a nutritionist. I've been following her, and then,

when I was a sophomore or junior in high school, I talked to a nutritionist out of

Nebraska. He was not encouraging. He told me I was going into the wrong field.

It was just very discouraging, and it just upset me. I talked with our family friend

a couple of years ago, and she told me her experience. She was still encouraging

me to go, but she was letting me know all the other factors I need to consider.

Aspirations developed while in college. For six of the 10 respondents, career

aspirations were developed because of experiences and involvement during college.

Participant 9 stated,

I had a professor who brought up [the career] in class. I've had a few professors

from Department X bring it up as well. It's been really interesting. So I looked

into in and decided it would be something I could do.

Participant 10 said, "My short-term career goal, [working in] higher education is the most

prominent to me right now, being shaped by my working on campus in a very intense on-

campus job." Participant 6 indicated,

I want to work in a non-profit because I've been involved with Circle K. I love

volunteering for people and helping. I love to volunteer with someone else, and I

love to see people's faces. I help them. They are so thankful.

Participant 7 recalled,

I never really wanted to become a teacher, but I think becoming a university

professor is different than just teaching in general. Because of my experience of

having other professors that weren't really trying to teach the material, I want to

eventually become a professor and help those that have the same struggles as I do.

I will actually pay attention to their needs and also help them succeed

academically.

Participant 4 confessed,

> I always thought that therapists and counselors were kind of fruity people, and I
>
> didn't think they were really necessary and I just wanted to teach agriculture. I
>
> didn't see the point for anyone to go to a counselor. But then this past year, I got
>
> involved in a campus ministry here and became friends with a girl who has
>
> severely struggled with anxiety and depression. And I got to know her story and
>
> what she's been through and seeing how she'd been helped by her counselors. I
>
> realize that they're actually very necessary people and they do a lot of good and
>
> they can help a lot of people. So it was actually because of this friend and what
>
> she'd gone through that I wanted to be able to help people like her.

**Factors that Made Development of Short- and Long-term Career Aspirations
Challenging**

As individuals from each generation graduate from college they embark upon an
unknown future. For students graduating during the Covid era, the future may seem a bit
more daunting. The pandemic changed talent acquisition strategies used by corporations
and businesses, including more businesses focusing on internal hiring (Maurer, 2021).
The participants in the current study talked about their concerns for graduating and
beginning new pathways after completing their undergraduate degrees. Participant 10
indicated,

> Another challenge would be kind of how the workforce is moving right now and
>
> how positions are open for a really long time. Others are opening every once in a
>
> while. So I don't want to take a position, and then I wish I did this [other
>
> position] because I don't like to waste people's time. Another challenge would

just be the timing, you know, because a lot of positions are contract based and

they very well could be in the process of being posted. But I'm a planner, so I

want to know what I'll be applying for in the next month or so.

When asked about challenges to short- and long-term career aspirations,

Participant 9 revealed, "I think the [application process] for my first job will be difficult

to get through." Participant 2 recognized additional struggles in the future.

I think life's just hard in general.   As I graduate now, I think my parents are

going to take a step back from helping [me] as they were financially. In a way, I

am going to take the full burden of being an adult.   They said that I will have to

start taking my own steps financially as I start making the decisions of living on

my own, especially if I do end up living somewhere away from them and so just

the challenge of learning about living independently.

Participant 6 acknowledged,

It is just the lack of knowledge of what's out there because I cannot really go and

ask my parents. They will never be able to help me on how to apply for a job.

For me being first generation is pretty stressful just because I feel like we just owe

it to ourselves to see what's going to happen. We don't have any expectations, just

from what we see in movies. So it's hard.

Participant 4 indicated, "Well, I think it's going to be challenging no matter what.

But, I guess I don't see it as more difficult than anything that I've already done."

Participant 8 said that during college and now with graduation, the financial unknowns

are challenging. "Part of all the challenges that have come with traveling, career

aspirations, and even coming to college is money."

Summary

      This chapter included a summary of the results of the data analysis of the interviews conducted with 10 senior status first-generation college students at University X. All participants were classified as seniors with each participant representing a different major and college at University X. Questions focused on factors related to stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study, findings related to the literature, and conclusions.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

The current study investigated the perceptions of senior status, first-generation college students enrolled at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution (University X) about factors that impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Chapter 5 is organized into three major sections. The first section provides a study summary that includes an overview of the research problem, purpose statement and research questions, methodology, and major findings. A second section describes how findings in the current study are related to the literature. The final section states conclusions that include implications for action, recommendations for future research, and closing remarks.

