

I'm First: Building a Pathway to Thriving for First-Generation College Students

by

Whitnee Danielle Boyd

Bachelor of Science, 2009
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Master of Arts, 2011
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Education
Texas Christian University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

December 2017

Abstract

Background: An increasing amount of first-generation college students (FGCS) are continuing to enter colleges and universities each year. This population of students has traditionally been excluded from the higher education landscape for decades. There are now more programs and initiatives geared at granting access to FGCS and a growing number of efforts to retain these students. There is a gap in research that focuses on building intervention and retention programs that focus on strengths-based interventions. Instead, there is an overwhelming amount of research that focuses on the deficits FGCS are said to possess which are in turn being used to develop programs to assist the students. There must be an effort to shift from building programs that focus on deficits to strengths. Institutions should invest in promoting thriving and the overall well-being of FGCS. **Methods and Procedures:** The Thriving Quotient assessment was administered to FGCS at the research site whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year institution. This assessment measured students' ability to thrive based on the five factors assessed by the instrument: social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective. The study also measured the differences in thriving between students associated with a retention-based support program and those students not affiliated with one. The participants then participated in focus groups and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of what influences a FGCS ability to thrive. **Results:** FGCS have the ability to thrive based on the assessment. There was a significant difference between the ability of these FGCS thriving compared to the national norm in three areas: engaged learning, academic determination, and diverse citizenship. As it pertains to students in a support group, t-test results revealed that they are thriving at a higher rate than their FGCS counterparts not associated with a support group. Other influencers of FGCS ability to thrive included psychological sense of community and institutional integrity, amongst others. **Conclusion:**

FGCS possess the skills needed to thrive. There are certain resources and needs the students have that institutions can focus on implementing within their programs and efforts to retain these students. FGCS have a story of triumph and perseverance that deserves a chance to be heard. These students work to navigate a system that was not built for their success. Institutions must take into account the flaws of the system in order to better support the overall well-being and success of FGCS.

Acknowledgements

“For we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose.”-Romans 8:28

This is the foundation of how and why I am here. This journey has come with its challenges and trials, but I am at a point of triumph fully confident in this being purpose driven work. In times when I questioned the decision or times when nothing made sense, it was the promise of God that kept me moving forward. It is through the pursuit of this doctorate that I learned transparency, humbleness, interdependence, and vulnerability all at new levels.

The support system that has helped me to this point is unmatched. I would like to thank my committee for not only your support, but for challenging me to explore learning in new and different ways. My chair and advisor, Dr. Cornell Thomas, has taught me to be an independent thinker and to advocate for those whose voices have been silenced. The support Dr. Thomas has shown me throughout this journey has been invaluable and expanded beyond just the classroom into a true mentorship that I will carry with me forever. My committee members have been encouraging and supportive throughout the process in ways that I cherish. Dr. Don Mills is the one who introduced me to TCU and the possibility of me becoming a Horned Frog. I am forever indebted to Dr. Mills for his guidance and willingness to share of his knowledge and resources to help me be successful. Dr. Jo Beth Jimerson has helped me through times of uncertainty and helped to reassure me that my work is important. She has helped me to stay focused on the goal of my research and to approach my work with a scholarly mindset. Dr. Barbara Brown-Herman is one who has believed in me since before I arrived at TCU. She took me under her wing and has been a constant source of support since that day. She has taught me a great deal about what it means to have a servant’s heart. Her commitment to students and creating opportunity for others is something we could all learn from. Two other people, my honorary committee members, who

have been vital to my completing this work are Drs. Angela Taylor and Darrell Ray. They have both helped me to bring this idea and work to life in order to study a phenomenon so near and dear to my heart. They have offered guidance and fostered a sense of understanding throughout my time. I am forever appreciative to my committee for their investment in me. I would like to thank Chancellor Victor Boschini, the Cabinet, and office team members for your support and encouragement. I have had the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant in the Office of the Chancellor for nearly three years and I have learned a great deal about governance, institutional responsibility, and most importantly to my work, what it means to be an advocate for students. I am grateful for the investment you have made in my research, academic journey, and personal and professional development.

It is interesting how life takes you down various paths that lead you to people you connect with and are truly confident that they have your best interest at heart. The mentors, peers, friends, students, co-workers, and supporters that I have met at TCU and Fort Worth throughout my journey has been amazing. I have connected with a network of people that has kept me grounded and uplifted throughout my time here. I am grateful for each classmate, fellow TCU Horned Frog, sorority sister, church member, community partner, High School High Scholar family member, and each person that has connected with me to help me live out my purpose.

Dedication

All that I am and that I have been positioned to achieve is because of God and the village He has surrounded me with. It is my village that has served as the foundation of my support system throughout my entire life. It is my village that has sacrificed their time, energy, and resources to help me live out my dreams. I am extremely blessed to have a village that has believed in me and constantly intercedes in prayer on my behalf.

This doctorate belongs to us all. This was not something meant for me to do alone or a road meant for me to travel solo, instead we traveled together. You never let me travel alone and you always reminded that you are with me. In moments that I felt I was alone, it was you, a member of my village that would reassure me that I am certainly not alone.

To my village leaders, my parents, Charles and Elfreda Boyd you are my creators of hope and triumph. You raised me to value education and the process of learning, but not just for myself. You raised me to be confident in my beliefs and to value others. You raised me to understand that I am purposed for service to others. You have always believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. I am forever grateful that God picked you two to be the leaders of my village and serve as my parents.

My siblings have pushed me beyond my comfort zone and shown me a love that I have never had to question. Chuck and Terrance, you two motivate me to be great. The greatness that you exude is true Black Boy Joy! Chuck, you have always been a trailblazer and shown me what it is like to live life to the fullest. You are filled with wisdom and always willing to share it with your little sister. Terrance, you are a force to be reckoned with and you use that confidence to help create opportunity for others. Your drive and determination paired with your calling to serve will continue to take you to new heights. You are both smart and filled with wisdom that I

am glad to see you use to serve others. To my sister, Caven, you have been a source of encouragement and an example of selflessness that I needed throughout this journey. I am blessed to call you my big sister. I share this with you all.

To my nephews and niece, Thomas, Morgan, and Trey, I hope that you all understand that Tia did this for you. I hope that I can be an example to you all that shows you to strive for the next level and to take it head on, no matter the obstacles you face. I hope that your faith and commitment to purpose driven living will take you to places beyond your imagination. You all give me so much energy and hope that all I do matters and is for a reason.

This process has been filled with ups, downs, and a crazy amount of highs and more lows than I care to admit. I experienced some of the most amazing adventures and expressions of love during this journey. I also experienced some of the most empty, helpless, anxiety filled, and just outright most challenging moments of my life throughout this process. It was my village that kept me pressing forward. To my aunts, uncles, cousins, godsons, friends, “family”, students, mentors, church members, community members of Humphrey and Pine Bluff, and every single member of my village, please share in this moment with me. It is you that God used to get me to this point. You are the reason that I feel I have something to offer the world and that I feel it is necessary for me to live my life with boldness. Each word of encouragement, sound guidance, prayer, act of kindness, laugh, hug, moments of understanding, smile, dinner, outing, trip, and all helped me to keep pushing.

This is dedicated to you all. This is dedicated to any other person out there looking for the strength or motivation to achieve a goal. This is dedicated to my ancestors that fought tirelessly for me to have an opportunity to pursue my education at the highest level. I thank you for thinking of me as you fought for the rights of our people. I truly hope that you can rest knowing

that your commitment, sacrifices, blood, tears, and love are valued and appreciated. I pray that I am living out your dream of a young, Black girl from rural Arkansas having the chance to be educated and educate. I do not take the foundation you have set for me lightly and I commit to making it my personal mission and duty to honor you and your legacy by providing opportunity for those coming after me by serving as a member of their village. Please help me celebrate our victory. We did it! I am who I am because of those God used to mold me into who I am. I am because of you.

Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem and Purpose	3
Problem.....	3
Context of Study	4
Definition of Terms.....	6
First-Generation College Students	6
Deficit Thinking.....	7
Strengths-Based Thinking.....	7
Sense of Belonging	8
Retention	8
Thriving	8
Purpose Statement.....	9
Research Questions.....	9
Researcher Positionality.....	10
Conceptual Framework.....	12
Summary	14
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	16
First-Generation College Students (FGCS)	16
5 Factors of Thriving Social Connectedness.....	17
Engaged Learning	19
Diverse Citizenship.....	22
Academic Determination	28
Positive Perspective	33
Components of Thriving.....	34
Psychological Sense of Community/Sense of Belonging.....	35
Spirituality	36
Institutional Integrity	37
Summary	39
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	40

Introduction.....	40
Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods.....	40
Research Design.....	41
Phases of Study.....	43
Research Site.....	43
Demographics of SCU Fall 2016.....	44
Participants.....	44
Data Collection.....	46
Instrumentation.....	46
Survey Assessment.....	46
Focus Groups.....	47
Virtual Interview Journals.....	49
Data Analysis.....	50
Thriving Quotient.....	50
Focus Groups and Virtual Interview Journals.....	50
Confidentiality.....	52
Ethical Considerations.....	53
Summary.....	55
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....	56
Introduction.....	56
Phase One.....	56
Subjects.....	56
Research Demographics.....	57
Thriving Quotient.....	61
Five Factors of Thriving and Other Components.....	61
Social Connectedness.....	62
Engaged Learning.....	63
Diverse Citizenship.....	64
Academic Determination.....	65
Positive Perspective.....	66
Other Components of Thriving.....	66
Psychological Sense of Community.....	68
Spirituality.....	69

Institutional Integrity	69
Impact of Support Groups.....	70
Thriving Quotient	70
Social Connectedness.....	74
Engaged Learning	74
Diverse Citizenship.....	74
Academic Determination	74
Positive Perspective	74
Psychological Sense of Community	75
Spirituality	75
Institutional Integrity	75
Participation Items	85
Faculty/Student Interaction Items	89
Satisfaction.....	91
Thriving-Self Rating.....	95
Demographics	96
Household Income	100
Working for Pay.....	102
Difficulty Paying for School.....	103
Phase Two.....	105
Interviews and Focus Groups: Phase Two.....	105
Focus Groups and Virtual Interview Journals.....	106
Identity	107
Five Factors of Thriving and Other Components	108
Social Connectedness.....	108
Involvement	110
Things to Consider.....	111
Engaged Learning	111
Intentions	112
Assistance Navigating.....	113
Things to Consider.....	115
Diverse Citizenship.....	116
Student's Background.....	116