Study Summary

This section summarizes the study, including an overview of the problem. The purpose statement and research questions utilized in the study are identified. This section concludes with a review of the methodology and the major findings.

Overview of the problem. According to Stolzeberg et al. (2018), the number of first-generation students enrolling in post-secondary education continues to rise. The graduation rate for first-generation students lags behind the graduation rate for continuing-generation peers (PNPI, 2021). Forbus et al. (2011) contended that university administrators need to understand the unique life experiences and academic supports needed for first-generation students. Tate et al. (2015) stressed the need for additional research focused on first-generation college students to increase understanding about the complexities surrounding this unique group of college students. Limited research studies

have examined perceptions of first-generation college students at the end of their collegiate journey about factors that have impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. With an increasing number of first-generation college students enrolling in post-secondary education, additional research is needed to understand the experiences of this population of students who are the first in their families to attend and graduate from college.

Purpose statement and research questions. Four purposes and four research questions guided this study. The study investigated participants' perceptions about factors that impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations during the college years.

Review of the methodology. A qualitative phenomenological research design with a social constructivist framework was chosen for this study. Phenomenological research focuses on the interpretation of the lived experiences of the research participants. This process required the researcher to understand the complexities of being a first-generation college student as described by the research participants through focusing on the participant's experiences. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), qualitative research interviewing allows the participants to share meaningful experiences and enables the researcher to clarify and probe for deeper meaning. The purposes and research questions focused on investigating the perceptions of senior status, first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution (University X) about factors that impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Upon receiving approval to conduct the study from the Baker University and University X IRB committees (see Appendix A and

Appendix B), a list of senior status, first-generation college students was obtained from University X. Emails were sent to 45 students inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Ten students agreed to participate in the study. A semi-structured interview with four demographic questions and 11 open-ended interview questions was conducted with each participant.

The interviews occurred either face to face or through Zoom. Interviews were scheduled during weeks 9 through 12 of the 16-week fall 2021 semester. Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy in transcribing them. The recordings were transcribed using NVivo. Each transcript was assigned an anonymous code (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) to preserve confidentiality. After the transcript for each interview was prepared, member checking of the transcript was completed by each participant. Following the transcription and member checking, Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five steps were implemented to analyze the data.

Major findings. Seven themes were identified through the qualitative data analysis:

1. Factors that contributed to stress and burnout.

2. Factors that alleviated stress and burnout.

3. Factors that made achieving academic success challenging.

4. Factors that contributed to academic success.

5. Factors that impacted degree attainment.

6. Factors that helped shape career aspirations.

7. Factors that made short- and long-term career aspirations challenging.

All participants in the study shared at least one factor that contributed to stress and burnout during their time in college. Although the timing of when stress and burnout occurred for each participant was different, at some point during their college years, all students experienced stress or burnout. Major factors contributing to stress and burnout for the senior status first-generation college students included academic, family, and financial concerns. Academic factors increasing stress and burnout for participants included the transition from high school-level courses to college-level courses, including the amount of homework, and study time needed for college-level classes. Many study participants were the first in their family to attend post-secondary education which made it difficult to seek guidance about challenges experienced in college from family members. Seven of the 10 study respondents have a close connection to family members back home and felt the pull to return home to help and visit family as much as possible. Paying for college and working were financial factors causing stress and burnout as participants were also trying to focus on being full-time students.

Participants also identified several factors that alleviated stress and burnout during their college journey. Engagement in campus activities, relationships with family, friends, faculty, and advisors helped alleviate stress and burnout. Engagement in co-curricular activities such as participating in living and learning communities, student organizations, and internships helped some participants learn valuable leadership skills which alleviated stress and burnout. Emotional encouragement and relationships with family and friends also helped study participants alleviate stress and burnout. Similarly, support and strong relationships with faculty and advisors who helped participants navigate the often-complex world of higher education helped alleviate stress and burnout.

Factors that made academic success challenging included the amount of study time and course delivery format, and financial constraints. Participants indicated the amount of time they studied to receive the same grades as their peers was considerably higher. Technology and the pandemic caused academic challenges for some study participants as they navigated moving from on-campus classes to online/hybrid courses and then back to on-campus classes. While participants indicated finances contributed to stress and burnout, this factor was also identified as a factor that impacted academic success. Financial constraints for students included determining how they would pay for college while also studying full-time.

Factors contributing to students' academic success included curricular and co-curricular involvement, building and utilizing career readiness competencies, and satisfaction with their degree program. The curricular and co-curricular involvement theme is similar to campus engagement, which was a leading cause of alleviating stress and burnout in these first-generation student study participants. All 10 study participants listed curricular and co-curricular involvement as one factor that contributed to academic success. Joining and holding leadership positions in student organizations, conducting research, creating relationships with faculty, and involvement inside and outside the classroom were cited as factors that contributed to academic success.

Building and using career readiness competencies during their degree program was another factor that contributed to study participants' academic success. Six of the 10 respondents indicated their communication skills developed during college and contributed to their academic success. Five of the 10 participants indicated developing and utilizing professionalism during their degree program, including working hard and

being disciplined with homework, assisted in their academic success during their undergraduate years of study. The final factor contributing to academic success was the study participants' satisfaction with their academic degree program. One study participant mentioned satisfaction with the degree program and academic success go hand in hand and stated, "You can't have one without the other."

Eight out of the 10 participants indicated determination was a leading factor in degree attainment. Some participants reported their determination to complete an undergraduate degree was a life-long dream. For other participants, their drive to complete a degree was fueled by the hope of finding a good job after graduation. Two study participants also mentioned challenges with advisors and the advising process was a factor that impacted degree attainment. Incompatibility with faculty teaching courses was an additional factor in degree attainment. Completing professional work experiences while also completing college classes, the uncertain future for undocumented students, and transitioning to a new stage of life were additional factors that impacted degree attainment.

Participants in the study were split on how career aspirations were formed. Four out of the 10 participants reported that career aspirations were shaped before enrollment in post-secondary education. These participants learned about future career fields from family and friends. For six out of 10 research participants, career aspirations were formed while in college. For all participants in the study, the biggest challenge to reaching their career aspirations was an unknown future. All study participants reported they were worried about the future as they transition to a new stage of post-college life.

Life and the upcoming job search were reported as daunting for these first-generation

students graduating during the Covid era.

Findings Related to the Literature

The stress levels college students experience in college continue to rise (ACHA,

2019; Helmbrecht & Ayars, 2021). As college students advance through their degree

programs toward graduation, choosing a major and career path, planning for the future,

finding jobs, and financial concerns can create additional stress (Beiter et al., 2015;

Ghosh & Fouad, 2017). Additional stressors for first-generation students can also result

from financial pressures, family, and part-time work obligations (Garriott & Nisle, 2018)

as well as academic performance (Craft Defreitas & Rinn, 2013; Mehta et al., 2011;

Upah, 2017; Vega, 2016), progress toward degree completion (Cataldi et al., 2018;

Martinez, et al., 2009; PNPI, 2021), and clarifying career aspirations (RTI International,

2021a). Senior status, first-generation college students participating in the current study

indicated these same sentiments as they related their experiences pursuing their

undergraduate degrees. All 10 participants in the current study indicated they had

experienced stress and burnout during their four years of college. The timing of when

during college study participants experienced stress and burnout varied, but major factors

contributing to stress and burnout included academics, family, and finances.

All study participants indicated academics played a role in their stress and burnout

at some point during their college journey. Karaman et al. (2019) found academic

coursework adds stress to college students. For some participants in the current study,

academic stress was experienced during the transition from high school to college

classes. These first-generation college students expected college to be similar to high

school regarding academic expectations but soon found out that was not the case. Upper-level courses and numerous assignments in every class created stress and burnout for other study respondents. Study participants indicated faculty don't always take into consideration homework assigned in other classes or that students have other responsibilities outside of college, which impacts the completion of assignments by expected deadlines.

Seven of the 10 study participants cited family concerns as a reason for feeling stress and burnout in college. Researchers (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Holden et al., 2021; Irlbeck et al., 2014; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021) have indicated that first-generation students are more susceptible to stress and burnout due to several factors including family support, a greater concern about finances, and a need to work part-time or full-time while taking courses. Nine of the 10 study participants indicated they have close relationships with family and felt the pull to go back home as much as possible to spend time with and support family members. Five out of 10 participants indicated finances caused stress and burnout in college. One participant related a part-time job was supposed to involve 20 hours a week, but it was not uncommon for working hours to be extended to 30 or even 40 hours a week.