Money and Finance.....	117
Value Difference and Engaging with Others	118
Commitment to Community through Increased Exposure.....	118
Things to Consider.....	119
Academic Determination	120
Overcoming Challenges.....	120
Grades and Academic Performance	121
Things to Consider.....	123
Positive Perspective	124
Psychological and Attitudinal Factors	124
Things to Consider.....	125
Other Components to Thriving.	126
Things to Consider.....	127
Spirituality	128
Institutional Integrity	128
Expectations versus Reality	128
Barriers to Thriving.....	129
Removal of Boundaries.....	130
Prevailing through Challenges	131
Things to Consider.....	131
Phase Three.....	132
Research Question #1	133
Research Question #2	135
Research Question #3	140
Summary	142
CHAPTER FIVE: CHALLENGING DEFICIT THINKING WITH PURPOSE	144
Fueled by Passion and Purpose.....	144
Purpose of the Study	145
The Perspective of FGCS and Their Ability to Thrive	146
Challenging Deficit Thinking by De(constructing) the Experience of FGCS	147
Identity	148
Social Connectedness.....	149
Engaged Learning	151

Diverse Citizenship.....	153
Academic Determination	156
Positive Perspective	157
Psychological Sense of Community	158
Institutional Integrity	159
The Power of Support	161
Social Connectedness.....	162
Engaged Learning	162
Diverse Citizenship.....	163
Academic Determination	164
Positive Perspective	165
The Shift to Strengths Based Thinking (Implications for Practice).....	166
Perspective Matters.....	166
Understanding Your Audience	166
Identity-Conscious	167
Recruitment.....	167
Transition To and Through.....	168
Advocacy that Empowers	169
Exemplars in the Field	169
Limitations of Study	170
Bridging the Gap with Current and Future Research.....	172
Conclusion	173
References.....	175
Appendices.....	182
Appendix A.....	182
Focus Group Protocol	182
Appendix B.....	186
Virtual Interview Questions.....	186
Appendix C.....	189
Thriving Quotient Approved IRB.....	189
Appendix D.....	190
Descriptor and Code List	190

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: <i>Five Factors of Thriving (Schreiner, 2012)</i>	6
Figure 1.2: <i>The Relationship between Thriving and Student Retention and Success</i>	14
Figure 3.1: <i>Explanation of Analysis</i>	52
Figure 4.4: <i>Self-Reported Thriving</i>	68

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: <i>Comparison of Ethnicity</i>	58
Table 4.2: <i>Comparison of Age</i>	58
Table 4.3: <i>Comparison of Classification</i>	58
Table 4.4: <i>Comparison of Degree Aspirations</i>	59
Table 4.5: <i>Comparison of Family Income</i>	59
Table 4.6: <i>Comparison of Employment Status</i>	59
Table 4.7: <i>Comparison of High School Grades</i>	59
Table 4.8: <i>Comparison of College Grades</i>	60
Table 4.9: <i>Comparison of Certainty of Major</i>	60
Table 4.10: <i>Comparison of Additional Demographics</i>	60
Table 4.11: <i>Comparison of Results of Thriving</i>	62
Table 4.12: <i>Comparison of the Social Connectedness Scoring</i>	63
Table 4.13: <i>Comparison of the Engaged Learning Scoring</i>	64
Table 4.14: <i>Comparison of the Diverse Citizenship Scoring</i>	64
Table 4.15: <i>Comparison of the Academic Determination Scoring</i>	65
Table 4.16: <i>Comparison of the Positive Perspective Scoring</i>	68
Table 4.17: <i>Comparison of the Other Components of Thriving</i>	69
Table 4.18: <i>Comparison of the Psychological Sense of Community Scoring</i>	70
Table 4.19: <i>Comparison of the Spirituality Scoring</i>	69
Table 4.20: <i>Comparison of the Institutional Integrity Scoring</i>	70
Table 4.21: <i>Thriving Quotient Scale Independent Samples T-Test Results</i> Error! Bookmark not defined.	
Table 4.22: <i>Thriving Quotient Scale Descriptive</i>	73
Table 4.23: <i>Thriving Quotient Item Independent Samples T-Test Results</i>	78
Table 4.24: <i>Thriving Quotient Item Descriptive</i>	80
Table 4.25: <i>Participation Items Independent Samples T-Test Results</i>	88
Table 4.26: <i>Participation Items Descriptive</i>	88
Table 4.27: <i>Faculty-Student Interaction Items Independent Samples T-Test Results</i>	90
Table 4.28: <i>Faculty-Student Interaction Item Descriptive</i>	91
Table 4.29: <i>Satisfaction Item Independent Samples T-Test Results</i>	92
Table 4.30: <i>Satisfaction Item Descriptive</i>	93
Table 4.31: <i>Thriving Self-Rating Independent Samples T-Test Results</i>	98
Table 4.32: <i>Thriving Self-Rating Item Descriptive</i>	98

Table 4.33: <i>Gender x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	99
Table 4.34: <i>Age x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	97
Table 4.35: <i>Race/Ethnicity x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	98
Table 4.36: <i>International Student x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	99
Table 4.37: <i>Estimated Household Income x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	101
Table 4.38: <i>Work for Pay x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	102
Table 4.39: <i>Difficulty Paying for School Expenses x in Retention Program Frequency</i>	103
Table 4.40: <i>Phase Two Participant Demographics</i>	105

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In an effort to eradicate years of misfortune and neglect to various oppressed populations, the notion of equal access to higher education has been a narrative that has informed policy and political platforms for decades. What does it mean to provide access? What does it mean to provide an equal opportunity for all? Providing equal education to the masses has major implications for the future and welfare of this nation. Higher education has been a popular topic for political forums, platforms, and discussions on each side of the aisle for years. Marco Rubio, Republican, was quoted in the *New York Times* (2015) stating; “We need to change how we provide degrees, how those degrees are accessed, how much that access costs, how those costs are paid and even how those payments are determined.” Bernie Sanders, Independent, was openly passionate about making college free for students as expressed in a feature in *The Washington Post*, “It is time to build on the progressive movement of the past and make public colleges and universities tuition-free in the United States — a development that will be the driver of a new era of American prosperity. We will have a stronger economy and a stronger democracy when all young people with the ambition and the talent can reach their full potential, regardless of their circumstances at birth” (2015).

These discussions could be moving to the forefront due to more and more jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree. By 2020 nearly 65% of jobs will require postsecondary education, which supports the notion of access to higher education being vital (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). The American people have had numerous opportunities to express opinions on increasing access to higher education, recently the Pearson Opportunity Poll (2016) found that two-thirds of those surveyed felt increasing the share of American adults with any post-secondary degree from around 40% to the proposed 60%, would improve the economy by increasing the number of

trained workers. In the same poll, only 28% endorsed the competing statement that alluded to the economy not improving due to a higher number of workers with degrees that exceeds the needs of employers. Access to higher education has varying implications and has been viewed differently based on a number of factors.

One population that has been impacted by the lack of access to higher education over the years is first-generation college students (FGCS). For decades, federal and state governments have invested in programs geared toward increasing access into higher education (Tinto, 2012). Federal and state governments have made efforts to increase access to higher education through the support in funding programs and policies such as the GI Bill, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Higher Education Act of 1965, TRIO programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services), Federal Work Study programs, Equal Opportunity Grants, implementation of the Pell Grant, and more (Long, 2012). FGCS are entering colleges and universities in increasingly larger numbers (NCES, 2010). Based on the growing rate of this population, research is continuing to emerge focused on determining how to best serve and support these students. Support for this population has looked different for various institutions including TRIO programs, increased financial aid, enhanced academic advising, and retention programs (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2010). Administrators, faculty, and staff must gather information on the needs, goals, values and readiness for college of FGCS (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Tinto, 2012). FGCS will arrive at institutions ready to learn with a wide variety of backgrounds, demographics, needs, and strengths (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in 2011, of the parents with children ages 5-17 years old, only 36% held a bachelor's degree or higher. This statistic shows that the number of FGCS who will continue to enter colleges and

universities will be a significant number that cannot go unnoticed. As research shows, the access of FGCS has improved and now programs and efforts are focusing on retention (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Participation rates in higher education have increased over the years; on the other hand completion rates have not increased at the same rate. “Although the postsecondary system has widened opportunity to numerous students from diverse backgrounds, this increased access has not resulted in higher degree completion rates or a better-educated workforce. Student success remains a vexing challenge in postsecondary education” (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012, p. xii). Research suggests a need for research and institutional practices to move beyond access, degree completion, and what FGCS lack to include a focus on changing the narrative of FGCS by studying their ability to thrive on campuses.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Problem

FGCS are by no means a homogenous group. The lack of clearly visible identifiers will at times allow these students to go unnoticed on campus, unless they opt to self-identify. Ward, et al (2012) note, “The characteristics of FGCS—their entering qualifications, aspirations, engagement in learning and campus life, academic achievement, personal growth, persistence, and graduation from college—frequently set them apart from non-first-generation students” (p.12). Understanding these factors that apply to FGCS will assist institutions as they recruit from this student population and help them better understand how to assist these students as they matriculate through college.

In order to expand on this research, it is time to shift the focus of FGCS from deficit thinking to strengths-based thinking. Programs and intervention methods have been established based on research that focuses mainly on what FGCS lack (Belcastro, 2009). FGCS are often labeled at-risk and appear to face multiple barriers that may impede their progress at a college or

university (Hope, 2016). FGCS were observed to likely be at a disadvantage related to factors like support (familial, academic, etc.), family expectations, encouragement, and guidance in the process of obtaining a baccalaureate degree leading to them being less likely to succeed and/or pursue a postsecondary education (Choy, 2001). Institutional leaders must know of such factors as they develop interventions and programs to combat these issues. Ward et. al reveal that:

First-generation students see more barriers to successfully navigating college life: financial constraints, resentment about going to college from parents who might not have any higher education experience, unrealistic expectations about college life, under preparedness for college, and social and personal worries. Thus the FGCS' transition into college is complex and full of confusion (2012, p. 22).