DeAngelo and Franke (2016) reported that first-generation students thrive at an institution committed to their engagement. Garriott and Nisle (2018) and Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021) found first-generation college students who utilize several different student support initiatives offered on campuses have lower stress levels. The participants in the current study indicated the use of several campus engagement and support services

helped alleviate stress and burnout. The campus supports included joining and holding leadership positions in student organizations, utilizing counseling and career services, and participating in internships.

LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) reported first-generation college students listed family as one of the most critical support systems in their enrollment and persistence in college. Irlbeck et al. (2014) concluded that most first-generation students' families supported their college attendance but lacked knowledge of the higher education system and procedures. Participants in the current study indicated the family unit was both a factor causing stress and burnout and a factor related to alleviating stress and burnout. When sharing how the family has helped alleviate stress and burnout, participants indicated their family members were supportive of their attendance at college and encouraged them to continue enrollment. However, respondents reported that family didn't know about or understand the specific situations students were facing since parent and sibling attendance at college was limited or non-existent.

According to the First-Generation Foundation (2020), academic and financial challenges limit first-generation college students academic success and degree attainment. Lee and Mueller (2014) reported that first-generation students relied more on student loans to participate in higher education than their continuing-generation peers. This same conclusion was reiterated by AIR (2020). Nine of the 10 current study participants cited academic challenges, including spending more time studying than peers, as factors that contributed to struggling with academic success and degree attainment. For five of the 10 students, determining how to pay for classes while attending school also posed challenges for academic success while enrolled in post-

secondary education. Participant 6 shared, "I'm an undocumented [student]. So I don't qualify for any financial help." Participant 4 recalled,

> College is expensive. Thankfully, I had people point me in the right direction to get scholarships, and I had my high school counselor walk me through the FASFA. But that was a big one. My parents didn't want me to go to college, so they wouldn't have helped pay for it. So I did all that on my own as well. So I had to go to work, on top of classes and stuff.

> Participant 7 indicated, "The triangle of school, work, and education has been very, very challenging. It's probably one of the hardest things I've had to do in my whole life."

Several factors in and outside the classroom contribute to academic success for undergraduate students. The AACU (n.d.) researched and developed essential learning outcomes used to define the knowledge and skills students gain after completing a liberal education. Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning skills comprise the competencies college students need to prepare for success after graduation and are the foundation of the essential learning outcomes (AACU, n.d.). Current study participants indicated their academic success was developed through curricular and co-curricular experiences, which heightened their knowledge of intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning skills. All 10 respondents in the current study listed curricular and co-curricular involvement as one factor contributing to academic success. Top responses related to developing essential learning outcomes from current study participants

included participation in student organizations, research, and rich faculty interactions. Six participants indicated the development of their communication skills during college aided in their academic success. Participant 6 shared, "I've learned to have conversations with people." Participant 8 indicated, "I'm still not the best public speaker, but I definitely feel more comfortable." Five students indicated developing and utilizing professionalism assisted in their academic success during their educational path. Participant 10 remarked, "Talent is not enough. You need to work hard." Participant 1 similarly stated, "You just put in the work."

Stress and mental health concerns, as well as optimism and pessimism levels have been shown to influence life satisfaction in college students (Holinka, 2015; Tuckwiller & Dardick, 2018). For seven of the 10 current study participants, finding satisfaction and feeling optimistic about their degree program and faculty contributed to their academic success. When asked what factors contributed to academic success, Participant 7 postulated, "I think [satisfaction with the degree program] and academic success go hand in hand. I think you can't have overall academic success without the other." Participant 8 indicated, "I am grateful because we did all this research stuff last year. It's awesome to think I'm going to be a published writer before I graduate."

Vega (2016) found that successful first-generation college students feel a high level of support from college personnel, family, and friends. This support has contributed to their persistence in college (Vega, 2016). Three current study participants shared that their determination and persistence to finish a degree was due to supportive and helpful faculty members and university staff. Other current study participants indicated the support and help they received from degree analysts to confirm they were taking the right

classes and on track to finish was invaluable to their persistence in college to degree attainment. Advisors also played a role by helping first-generation students understand the nuances of higher education, including the difference between general education courses and courses for their degree and steps in the enrollment process. Students also shared that faculty who provided career mentoring and support helped them better understand expectations for the workforce and eased apprehensions about transitioning to a new stage of life.

Researchers have identified significant life transitional events, such as leaving home, becoming more autonomous and self-sufficient, and identifying career pathways as sources of stress for students (Baghurst & Kelley, 2014; Martin, 2021). Researchers have also found college students with a normal career development trajectory experienced high levels of career anxiety (Pisark et al., 2017). Pisark et al. (2017) identified seven themes of career anxiety: general symptoms of anxiety, existential concerns, pressure, lack of career guidance, cognitive distortions, social comparisons, and economic and occupational uncertainty. All respondents in the current study expressed anxiety about transitioning from college to life after college and what the future holds. Eismann (2016) compared the post-graduation plans for first-generation and continuing-generation students. Twenty-three percent of each population of students planned to continue education and 60% of each group planned to enter the workforce. In the current study, participants' post-graduation plans mirrored Eismann's (2016) research with 20% of participants (2 of 10) planning to enroll in a graduate program upon undergraduate degree completion. Eighty percent of current study participants (8 of 10) planned to enter the workforce upon graduating with their undergraduate degree. Study participants also

shared apprehensions regarding economic and occupational uncertainty as they embark on the next step of their journey. Participant 10 indicated, "A challenge would be kind of how the workforce is moving right now and how positions are open for a really long time. Others are opening every once while." Participant 9 revealed, "I think the [application process] for my first job will be difficult to get through." Participant 6 acknowledged, "It is just the lack of knowledge of what's out there. Because I cannot really go and ask my parents. They will never be able to help me on how to apply for a job. For me being first-generation is pretty stressful."

For other study participants, finding autonomy and becoming self-sufficient has been challenging in terms of career aspirations. Participant 2 recognized additional struggles in the future. "I think life's just hard in general. As I graduate now, I think my parents are going to take a step back from helping [me] as much as they were financially. In a way, I am going to take the full burden of being an adult." Participant 4 indicated, "Well, I think it's going to be challenging no matter what." Participant 8 shared, "Part of all the challenges that have come with traveling, career aspirations, and even coming to college is money."

Conclusions

This study examined perceptions of senior status, first-generation college students enrolled at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution (University X) about factors that contributed to stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Ten participants responded to interview protocol questions. This section includes implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Implications for action. Participant responses to interview questions in the current study provided in-depth information about factors that impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. The results of this study have implications for continued improvements to support first-generation college students in factors relating to stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations.

Senior status first-generation study participants indicated that both academic and financial concerns contributed to stress, burnout, and academic success challenges faced during their academic journey. Higher education leaders must consider unique challenges faced by first-generation students as they navigate their academic program and ensure targeted support services are offered to strategically support this population of college students. Study participants mentioned a lack of knowledge in the difference between high school and college-level courses. As these study participants continued through their degree program, they indicated they were unprepared for the rigors of upper-level courses. Institutions can help support first-generation students with these challenges by ensuring advisors, faculty, and support staff are aware of the unique challenges encountered by first-generation students. Preparing university faculty and staff to better support first-generation students inside and outside the classroom will help create a holistically better experience for first-generation students.

Additionally, higher education institutions offer a variety of support services, including summer bridge programs, orientation experiences, living and learning communities, tutoring, library services, counseling, and other support services for students. Institutions should ensure first-generation students know about these services

and understand the benefits utilizing these services can offer them. Hosting events and services specifically for first-generation students may help students feel more comfortable utilizing services. Study participants engaged in curricular and co-curricular activities indicated this involvement helped alleviate stress and burnout and contributed to academic success. First-generation students may feel they lack the time outside of the classroom to participate in curricular and co-curricular activities. Providing these experiences as part of the course curriculum, such as offering research, service learning or internship opportunities allows first-generation students the opportunity to access experiential learning in class while gaining access to these valuable experiences. Study participants also indicated relationships with faculty and advisors helped alleviate stress and burnout and contributed to academic success. To encourage relationship building, advisors should meet in-person with first-generation students for advising sessions. As first-generation students begin their college journey, these meetings should take place more frequently, perhaps up to three times for the first year or two students are enrolled in higher education. Faculty should also be encouraged to connect with students during class time, getting to know students and their goals and desires for obtaining higher education.

As institutions continue to recruit more first-generation college students to campus, the need to create a more favorable financial environment for these students is imperative. Finances contributed to stress and burnout and were a challenge to study participants' academic success. Study participants indicated the high cost of attending college and the need to work one or more jobs contributed negatively to their college

experience. Providing first-generation college student scholarships or campus job and internship opportunities could help support students during their college years.