While available research outlines the issues faced by FGCS (Ward et.al; Tinto, 2000; Bui, 2002), there is a gap in understanding the research from the perspective of the student and an assets-based lens that focuses on their ability to thrive. Changing the paradigm from deficit thinking can allow research to shift focus on developing strategies that focus on the student's strengths (Weiner, 2006). This study strived to identify some of the primary factors affecting the overall success of FGCS at a predominantly white, private, affluent, mid-size university.

Colleges and universities can benefit from this study through understanding the experiences from the perspective of FGCS and how to move from deficit thinking to focusing on student success.

The results of this study focus on how to invest in retention and intervention methods geared at supporting the thriving of FGCS by removing systemic issues and processes that stifle growth.

Context of Study

For the purposes of this study, the research site is protected by the use of a pseudonym, Southwestern Cathedral University (SCU). Southwestern Cathedral University is a mid-size, private institution located in the North Texas region. SCU has implemented a series of programs and efforts to recruit and graduate FGCS. The study focused on the population of FGCS and administered the Thriving Quotient, a validated instrument used nationwide, that measures a

student's ability to thrive in college (Schreiner, 2012). "Thriving implies more than just surviving in the college environment; it conveys that a student is fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally, and is experiencing a sense of psychological well-being that contributes not only to his or her persistence to graduation, but also to success in life" (Schreiner, 2012, p. 5). The Thriving Quotient instrument was developed over a period of five years and has been used nationally to collect, measure, and analyze data (Schreiner, 2012). The study also made use of focus group and interview data to learn more about the stories and experiences of FGCS at SCU.

An overwhelming amount of current research on FGCS takes the stance of a deficit model and what students lack (Braxton, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McCleaf, 2012; Ward et. al, 2012). Researchers tend to focus on the gaps and areas of need that exist with this population. FGCS have been labeled at-risk with numerous factors (Arendale, 2004; Braxton, 2013; Choy 2001). The students have been said to lack in areas like social capital, academic preparedness, financial capital, support, and other areas (Braxton, 2013; McCleaf, 2012). While each of these has an important place in supporting FGCS, this study focused on qualities students possess that help them excel in college and how institutions can build upon those factors to support student success. Using this approach can change the narrative for FGCS and how they are viewed by institutional leaders. This study gives institutions information on how to assist FGCS on the quest to thrive versus simply surviving, aiding in the overall retention of the student population. The study promotes the need for more institutions embracing the skills and qualities possessed by FGCS. Promoting the success of FGCS based on the five factors of thriving can help maximize their college experience (Schreiner, 2012) (see figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1. Five Factors of Thriving (Schreiner, 2012)

Definition of Terms

First-Generation College Students

FGCS can be defined in varying ways depending on the institution. One way of identifying a FGCS is as a student whose parents never attended college (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Another definition of FGCS states that neither parent graduated from a four-year college (Choy, 2001; Nuñez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998; Ishatani, 2003). It is important that institutions examine how they will define FGCS in order to effectively support the students. Programs such as the Common App, federally funded TRIO programs, and schools like Harvard and Brown have adopted the definition this study uses, which is a student whose mother or father did not graduate from college with a bachelor's degree (Pappano, 2015). This

definition expands the number of students on campuses defined as FGCS and highlights the growing need for systems in place to support those students.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking is a term used in the education sector to address issues of oppression and school failure in the K-12 environment (Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking has impeded true progress for education for decades (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). Intervention and retention efforts have looked at FGCS as something to be “fixed”. This type of thinking supports the notion that when students achieve poorly or have difficulties that the problem lies with the student or family and negates the role the system plays in the issue (Weiner, 2006). This model removes the blame from the systemic issues and places it on the individual. Deficit thinking is grounded in perpetuating the systems of oppression that already exist like sexism, classism, and racism (Valencia, 2010). Deficit thinking impacts and informs educational policies that further exploit oppression toward disadvantaged populations (Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking has invaded the lives of the oppressed for centuries and continues to uphold the systemic failures in place to continue the oppression.

Strengths-Based Thinking

Strengths-based thinking challenges the structures of oppression set forth by deficit thinking. The concept of strengths-based thinking challenges one to dispel any preconceived notions of deficit thinking to embrace the stage the student is at versus where theory or stereotypes say the person is (Blundo, 2001). This approach encourages an individual to work with the student to develop models of success. Institutions must seek to develop talent and focus on ensuring success for an ever evolving and diverse population. This focuses on students’ talents and skills being viewed as assets versus deficiencies. This approach prepares institutions

to be proactive in meeting the learning needs of students that have been ignored and underserved by higher education throughout history (Chickering, 2006).

Sense of Belonging

A student's sense of belonging and fit at an institution is important to the success of that student. This level of belonging and commitment refers to a student's desire to continue and persist to graduation at one's respective institution (Schreiner et al., 2012). This concept stems from the construct of *psychological sense of community* that focuses on the extent to which a person connects with a community, is an active participant with a voice, and can engage in meaningful ways with other people (Sarason, 1974). Finding a fit is essential to the success of a student and any member of a community. McMillian and Chavis (1986) identified four elements important to experiencing a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. Colleges and universities are designed to be a community, therefore the level of which a student feels a sense of belonging to that community impacts his or her success and the overall success of the institution (Schreiner et al., 2012).

Retention

Students enter college each year and institutions work tirelessly to develop methods to keep the students on their campuses. The goal of any institution should be to retain students. Retention is determined by an institutions ability to retain a student from their enrollment at the institution through degree completion (Seidman, 2012).

Thriving

Institutions have students who are either thriving or merely surviving. The term *thriving* was coined by researchers from Azusa Pacific University to focus on students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally: "Thriving college students not only are

academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4). Focusing on the student’s ability to thrive and addressing barriers to success can help enhance the experience of FGCS.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to challenge deficit thinking by using a strengths-based perspective to identify factors related to FGCS’ ability to thrive at a private, mid-sized, predominantly white institution. This study was not designed solely to compare one group to another group, but instead to examine the positive aspects of this student population versus deficit thinking by exploring the notion of thriving. The concept of thriving explores student success beyond grades and graduation by focusing on whether students are engaged in the learning process and maximizing the college experience (Schreiner, 2013). This study focused on shifting how FGCS success is viewed and impact the strategies used to assist this population of students. This study moves from focusing on how students are not ready for college, to where they are going and the talents they possess that will help them reach student success from an asset-based lens. Thriving focuses on promoting student success versus preventing student failure (Schreiner, 2013). I used a mixed methods approach in order to provide a more synergistic finding than either a solely quantitative or qualitative study could provide.

Research Questions

Accordingly, the study will be guided by these three research questions:

1. Do first-generation college students (FGCS) thrive or merely survive based on the 5 Factors of Thriving?
2. How does being connected to a retention-based support group impact the thriving of FGCS?

3. What aspects of a FGCS experience and being impacts his or her ability to thrive?

Researcher Positionality

My passion and interest for this population of students grew from my first job after completing my master's degree. I worked as a student development specialist at the University of Arkansas in the Student Support Services, a TRIO program. Over the decades, institutions have identified ways individual campuses can be more supportive of FGCS through programs and services. As a response to such needs, the federal government established TRIO programs to primarily serve disadvantaged populations like first-generation, low-income, and/or students with disabilities from middle school throughout college. TRIO programs serve nearly one million students each year with about 2,800 programs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Gaining a better understanding for the needs and challenges faced by this, what I deem as resilient, population of students motivated me to explore this population. I worked with students each day who possessed a number of qualities that helped them to excel in the university setting. The students worked diligently to overcome any hardships and challenges. We worked together to form plans of development and to identify what their personal goals and routes to success would be. They were committed to their success and once offered the support they needed, they were able to navigate their college experience from a different lens. This is what calls for me to challenge the research and practices that question the ability of FGCS to succeed and that speaks to their ability as being deficient. These students proved to me that while they may have some challenges, they also have strengths that can help them to excel if they receive the proper support.

Working with this population of students let me know that I had to become an advocate for the voices that were often silenced. Systemic issues within and outside of the university setting have plagued FGCS. The desire to be a voice for these students led me to pursuing my

doctorate degree in Higher Education Leadership at TCU and to research FGCS specifically. I have had the opportunity to serve as a Graduate Assistant for the Office of the Chancellor for two years. In this role, I am able to attend Cabinet meetings, board meetings, and other strategic planning sessions that have given me insight into how decisions are made. This experience has furthered my sentiments on the need to have a voice and seat at the table to advocate for those who are not always presented or heard for a variety of reasons.

I have sought opportunities to continue my work with FGCS at TCU. I have worked with the Leaders for Life program at TCU is an intervention-based program geared at supporting FGCS, students of color, international students, and students with the highest financial need. I developed the second year curriculum for this program and assisted the advisor of the program in implementing various initiatives. I have also remained close to this population and issues of access by working as an instructor with Upward Bound, a federally funded TRIO program. My work with FGCS has expanded into the community where I spent a year as an Albert Schweitzer Fellow where I developed a project for a local community to increase college awareness in the schools and churches in the area. I also help to coordinate workshops and experiences geared at preparing FG, minority students for college through a program called High School High Scholar (HS2). Each of these experiences has continued to grow and strengthen my passion for helping FGCS thrive once they reach a college campus.

Understanding my position with this research and how I have been shaped by the work I have done with FGCS is important. I take a stance in favor of not only providing access, but ensuring that our campuses are prepared to support FGCS by focusing first on the student's strengths and assets. Beyond what the student has to offer, institutions must also look at what systemic issues and societal factors oppress FGCS. These biases and views will play a role in

my research. As a female, African American researcher, I understand that certain factors that I identify with will impact how I approach my study and present findings. While I do not identify as a FGCS, I do understand what it is like to enter an environment that was not “built” for you and what it is like to work to navigate that space at times without the proper support structure in place or feeling that it is all on you as an individual to figure out. I have seen many of the factors that impact the success of FGCS also impacts me as a member of various groups that have been labeled “at-risk”. This study was my chance to propel the voices of FGCS and allow them to tell their own stories, in their own voices. I hope the study helps empower institutions to move from deficit thinking toward better understanding how to serve and support FGCS from a strengths-based perspective.