Study participants indicated family was both a factor contributing to stress and burnout and a factor related to alleviating stress and burnout. First-generation study participants expressed that family contributed to their career readiness competency of professionalism and hard work, determination to achieve degree attainment, and helped shape short- and long-term career aspirations. Higher education institutions should continue to find ways to incorporate families into the college journey of their first-generation students. Family relationships and connections are essential for first-generation students and encouraging these connections while these students are attending college may help reduce stress and burnout.

Finally, senior status first-generation students expressed concern about life after graduation and the prospects of an unknown future. This concern provides an opportunity for career services and alumni offices, advisors, and faculty with the opportunity to support students in their destinations after they obtain their undergraduate degree. Connecting junior and senior status first-generation college students with a first-generation alumni mentor could provide upper-class students with a friendly connection to help support students as they embark on their journey into adulthood.

Recommendations for future research. Few qualitative research studies have examined perceptions of senior status first-generation college students about factors that have impacted stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. Most previous research studies focusing on first-generation college students were quantitative studies and did not consider the lived experiences of

first-generation college students. Several recommendations for future research should assist in gaining more knowledge and understanding about the impact of stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations in first-generation college students.

Broadening the current qualitative study to examine a larger population of senior status, first-generation students across a variety of demographic settings and higher education institutions will provide a deeper examination of factors impacting stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. This study included the perceptions of 10 senior status first-generation college students at a rural, public, Midwest, four-year institution (University X), making it difficult to generalize the study's findings. Future qualitative studies examining stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations should be conducted. Replications of the current study should be conducted in varied types of higher education institutions (e.g., research intensive, regional four year public, private, and for-profit) throughout the U.S.

The research and interview protocol questions in the current study were purposefully broad and provided a generalized picture of factors impacting stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations from the perspective of a senior status first-generation student. To explore each factor more fully, more specific and targeted questions regarding stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations could be developed. A longitudinal study could be conducted to explore how factors impacting stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career

aspirations ebb and flow during the college journey for first-generation students from freshman classification to senior classification. Following students from enrollment to graduation could also help provide more targeted data for students transferring between institutions and may capture information valuable to why students may decide to drop out of college. Data from these studies could be used to inform practices to increase the persistence and retention of first-generation college students.

Finally, to develop a clearer picture of stress and burnout levels of first-generation college students, mixed-methods studies could be conducted to quantitatively determine the specific levels of stress and burnout in first-generation students. Many quantitative instruments exist to survey stress and burnout levels in college students. The qualitative portion of the mixed-methods study could capture these students' lived experiences, helping more fully detail the experiences of first-generation students on college campuses.

Concluding remarks. The number of first-generation students attending college has been increasing over the past decade (Lang, 2015; Stolzenberg et al., 2018). Cataldi et al. (2003) and PNPI (2021) reported that first-generation students have a higher drop-out rate than continuing-generation students. While all college students experience stress during the college years (Garriott & Nisle, 2018), first-generation students have unique characteristics and challenges that may make the college years even more stressful than what is experienced by continuing-generation students (Helmbrecht & Ayars, 2021). Family, academic, and financial constraints may result in increased stress for first-generation students during the college years. College administrators should encourage faculty and academic advisors to learn more about the unique challenges first-generation

college students are experiencing as they attend college. Finding ways to regularly engage family may reduce the stress first-generation students encounter as they try to balance the time needed to study with the need to connect with family members. First-generation participants in the current study commented on their lack of understanding about faculty expectations and the amount of time required for studying. Providing peer mentors and tutoring for first-generation students may increase their understanding of the academic expectations in classes. Engagement in curricular and co-curricular activities were mentioned by study participants as strategies to relieve stress and prevent burnout. Ensuring first-generation students know about curricular and co-curricular opportunities may be an important support college administrators can promote on campuses. Access to counseling, career services, and internships may also contribute to the academic success of first-generation students. The awareness of college administrators and personnel about the unique characteristics of first-generation students may assist these students to persist in college through degree completion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Baker University IRB Approval

Baker University Institutional Review Board

October 4th, 2021

Dear Karen McCullough and Tes Mehring,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at npoell@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,

Nathan Poell, MLS
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
      Sara Crump, PhD
      Nick Harris, MS
      Christa Manson, PhD
      Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix B: University X IRB Approval