Conceptual Framework

Institutions must strongly consider the needs of FGCS and the best practices for retaining and building a quality environment that promotes success. Institutional fit refers to a person’s ability to fit in with others at a college (Seidman, 2005). Finding a sense of belonging and fit at an institution can help retain a student and increase persistence (Tinto, 2000). It is important that that FGCS be integrated into the campus community and connected with the resources needed to excel if an institution is committed to best serving all of its students. Studying the ability of these students to thrive can help institutions to strongly consider the needs of FGCS and the best practices for retaining these students. J. P. Bean (2005) identified nine factors that influence student retention and that should be taken into account by institutions across the globe: a student’s background, money and finances, grades and academic performance, social factors, bureaucratic factors, the external environment, psychological and attitudinal factors, institutional fit and commitment, and intentions. Based on these factors, the study measured how FGCS are prepared to thrive and excel at institutions (see figure 1.2).

The Thriving Quotient measures five factors: engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, social connectedness, and positive perspective (Schreiner, 2012). It is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to consider these factors and to create a culture of change and acceptance for FGCS to be successful. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, I examined the experiences of FGCS at SCU by measuring their ability to thrive. This approach allowed for a wide variety of research questions and helped to provide a deeper understanding of the matter (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The first phase of the study included a well-established survey, the Thriving Quotient. The concept of thriving is not only linked to models of psychological well-being, but also linked to models of student retention in higher education (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). Through administering this survey instrument that measured the ability of the students to thrive, I was able to determine the areas of strength for FGCS and areas where they may need more assistance. In the second phase of the study, I followed up with focus groups and interviews targeted at FGCS in order to further explore the findings from the first phase of the study. This study was an effort to focus on the student from a holistic viewpoint. Through studying the experiences of FGCS at SCU, I hope institutions will use this information to identify the strong points and where the gaps are in the services and support offered to this population of students.

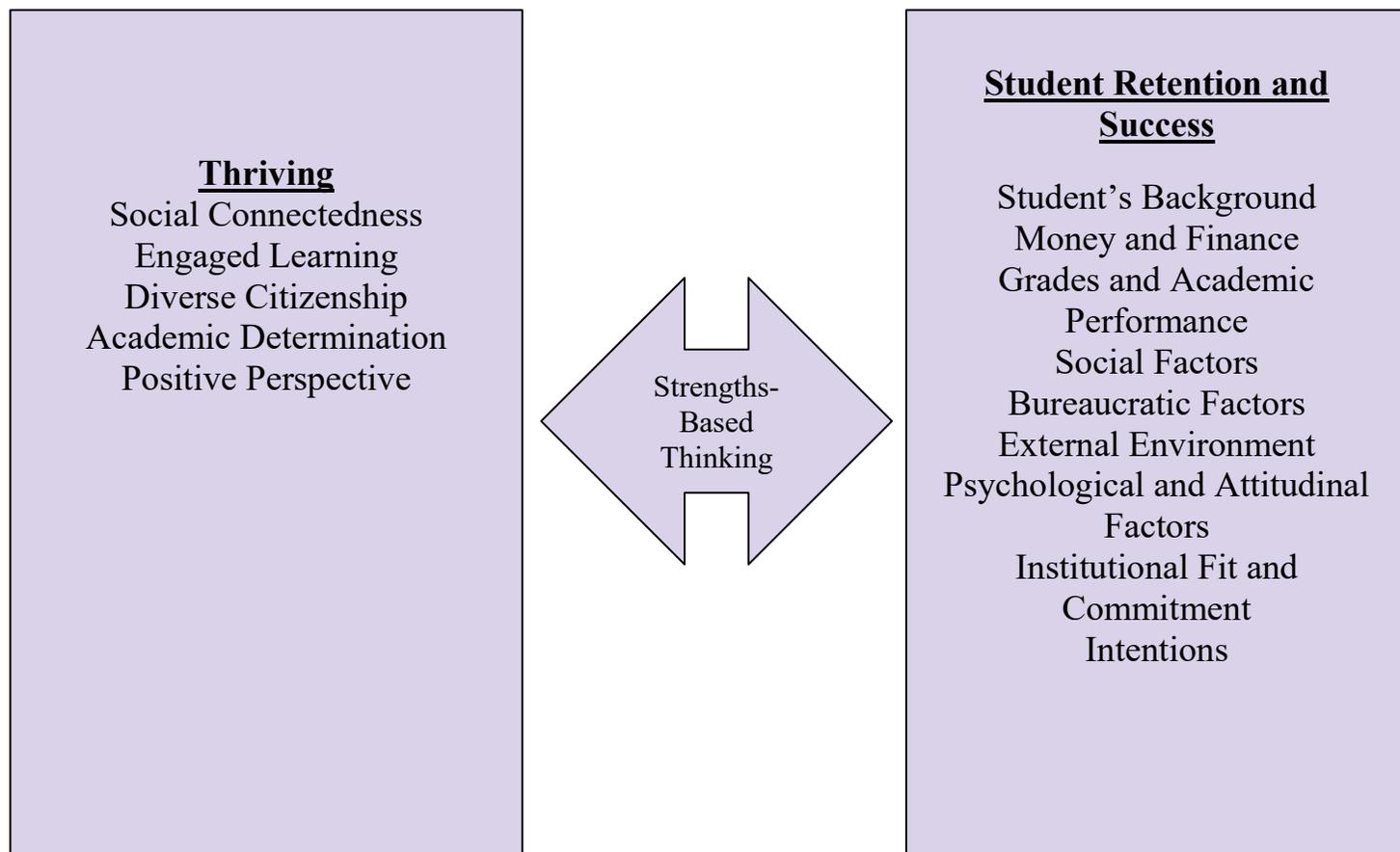


Figure 1.2. The Relationship between Thriving and Student Retention and Success

Summary

Access to higher education has become a political platform for many lawmakers and aspiring leaders. Creating the opportunity for more students to attend college has happened for decades now. Institutions have even improved on retaining and graduating students. But this is not enough, students must move beyond surviving to thriving. FGCS have been underrepresented and in ways ignored for years. Current research operates from a deficit model and lacks the connecting the strengths and skills FGCS do possess that can help them be successful. It is imperative that institutions begin to focus on how to address systemic barriers to success and how to provide the proper resources to aid FGCS in their success. This study is a platform for the voices of FGCS to be heard and sheds a positive light on the ability of FGCS.

The next chapter addresses the current research centered on FGCS and the five factors of thriving.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examined the ability of first-generation college students (FGCS) to thrive and persist through graduation. The focus of this study is to understand how institutions can focus on promoting student success in order to best utilize intervention-based programming and retention methods to retain and graduate FGCS. The study focused on providing a positive perspective of FGCS that will potentially challenge research and views based around this student population in order to help change the narrative for FGCS. This chapter examines research focused on FGCS that outlines strategies for supporting this student population graduating from college. Understanding the research in this area is vital to garnering clarity on how institutions can increase the retention of FGCS from access to degree completion.

First-Generation College Students (FGCS)

FGCS will be defined in this study as a student whose neither mother nor father graduated from a four-year college or university. Various researchers have labeled this group “at-risk,” as a student facing more than one barrier or challenge that impacts his or her ability to persist and reach degree completion (Arendale, 2004; Braxton, 2013; Choy 2001). Risk factors such as being from a low-income home, ethnic minority, having a disability, dealing with academic under preparedness, and being from a single parent household have been identified as barriers to the academic success of FGCS. Often times these barriers make it difficult for a FGCS to transition to the culture of an institution both socially and academically. Researchers have found that FGCS have a difficult time integrating academically due to lower levels of preparation and socially due to a perceived lack of social capital that differs from the majority of non-first generation college students (McCleaf, 2012; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). FGCS develop low expectations about the highest degree level they will obtain as early as the eighth grade and in comparison to non-first-generation students, by the twelfth grade only 50 percent of

FGCS expect to graduate from college versus 90 percent of the non-first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002). These risk factors tend to compound on one another causing difficulties in the area of retention of FGCS. Students who identify as low-income and FGCS are nearly four times more likely to leave an institution after the first year than students without these risk factors; after nearly six years 43% of the students had left higher education without attaining a degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The barriers and risk factors faced by FGCS must be recognized by institutions as they develop best practices to support the students.

5 Factors of Thriving Social Connectedness

Identifying the key stakeholders in the success of FGCS is important in the process of developing retention and intervention methods (Dumais, 2012; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Stakeholders such as the parents/families and the institution are important to the goal of retaining these students. Literature shows that the parents and families of FGCS play an integral role in student success (Austin, 2011). Families can either increase or decrease the desire for a student to attend college, depending on whether they are in support of the student or if they downplay the importance of college. Researchers also point out that parents who did not attend college may find it difficult to share knowledge of college readiness and preparedness due to a lack of experience in this area (Ward et. al, 2012). This and similar research brings clarity for the work ahead at colleges attempting to increase the retention and graduation rates of FGCS. These institutions must build support systems designed to bridge the gaps of the increasing needs of this student population. “Often parents of marginalized students feel inferior about the college experience and do not get involved in academics, leaving their children to not only build their support networks on their own but also play the double role of student and teacher for their parents” (Arzuaga, 2016, p. 12). Students whose parents have had some exposure to college are twice as likely as students whose parents have no exposure to college to complete a bachelor’s

degree and are five times more likely to graduate if his or her parents graduated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions must consider such statistics when developing plans to support the retention and graduation of FGCS. Retention of students is not only beneficial to an institution from a financial lens, but also helpful to the institution living out its purpose and responsibility to educate each student who is a member of its campus community (Hossler & Bean, 1990).

Socially integrating FGCS with peers is another best practice that can be adopted by institutions. Learning happens through both the academic and social components of a student's experience (Astin, 1984). Having these college experiences provided through extracurricular activities could potentially help FGCS feel more connected to peers and the institution. This may be a challenge for institutions since ironically, research shows that FGCS are less likely to get involved (Ward et al., 2012). With such factors, institutions must first help FGCS transition into the campus environment and provide support for them to feel like members of the campus community. Students who are engaged in the life of the campus through student organizations and other methods often feel a stronger connection to the campus than those who are involved in fewer activities or not at all involved (Strayhorn, 2012). The transition to college can be complex considering factors like being separated from family and friends, viewing college as disconnected from their normal life course, and other factors (Choy, 2001). Engaging with social and peer networks is proven to positively impact the student's critical thinking skills, retention and persistence, ownership of academics, and cognitive thinking skills (Pascarella et al., 2004). The opportunity to develop such skills is invaluable to the experience of a FGCS and his or her institutional fit. Institutions can consider social interactions with peers through extracurricular activities as a way to also integrate this student population into the culture set by the majority population. This also gives FGCS a chance to establish themselves in the

environment and find their place. Researchers found that “extracurricular or peer involvement may expose FGCS to classmates with a better understanding of behaviors that help individuals succeed in and maximize the benefit they receive from college” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 278). If institutions are intentional about the social integration of FGCS, it could positively impact the overall experience of the student. “Experienced practitioners realize that a student’s characteristics upon enrollment and levels of integration into the academic and social environments of the college provide insight into his or her success, but that additional forces shape experiences and decisions (Schreiner, et al., 2012, pp. 44-45).” The benefit of helping students find their fit that extracurricular experiences provide for all students, but particularly first-generation, is invaluable.

Engaged Learning

Access to higher education has a direct impact on the economy and future of our nation. Understanding the importance of obtaining an education and how it adds value to the life of a person is at the forefront of the discussion. A person with a bachelor’s degree is slated to make more than 84% or greater earnings over a span of a lifetime compared to a person with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). In order to meet the demands of the workforce, more college-educated people will be needed. It is predicted that by 2020, 65% of jobs will require postsecondary education and training (Carnevale et al., 2011). For FGCS, this is essential to the level of motivation to complete a degree. Institutions must consider such statistics to help build a quality environment that promotes success for FGCS. “Institutional fit is a sense of fitting in with others at a college...” (Bean, 2005, p. 219). Gaining a sense of belonging and fit at an institution can help to retain a student and increase persistence. Programs and policies have been set in place to help increase a sense of belonging for FGCS.

Engaged learning pertains to a student's ability to process course material in a meaningful way and make connections between the knowledge they already possess or are interested in and combine it with what they need to learn (Schreiner, et al., 2012). FGCS need to be engaged with the campus environment and feel they are in a safe and secure environment. In addition, it is also important to integrate this student population academically. Academic integration describes the levels of engagement and experiences of a student in the academic components of a university, both formal and informal (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration is important to develop a connection with the academic environment both inside and outside of the classroom (McKay and Estrella, 2008). Increasing faculty interaction with FGCS helps to build academic integration. Student interaction with faculty can be a strong predictor for student learning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Integrating with faculty members provides space for both these students and the faculty to move away from perceived stereotypes of the *other*. It also helps to establish the kind of connections needed for each to communicate in an environment that honors each person's presence. Strayhorn (2012) underscores the importance of students feeling that they belong in the academic environment:

In educational settings, the need to belong can drive students' behaviors to or against academic achievement norms. For example, those who feel unsupported or rejected by adults (e.g. teachers) or achieving students may appeal to the interests of peer groups with anti-academic norms for acceptance, resulting in dis-identification with school or disinvestment for academic goals. Under these circumstances, some students build bonds of support, trust, and friendship with members of groups that are marginalized, devalued, and worse, punished in educational settings such as schools and colleges. For instance, several interview participants over the years have talked about their "decision" to break school rules (i.e., joining the troublemakers), to good off in class (i.e., joining the class clowns), to refuse to complete assignments (i.e., joining the apathetic club), or to join a street gang. Almost without exception, students described personal histories and academic journeys that placed them in moments where they developed an appetite for belonging, dis-identified with adults and achieving peers in schools, and consequently satisfied their need

to belong by affiliating with those who promised them security, community, and support in exchange for their commitment to anti-academic values (p. 19).

Connecting with the source of learning in the academic setting is important to creating a space for learning to occur and not having students reject the idea of learning. Interacting with faculty members helps to develop critical thinking skills and understanding of the subject matter, as well as enhancing a desire to learn. Institutions that focus on creating a positive view of faculty interaction for all students will help to increase academic integration.

The kinds of interactions discussed here will become more productive as faculty members and students better understand how this type of intervention will increase academic success, particularly FGCS. As institutions increase support for FGCS educating faculty members on the characteristics and needs the students is vital (Ward et al., 2012). Faculty members need to understand how to interact and engage with students in order to meet the needs of the student's academic journey. Institutions must focus beyond the frequency of faculty and student interaction more towards the quality of the interaction. Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that students feel more connected to faculty members who are “approachable, helpful, understanding, and encouraging, rather than remote, discouraging, and unsympathetic” (p. 563). This study also showed the importance of students connecting with faculty member from his or her own ethnic background, encouraging institutions to diversify the academy” (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Institutions can do a number of things to help build the relationship between FGCS and faculty even when they are from different ethnic backgrounds. The interactions can be strengthened by occurrences that happen inside and outside the classroom setting (Strayhorn, 2012). “These opportunities can occur in orientation, residence life, recreation programs, and in other student affairs domains where students may feel more comfortable” (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004, p. 563). All of these factors, along with faculty led study groups, one-on one-

debriefings, and guided learning opportunities must be considered as ways to help integrate FGCS academically yielding to higher retention and completion rates.

Colleges and universities have adopted best practices presented in research for decades to support FGCS. Researchers have deemed institutional fit as a crucial factor in retaining FGCS (Bean, 2005). FGCS should feel a sense of belonging and connection to the community and its culture. Academic and social integration should be at the core of these initiatives. Increasing faculty interaction with first-generation students helps to build academic integration and interacting with faculty members helps to develop the critical thinking skills and understanding of the subject matter. Student interaction with faculty can be a strong predictor for student learning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Furthermore, engaging FGCS with social and peer networks is proven to positively impact the student's critical thinking skills, retention and persistence, ownership of academics, and cognitive thinking skills (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The opportunity to develop such skills is invaluable to the experience of a FGCS and his or her institutional fit (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Tinto, 2000).

Diverse Citizenship

Diverse citizenship combines a student's ability to value differences and the openness to others, along with the desire and confidence to make contributions to one's community (Schreiner, et al., 2012). Some of the pertinent areas of research that pertain to FGCS and their diverse citizenship are around cultural capital, identity, and financial capital.

Cultural capital. Cultural capital can be defined as one's familiarity with the dominant culture (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997). Cultural capital impacts the way one is able to connect with the culture and perceptions of others associated with the dominant culture, which depending on the type of campus causes a disadvantage for FGCS from the beginning. "Cultural capital is a resource, much like money and natural resources, and not all forms have equal value. The cultural elite and the financially privileged control the most valued cultural capital; therefore, acquiring the characteristics of this social group is very important" (Austin, 2011, p. 7). Colleges and universities use cultural capital as a way to build the traditions, norms, and behaviors that impact all students attending the institutions. Cultural capital can be acquired by students:

To acquire cultural capital, a student must have the ability to receive and internalize it. Although schools require that students have this ability, they do not provide it for them; rather, the acquisition of cultural capital and consequent access to academic rewards depend on the cultural capital passed down by the family, which, in turn, is largely dependent on social class. Cultural capital, then, is comprised of "linguistic and cultural competence" and a broad knowledge of culture that belongs to members of the upper classes and is found much less frequently among the lower classes. Differences in cultural capital are reinforced by an educational system that prefers these styles, leaving most members of the lower classes with little hope of achieving social mobility (Dumais, 2002, pp. 44-45).

Institutions must acknowledge its role perpetuating the use of cultural capital based on the dominant culture on all who enter the system. Cultural capital in this way is associated with the privileged, which is seemingly unfair to FGCS who often come from a number of disadvantaged backgrounds. Those disadvantaged groups include, but are not limited to groups such as minority students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lower academic preparedness, and women with children (Ward et. al, 2012). Understanding that the level of cultural capital will vary for these groups should be a high consideration for institutions. The amount of exposure FGCS have had to the cultural capital embedded into the culture of

institutions varies. The level of exposure to various cultural experiences is tied to the parents. This does not refer to a good or bad style of parenting, but the role parents play is critical. Ward et. al (2012) says they have the ability to increase the desire of a student to attend or in some cases cause guilt for the student, which both can impact the student's likelihood of attending and persisting through college to degree completion. This can be attributed to the parents not attending college and not being knowledgeable of the experiences and information needed to help the student persist.

The perceived lack of cultural capital impacts the academic journey of the FGCS. Cultural capital defined by the dominant culture is an unfair barrier to this population of students that must be dealt with. This issue must be taken seriously due to the domino effect it has on a number of factors like the student's ability to transition, find his or her fit at the institution, get engaged, be retained, and more. Institutions must pay more attention to how they are helping FGCS find their fit, as well as what they are doing to make a FGCS feel out of place (Ward et. al, 2012). When institutions work to increase the cultural capital of FGCS it also increases his or her psychosocial engagement, social integration, level of commitment to the institution, and likelihood that the student will persist (Braxton, 2013). Cultural capital can be indirectly linked to retention and persistence based on such aspects. Institutions must address the fact that those in marginalized groups do not lack cultural capital, but it indeed may differ from what the system has conformed to. The cultural capital of marginalized groups is different than the cultural capital that is valued and rewarded systemically (Carter, 2005). Institutions should instead focus on how entities can band together from various areas and disciplines to offer the needed support and awareness that will aid in student success. Instead of severing ties with one's culture and relationships back home to better align with the dominant culture, students should be encouraged

to learn and grow by reframing their current being by negotiating, re-negotiating, and maintaining ties to family and friends (Strayhorn, 2012). Students can be assisted with navigating the college system through helping to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This could include helping students understand unfamiliar academic language, faculty expectations and relationships, systemic processes, cultural enrichment opportunities, and more (McCleaf, 2012). Institutions often consider these things to be understood when in reality they are not. It is then the job of the institution to move beyond access to higher education and into providing a level field regarding cultural capital.