DATE: October 7, 2021

TO: Karen McCullough

FROM: ████████████████ IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1821670-1] First-Generation College Students: Factors That Impact Stress and Burnout, Academic Success, Degree Attainment, and Short and Long Term Career Aspirations

IRB REFERENCE #: 22_0017

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: October 7, 2021

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # *2*

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The departmental human subjects research committee and/or the ████████████████ IRB/IRB Administrator has determined that this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

For any research that will be conducted face-to-face, the ████ IRB strongly recommends that the PI and research team adhere to CDC guidelines regarding COVID-19. Please note that neither ████ nor the ████ IRB are responsible in the event that a participant and/or member of the research team is exposed to risks related to COVID-19.

Please note that any changes to this study may result in a change in exempt status. Any changes must be submitted to the IRB for review prior to implementation. In the event of a change, please follow the Instructions for Revisions at http://www.████.edu/academic/gradschl/irb/.

The IRB administrator should be notified of adverse events or circumstances that meet the definition of unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects. See http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/AdvEvntGuid.htm.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Exempt studies are not subject to continuing review. If you have any questions, please contact ████████████ at IRB@████.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in the Study

Invitation to Participate in a Study

Hello! My name is Karen McCullough and I am a doctoral candidate at Baker University in Overland Park, Kansas in the Graduate School of Education. I also work at ██████ ████████████ as the Director of Career Services. For my dissertation I am conducting a qualitative study on the perceptions of senior status first-generation college students about stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. As a first-generation senior student, you are an individual who might be interested in participating in the study.

Your participation is voluntary and will include a 45-60-minute interview, either in-person or through zoom (which will be audio recorded) to discuss your perceptions about factors that contribute to stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations. The interview questions are provided below. The researcher will be taking notes throughout the interview. Should you choose to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and cease participation at any point in the process. During the interview, you may choose to withdraw from the study or indicate that you prefer not to respond to any question. If you choose to participate, your interview will be assigned an anonymous code (e.g., Participant 1) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. There are no risks or discomfort associated with this study. You will not receive any compensation or benefits for participation.

After the interview, I will email you a transcript of your interview. You will have an opportunity to review your transcript to provide any corrections. After the study is completed you will be sent a summary of the findings and will have an opportunity to review the findings and share comments with the researcher.

Your participation will contribute to the research on this critical and understudied topic. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at **785-259-5350** or at **KarenAMccullough@stu.bakeru.edu**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen McCullough, ABD
Kamccullough@stu.bakeru.edu
785-259-5350

Major Advisor:
Dr. Tes Mehring
tmehring@bakeru.edu

Interview Questions

1. What is your current classification?

2. What is your declared major?

3. What is your current GPA?

4. When is your planned graduation date?

5. What (if any) factors have contributed to stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

6. In what ways (if any) have friends, family members, or university staff contributed to stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

7. What (if any) factors have alleviated stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

8. In what ways (if any) have friends, family members, or university staff alleviated stress and burnout you experienced during your college years?

9. What factors have contributed to your academic success during your college years?

10. What factors caused challenges to your academic success during your college years?

11. Having gotten to this point near the end of your degree program, what factors have helped you finish your degree?

12. Having gotten to this point near the end of your degree program, were there any factors that made finishing your degree challenging?

13. What are your short- and long-term career goals?

14. What factors helped shape your short- and long-term career goals?

15. As you have pursued your career goals, have there been any factors that have made pursuit of your career goals challenging?

Appendix D: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

████████████████ supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to consent to participate in the present study. This study focuses on senior status first-generation college students and their perceptions about stress and burnout, academic success, degree attainment, and short- and long-term career aspirations.

Your participation is voluntary and will include a 45-60-minute interview (which will be audio recorded). The researcher will be taking notes throughout the interview. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. If there is any question that you prefer not to answer just indicate to the researcher that you prefer not to answer.

After the interview, I will email you a written transcript of your interview. You will have an opportunity to review your transcript and provide any needed corrections. After completion of the study, you will be sent a summary of the findings and will have an opportunity to review the findings and share comments with the researcher.

If you choose to participate, your interview will be assigned an anonymous code (e.g., Participant 1) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. There are no risks or discomfort associated with this study. You will not receive any compensation or benefits for participation.

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in the research study and are aware that the interview will be audio-recorded.

_____   _____
Signature of individual agreeing to participate in study   Date

I agree to be audio recorded: _____
                                           Signature of participant