Identity. The literature reveals various identifiers of FGCS including, but not limited to: being a student of color, being academically underprepared, identifying as low-income, being at-risk, and appearing ill-equipped socially (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et. al, 2012). Understanding the identity of the population you are working to serve is essential and applicable to any efforts meant to assist others. While this group of students is not homogeneous by far, it is important to share research based around the importance of identity and the FGCS. “Identity in psychological terms relates to awareness of self, self-image, self-reflection, and self-esteem” (Shields, 2008, p. 301). Identity and the expectations of one's identity changes as they enter new environments and have new experiences (Wilkins, 2014). Identity plays a strong role in a person feeling that he or she belongs to a system. Everyone has a need to belong, but the need to belong varies based on varying identities (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, class) (Strayhorn, 2012). For FGCS, this can be a challenging time due to the levels of intersectionality they experience while transitioning into the college environment. Intersectionality focuses on “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in

terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). As students work to navigate these varying intersections it impacts how their identity correlates with their overall well-being including their academic success and social integration (Wilkins, 2014). When working with FGCS, it is important to be cognizant of the various layers of identities the population possesses. Institutions should focus on seeking understanding:

In the innocent belief that mobility is unproblematic, students are often unaware, at least initially, of its potential costs in social and personal dislocation. It soon becomes apparent, however, that old relations are changing and that new ones must be forged. It is only when we see that negotiating cultural obstacles involves not just gain but loss--most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self--that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish reported by first-generation students. (Zwerling & London, 1992, p. 10)

Institutions should work to help students uphold their identity and not feel forced to assimilate to the majority culture. Students can garner a connection to an institution and still remain affiliated with other communities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). “Some students whose entering characteristics seem to predispose them to success adjust poorly and fail to persist. In contrast, many students experience profound success despite profiles that seem predictive of academic failure or dropout” (Schreiner, et al., 2012, p. 43). By gaining an understanding of the identity of FGCS, individuals can better equip themselves to better serve the population.

Financial capital. FGCS are historically labeled with a lack of financial capital leading to more barriers such as affordability (Austin, 2011). Financial capital is another important factor in student success at colleges and universities. Affordability issues continue to plague students across the nation and interfere with the matriculation process. This is especially true among the ranks of FGCS, who are also often from lower income families. About 4.5 million students identify as both first-generation and low-income (Opidee, 2015). Another barrier for FGCS is that they tend to deal with these affordability issues due to also identifying with another

disadvantaged group, low-income students. Institutions must be aware of such factors and consider how the culture of the institution impacts these students. Understanding the financial needs of the students will help institutions to build an infrastructure to help the students reach success.

When budgeting scholarship dollars and implementing new programs, institutions should be knowledgeable about how financial barriers of FGCS can be relieved through, for example, proper budgetary allocation, more work-study jobs, and financial assistance tied to academic success. According to a study conducted by The Pell Institute (2008), low-income FGCS were nearly four times more likely to leave an institution after the first year than students without these risk factors and after nearly six years 43% of the students had left higher education without attaining a degree. Startling statistics like this help to gather a basis for the need for institutional practices to help these students. By continuing to increase merit-based scholarships, we are creating more class issues for our society. Institutions are putting more funds for merit based scholarships for which FGCS are often not strong competitors due to them attending poorer K-12 schools that have not prepared them well (Ward et al, 2012). These students are in greater need of need-based scholarships over merit-based scholarships.

The financial needs of FGCS who lack financial capital will directly or indirectly impact the experience of the student and how he or she engages with the culture. If this happens through the need for these students to work causing them to be less engaged with the campus environment or from a lack of financial resources in general causing them to miss opportunities for engagement (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Studies have shown that over 60% of the first-generation, low-income students report working over 20 hours per week (Engle and Tinto, 2008). When institutions plan for programming geared at retaining this student population and

increasing the persistence of the students, factors such as workload must be considered. Institutions have to work to intentionally engage the students in the campus experience. Intentionality is a priority when policies and experiences are developed through a conscious lens and completed with deliberate effort to develop solutions and progress (Strayhorn, 2012). Often times, this student population does not see the value in campus engagement due to having a number of outside factors that take precedence over social integration such as working to build his or her financial capital (Ward et al, 2012). Financial constraints are an essential piece of the issues and barriers faced by FGCS. In order to improve this situation, policy makers and institutions must consider the implications of socioeconomic status on the success of students (Austin, 2011).

Academic Determination

The factor of academic determination focuses on a student's sense of motivation to excel in college and the willingness to do what it takes to succeed. These students understand that their academic determination will help them to reach their goals (Schreiner et al., 2012). Over the decades, institutions have identified ways individual campuses can be more supportive of FGCS building academic determination through programs and services. As a response to such needs, the federal government established TRIO programs to primarily serve disadvantaged populations like first-generation, low-income, and/or students with disabilities from middle school throughout college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The federal government outlined in the Higher Education Act that two-thirds of participants in TRIO programs must identify as both first-generation and low-income, the remainder may be first-generation or low-income. TRIO programs serve nearly one million students each year with about 2,800 programs (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Department of Education, 2013). The number of the students enrolling in institutions of

higher education is improving based on the success of TRIO programs. Students are able to receive a variety of resources through the TRIO programs ranging from counseling, tutoring, financial assistance, and even summer enrichment programs. Research by Pitre and Pitre (2009) also reveal that low-income, underrepresented ethnic/minority, and FGCS in secondary education benefit from TRIO programs like the Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound as they transition from high school to college. Once they are in college, TRIO programs like Student Support Services provides the programs and resources needed to help retain these students. TRIO has made an effort to offer access beyond the baccalaureate level in order to help FGCS flourish after graduation. TRIO has established helped with this by establishing an achievement program, known as The Ronald E. McNair Program. The McNair Program has connections to many different types of institutions, including both research intense universities and liberal arts focused colleges (Gallardo, 2009). Participating in TRIO programs can show an institutional commitment to the success of FGCS. These programs offer both pre-college and in-college support to this student population. These programs are vital to the students because often time this is the only exposure the student gets in regards to higher education. Each component of TRIO programs is designed to increase a student's chances for institutional fit and increase the degree completion rate.

Studies show differences in the academic preparedness for FGCS in comparison to the non-first-generation students. These students may be underprepared in areas such as English and math, as well as having inadequate study skills (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). In order to assist with such disparities and inadequacies, institutions have placed learning assistance centers on campuses to help students academically. The learning assistance centers may see students that are academically underprepared because of matters beyond their control. Students can be

underprepared based on the K-12 education received, socio-economic background, racial ethnicity barriers, or even a learning disability (Arendale, 2004). Students can receive a variety of resources that can help them to overcome their academically-based challenges. Stebleton and Soria (2012) shared that practitioners working in learning assistance centers must work to understand the factors facing FGCS and how it impacts the learning process:

Several of these factors likely compound upon one another, presenting several obstacles to first-generation students at the same time. For example, first-generation students may have both job and family responsibilities in addition to weak study skills—factors that, when combined, may cause even greater challenges to reaching their goals (Engle & Tinto, 2008). One can argue that first-generation students who attend large research universities experience these obstacles more frequently than first-generation students at smaller institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges) due to the size of the universities. Learning assistance staff, tutors, and other educators (including faculty members) can benefit from an awareness of these challenges that first-generation students encounter (Arendale, 2010). Moreover, these professionals must reach out to first-generation students and help them to reach their personal and professional objectives. (p. 13)

Considering the extensive range of variables that impact the learning process of FGCS makes the work of learning assistance centers that much more impactful. If those working in the centers can build his or her personal awareness of this student population, institutions can use these centers to help with the goal of moving beyond access to degree completion.

Another best practice that has been proven through research to assist FGCS is living and learning communities. Research supports the concept of living and learning communities and has shown that FGCS participating in a living and learning community integrate better socially and academically to an institution compared to FGCS that do not participate (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). Creating experiences for academic and social integration right in the living space of FGCS helps to remove certain barriers to participation and engagement. Involvement refers to a student's engagement inside and outside of the classroom, “the investment of physical and psychological energy into different objects or activities, which occurs

along a continuum; as well as the quantity and quality of students' investment in experiences designed to produce desired outcomes" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 108). Living and learning communities for FGCS helps to show a level of support from the institution towards helping these students adapt to the demands of the culture. Psychological theories suggest that involving a student in a small community early in his or her academic career will improve the student's performance and increase the likelihood of retention for that student through developing confidence and facilitating social integration (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006, p. 197). Programs can carefully place first-generation in communities that will support their success.

There has been a rise in living and learning communities at various types and sizes of institutions including: University of Kentucky, Pacific Lutheran University, Clemson University, Loyola Marymount University, and others. At Pacific Lutheran University, they offer a residential option that also comes with academic and advising support for FGCS. In addition to the living community, the cohort is also enrolled in a common academic course and social engagement that allows them to build skills, offer peer support, and outreach opportunities to local FGCS high school students (Katz, 2015). As displayed through this program, the learning outcomes of the community should support the needs of FGCS.

Learning communities provide a holistic view to the academic experience by integrating an interdisciplinary approach while engaging students in the full college experience (Schreiner, et al., 2012). This helps the connection of students in the learning communities to expand well beyond the classroom. The network built by the community allows students to get to know and establish relationships with others that share similar interest and backgrounds, and with their professors. Institutions must strongly consider the role of staff and faculty in the living and learning community experience of FGCS. This group of students may be more reliant on

structured and formal interactions with faculty and staff and having the resources available in the residence halls over an unstructured and informal process with peers (Inkelas et al., 2007). This may cause FGCS to be more dependent upon university leaders to create opportunities for engagement with faculty, staff and peers making programming essential for this environment. This structured environment from the beginning may in turn provide encouragement for more interaction with peers in more informal settings. FGCS can then utilize the support system gained here and engage in activities throughout campus. Students could possibly attend campus-based programs and other events as a group. If students are supportive of the efforts put in place by the institutions, it will be an easier adaptation from year to year for both the students and institutions. A student builds a support system with the institution, faculty, staff, and his or her peers. The living and learning communities assist students with their learning and relationship development processes. Students that receive this assistance forming relationships early on in their college career are able to continue the relationships throughout and beyond their college careers. “Unlike other retention programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, living and learning communities seek to transform that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student retention” (Tinto, 2000, p. 8). This practice can lead to great measures of success for the institution and students.

Taking heed to the needs and best practices proven by researchers can be of assistance to institutions making a commitment to assisting FGCS. Each of these factors is essential to the transition to and through college for this student population. In order to build a sense of belonging and fit for FGCS these best practices should be assessed and implemented onto college campuses. Institutional leaders should make efforts to properly implement practices throughout the organization.

Positive Perspective

In order to encourage institutions to create a change in the culture for FGCS, leaders must understand that the benefit of this change extends far beyond the publicity received for serving a *special* student population. Positive perspective refers to a student's view of reality and how he or she copes with it in a proactive manner. Students thriving in this area can take a long-term overview of events that occur and see them from various viewpoints. These students can reframe negative experiences and see them as learning opportunities (Schreiner, et al., 2012). Creating such change can lead to reforming the overall education system. Reform can happen by creating a comprehensive learning experience for all students, no matter his or her background. This can enhance the learning experience for not only FGCS, but even students that come from a life of privilege. It can help students from various backgrounds better understand various levels of social class and socioeconomic statuses versus reinforcing the biases that support a life of privilege (Oldfield, 2007). Implementing such changes can help build a more inclusive environment for students to learn and live in preparing them to be more aware of personal differences as engaged citizens. "Students, who function well academically and interpersonally, view their circumstances optimistically, and experiences a sense of well-being are able to approach the demands of college well-equipped for success. However, students who lack these essential characteristics are unable to fully enjoy the breadth of positive experiences offered by postsecondary living and learning environment and may struggle to persist (Schreiner, et al., 2012, p. 45). Having a strong base of FGCS can help to bring a variety of opinions and experiences to a campus environment.

As identified by Edgar Schein (2010), culture is difficult to change and members of the culture must see these changes as being better than the current culture in order for the change to happen. Institutions must understand that identifying and addressing the needs of these students

are important to the growth and advancement of colleges and universities in creating a more diverse campus environment. If this is at the center of what the mission of the institution embodies, this will help the change and implementation occur. The core of any culture is the shared assumptions of its members regarding the mission and goals of the organization (Schein, 2010). Leaders and members of the institutions must try to better understand and value the importance of creating this type of inclusive environment, where all are valued and encouraged to make use of their unique gifts, as a way to strengthen all of us. Instead of the growing divide among our citizens, all will begin to celebrate the positive impact that a more diverse and inclusive environment has in so many important ways. Institutions will receive resistance to the changes, but must remain consistent with the goal of improving the experience FGCS.

Components of Thriving

Focusing on the student's ability to thrive is essential to the fundamental goals of this research, which are to create a better experience for FGCS by producing a more positive aspect. Thriving helps to move the conversation beyond retention and graduation rates, but also focuses on students maximizing their college experience by being engaged intellectually, psychologically, and socially (Schreiner, 2014). There are three major areas of thriving: academic thriving, intrapersonal thriving, and interpersonal thriving. Academic thriving explores the ability of students to be engaged in the learning process. Intrapersonal thriving focuses on building healthy and positive attitudes toward their experiences and learning to cope with it in a proactive manner. Interpersonal thriving examines the belief about how sufficient one's personal relationships are and the values that drive one's interactions with others. From these three areas, five factors have been deduced: engaged learning and academic determination (academic thriving), positive perspective (intrapersonal thriving), and social connectedness and diverse

citizenship (interpersonal thriving) (Schreiner, et. al, 2012). Other components that impact thriving are psychological sense of community, spirituality, and institutional integrity.

Psychological Sense of Community/Sense of Belonging

Garnering a sense of belonging and community is essential to student success. “Thriving students are those who are able to experience life’s transitions as opportunities that lead to significant personal growth. Yet, they rarely do so without support. Thriving students are typically surrounded by others who are thriving, and are often embedded in a community that provides them with a sense of belonging and competence” (Schreiner et al., 2012, p. viii). The sense of belonging to a community enhances each facet of the student’s experience.

Institutions should seek an understanding of how to build and promote belonging for all students. This type of environment promotes student success. McMillan & Chavis (1986) declared four elements that connect to building a sense of belonging:

The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, and time together and similar experiences. (p. 9)

Understanding the importance of belonging and mattering is paramount to supporting FGCS.

This population of students must feel they are welcomed members into the campus community.

In order to build this sense of belonging, institutions should also be aware of the importance of ensuring FGCS remain connected to their individual identity and culture. For many students connected to marginalized groups, staying connected to their culture matters because it represents their allegiance to their culture and preserves the sense of belonging to that group (Carter, 2005). Acceptance of this is important to the overall wellbeing of students. The

sense of belonging is diminished and tarnished when students are forced to assimilate and disconnect from their culture. This type of disconnection from supportive relationships leads to psychological issues and dissatisfaction which lead to academic failure (Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2000; Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

It is imperative that students feel a sense of belonging and understand that they are important and matter (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Strayhorn, 2012). The phenomenon of mattering and belonging is deeper than one may assume. In a psychological meaning, the sense of belonging is associated with feeling of value and significance within a system (Strayhorn, 2012). An environment that encourages FGCS to feel supported as a member is vital, especially as it relates to the connection between FGCS and marginalized groups. The need to belong is increased when an individual is placed in an unfamiliar environment or where individuals may be marginalized or unsupported (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Bridging the gap between isolation and belonging may be difficult, but is important to the overall thriving of FGCS.

Spirituality

Spirituality is defined as beliefs and practices (humanistic, religious, and spiritual) that help individuals discover purpose and meaning as they better understand self, others, and the world around them (Kanzanjan, 2013). Researchers have not spent a great deal of time and effort researching topics like spirituality and its role in student development. Student development research has had a stronger focus on more on mental and psychological development. There is a growing amount of reputable researchers conducting studies in this area that is often deemed “untouchable” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Chickering, 2006). The

increase in research around spiritual development could have potentially stemmed from the growing amount of faculty and students that connect with spirituality (Astin et. al, 2011).

Spirituality shapes how many people view the world and how they experience daily life. Victor Kanzaian (2013) does not limit spirituality but instead explores this phenomenon as “spiritual identity and practices often provide places of shared identity, places for the teaching of values and norms of behavior, places where life rituals are enacted so that members might share together in a common experience around moments throughout the cycle of life including birth, coming of age, marriage, illness, death, and remembrance, and sometimes places where the cultural, social, and economic needs of the members of a group are met” (p. 101).

Understanding spirituality without boundaries can help individuals working with students understand how this area of one’s life is important to the overall development.

Spirituality is important to explore in relation to thriving because thriving focuses on the overall well-being of a student from a holistic approach. As it relates to thriving spirituality is “defined spirituality as reliance—especially in difficult times—on a power greater than self, an awareness of purpose, and a lens through which to perceive and interact with the world” (McIntosh, 2015, p. 18). Spirituality aids in the overall development of individuals and helps a person process his or her approach to life and its happenings. Spirituality is used to define and affirm a person and is particularly important during the moments of transition experienced by college students (Astin et. al, 2011; Kanzaian, 2013). Thriving and spirituality both promote success from a holistic approach that leads to individual growth and progress.

Institutional Integrity

This concept of thriving helps institutions to understand how to better implement intervention and support programs based on predictors of success that have already been

developed in the student. A great number of these variables are beyond the institution's control or occurred before the student arrived on campus: academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, entrance exam test scores, and other factors (Schreiner, 2014). Considering these factors and then identifying the role they play in student success is important. Students enter colleges and universities with these predispositions, behaviors, experiences, and backgrounds that appear to be fixed, but that are in many ways malleable as it pertains to thriving (Schreiner et al., 2012). Understanding this will help lead to areas the students are thriving in and other areas where students need more support. The paradigm of thriving supports the notion of intentionally focusing one's energy on shaping that which will promote the most growth and development. This does not mean you ignore weaknesses, but you instead build pathways to understand and manage areas of deficit while building on areas of strength (Clifton & Nelson, 1992). It allows individuals working with FGCS (if they identify or not with the population) to process how to offer the next level of support that will help the students thrive over merely survive.

While there is an abundance of research on FGCS as a whole, it is important to note that the experience of a FGCS is unique. Institutions have indeed done a better job at granting access to FGCS and are continuing to make improvements on how to retain the students. There is however a gap in the research pertaining to enhancing the student experience from a holistic viewpoint. The premise for this research will focus on telling the story and experience of FGCS as it pertains to their ability to thrive and the qualities they possess that will aide in their success. Measuring the ability of a student to be successful beyond the classroom and focusing on the full out engagement of the student will be the goal of this study. Understanding these barriers is essential to improving the educational pursuit of FGCS, but it is time to move beyond deficit

model thinking and focusing on changing the overall narrative for these students. Using thriving as a premise for student success allows educators to shift from deficit thinking to asset based thinking that focuses on developing strengths. It allows educators to not limit a student based on the past, but create an environment that expands the possibilities for their future. It truly aids in changing the focus from preventing failure to promoting success (Buckingham, 2007; Clifton & Nelson, 1992; Schreiner et. al., 2012; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). This study will focus on gaps in research of FGCS thriving at a private, selective, predominately white institution with an affluent student body. The results will lead to how institutions of this type can better support FGCS student success. Institutions that place an emphasis on nurturing student assets and talents as a base of student success have created programs and policies that build on the strengths of a student instead of remediating their deficiencies (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Research results will focus on the experiences of current day students from varying backgrounds that play a significant role in how they experience this type of institution as a FGCS.

Summary

A number of interventions and programs have been set in place to support FGCS. The literature supports that there are efforts being made by institutions to provide access to students and retain students. Some of this research is grounded in deficit thinking and speaks to what FGCS as individuals lack or do not have. This gap in research that focuses on the positive narrative of FGCS and the things these students can add to campuses is alarming. Research must address this gap by shifting the paradigm to address if the institutions are properly engaged in efforts to support FGCS' ability to thrive. It is now time for institutions to take on the responsibility of ensuring that FGCS are more than surviving on campuses, but instead thriving from a holistic view. The next chapter focuses on methodology and outlines the research design of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to identify the factors related to the ability of first-generation college students to thrive at SCU. Understanding the nature of this study and its guiding central research questions helps identify an appropriate research approach. The central research questions are:

1. Do first-generation college students (FGCS) thrive or merely survive based on the 5 Factors of Thriving?
2. How does being connected to a retention-based support group impact the thriving of FGCS?
3. What aspects of a FGCS experience and being impacts his or her ability to thrive?

I used a mixed methods approach to provide more comprehensive findings than either a solely quantitative or qualitative study could provide on the subject. Using the mixed methods approach provided the most complete analysis of problems by providing multiple forms of evidence that led to solutions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A mixed method approach supported the notion of multiple viewpoints and perspectives allowing me multiple ways to gather and analyze data that led to a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Patton, 2015; Greene, 2006; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).

Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods

The study occurred in three phases through the implementation of an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach. An explanatory sequential mixed methods study uses the descriptive numeric data of the quantitative study from phase one to set the stage for the second phase of qualitative data that will help explain the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative portion of this study included a survey assessment. The assessment

yielded results that measured each student's experience from an academic, social, and psychological lens. These factors are predictive of academic success, institutional fit, retention and graduation, and a student's overall satisfaction with college (Schreiner, 2012). The data gathered from this survey informed the method used for the qualitative phase of the study. "Specifically, the researcher develops or refines the qualitative research questions, purposeful sampling procedures, and data collection protocols so they follow the quantitative results" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 83). The qualitative methods delved deeper into how the factors explored in the assessment applied to the unique lived experiences of FGCS. This portion of the study helped to connect the data collected from the assessment with the real life experiences of the students. The qualitative phase helped to explain the quantitative portion of the study as it relates to the ability of FGCS to thrive. I interpreted the data in the third phase through constructing a case study that addressed the central research questions. The exploring of the case allowed me to share the results from the first two phases. Combining these methods produced a richer and more comprehensive picture of what the true narrative of a FGCS is in this setting.

Research Design

SCU is a mid-size, private institution located in North Texas. SCU defines FGCS as a student whose mother or father did not attend college (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) according to its admission records. As mentioned previously, this definition provides limitations and ignores an entire sector of the student population that should still be considered FGCS. For the purposes of this study, FGCS is defined as a student whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year college or university. This latter definition recognizes a difference between what is gained from a person attending college versus one graduating from college. By expanding the definition of FGCS at SCU alone, the population of FGCS went from nearly 450

students based on SCU's definition to nearly 950 using the definition of this study. The student population for this study included 952 students as a FGCS in the expansive definition. The population received an electronic version of Thriving Quotient, a validated instrument used nationwide, that measured the student's ability to thrive in college. This concept expands the definition of student success to imply that there is more to college than simply surviving. When a student is thriving they are fully engaged inside and outside of the classroom in all areas of their lives contributing to their overall success (Schreiner, 2012). The Thriving Quotient instrument was developed by researchers over a period of five years and has been used by institutions nationally to collect, measure, and analyze data (Schreiner, 2012; Schreiner et. al, 2012).

After analyzing the data from the assessment, I implemented a series of focus groups and virtual interview journals to delve deeper into student experiences to gain an understanding from the participant's point of view. The final phase of the research was constructing a case study that synthesized both quantitative and qualitative findings, in order to tell a more complete story of FGCS. Case studies are designed to study a phenomenon in-depth (Yin, 2014). The use of case study analysis allowed the experiences of FGCS at SCU to be told in a unique way that captured the connection between the quantitative and qualitative approaches of this study. For the goals of this study, this type of methodology was ideal. Case studies offer insight that has implications directly on the development and implementation of various policies (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2013). Telling the story of the participant was found to be vital to sharing the lived experiences of participants from their point of view.

Phases of Study

Research Site

Considering the impact the campus ecology and setting played in the process, the SCU campus served as the research site. SCU was founded in the late 1800's and has a religious affiliation. SCU is a mid-size, private institution located in North Texas. The student body population is about 10,300 students with about 60% female and 40% male. Undergraduate students make up the majority of the population with about 8,800 undergraduates and about 1,500 graduate students. About 20% of the students at SCU identify as a student of color and/or international student. The cost of attendance at SCU is set at right above \$59,000. The majority of the student population hails from Texas at 51%. During the 2015-2016 academic year, SCU had an estimated budget of nearly \$595 million and an endowment of about \$1.5 billion. SCU's retention rate for freshman-to-sophomore is right around 91%. Reports from the Fall 2010 cohort shows the four-year graduation rate at 62.8%.

- Mission Statement: "To educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community."
- Vision Statement: "To create a world-class, values-centered university."
- Values Statement: "SCU values academic achievement, personal freedom and integrity, the dignity and respect of the individual, and a heritage of inclusiveness, tolerance, and service."

It is important to understand the demographics of the FGCS population at the research site as of Fall 2016 through data provided by Institutional Research at the site. As it pertains to FGCS, about 13% of the population identifies as FGCS with about 61% female and 39% male. About 56% of the FGCS population are students of color and/or international students with largest populations identifying as Hispanic students being 28%, African American students being 11% ,

and non-resident being 8%. The majority of the FGCS population is from the state of Texas at 64%. The FGCS age group mirrors the overall population with 84% being between the ages of 18-21 and the overall population being 85% of students being between 18-21. Compared to the overall population, the FGCS had an average ACT score of 25.9 and the overall population an average of 27.8. For the overall population, 12% of the students receive Pell grants and for FGCS 38% of that population receives Pell grants. A majority of the FGCS (23%) major in the fields of science and engineering, while the overall population has business as the predominant major (26%). For the entering Fall 2012 cohort, 60.9% of the FGCS graduated in four years. These data points were supplied to provide a more comprehensive context around the type of FGCS at the research site.

Predominately White Institutions that are well-resourced benefit most from the opportunity gap which increases barriers of access to underserved populations (Pendakur, 2016). It is important to understand the type of institution, demographics, resources, values and goals and other data about the site as each of these are factored into how an institution views or should view its student, FGCS and all.

Demographics of SCU Fall 2016

Participants

The participants in this study all identified as students at the research site and fit the definition of FGCS used for this study: a student whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year college or university. The population for this study was targeted using stratified random sampling. Stratified random sampling is used when the researcher divides the population into subgroups and selects randomly from that subgroup (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The two subgroups for the purposes of this study were those associated with a retention-based support group and those not associated with a retention-based support group. There were 103

students who took the survey and 92 of the students completed the entire survey. Students were asked during the first phase if they were interested in participating in the second phase of the study. 52 respondents wanted to be considered for the second phase of the study.

In order to collect rich and meaningful data, I used purposeful sampling for the qualitative portion of the study. Purposeful sampling focuses on the researcher's desire to gain insight and understanding through selecting a sample where the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009). I utilized purposeful sampling by using participants from SCU that participated in the first phase of the study and voluntarily expressed a desire to participate in the second phase of the study. Of the 52 students who expressed interest, 13 students participated in the second phase.

I gathered a list a names and email addresses from the Institutional Research department. There was an email sent to the students by the Quality Enhancement Office at the site including a brief overview of the study, along with the parameters of their involvement if they chose to participate in the study. The email outlined that participation is completely voluntary. The consent form was also attached to the email correspondence for potential participants to review before joining the study. Precautions to minimize the possibility of undue influence or coercion were taken. The participation in this study followed the normal habits and behaviors of the students and was studied strictly based on the student's full desire to participate. All results were de-identified, and student's confidentiality was maintained at all times during and after the research process.

The study had two different consent forms for phase one and phase two. Participation in phase one required an electronic consent form that required participants to give consent before starting the survey process. For phase two, participants were given a consent form to sign at the

initial focus group or meeting with me that served as the consent form for both the focus groups and virtual interview journals. Students were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point prior to data analysis. There was contact information for the researchers and instructions on how to withdraw from the study provided on the consent form. There was an incentive offered for participating in the study. Incentives for completing the full study included the opportunity to win an iPad mini, gift cards, or a water bottle. Each participant that completed both phases received an incentive. The use of prizes was implemented to help improve the response rate to the study.

Data Collection

I conducted the research using an explanatory sequential mixed methods study that took place in three phases: quantitative, qualitative, and case study analysis. In order to augment the data collected from the quantitative portion of the study, I conducted a second qualitative phase of the research. This explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was ideal for this study because it allowed for a single researcher to conduct the design by requiring collecting only one set of data at a time (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Both of these phases provided a set of rich data for the case study analysis.

Instrumentation

The following sections will further explain the instruments used for data collection.

Survey Assessment

The population of students that fit the study's definition of FGCS received an invitation to complete The Thriving Quotient (TQ) assessment. The assessment used a six-point Likert scale to measure student perceptions. There were 26 items used to measure the five factors of thriving: social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective. There was a variable list provided that links the participant's response

to the factor being measured. The assessment also captured student engagement in campus-based activities allowing students to self-report through nine questions. Data around areas like experiences, motivation, and other satisfaction related items were gathered through thirteen questions. Finally, the Thriving Quotient gathered demographic data like gender, parent's education level, socioeconomic status, race, and self-reported academic data. The reliability and validity for the survey has continued to expand. The study started at 198 items in 2008 and has morphed through various degrees of research and studies regarding the best way to administer the study. The study now uses 32 items and has highly reliable scores for all five scales: "Engaged Learning ($\alpha = .85$), Diverse Citizenship ($\alpha = .80$), Academic Determination ($\alpha = .83$), Positive Perspective ($\alpha = .83$) and Social Connectedness ($\alpha = .81$)" (Schreiner et al., 2009, p.9). Each of these factors will help to address the purpose of this study and determining the ability of FGCS to thrive at the particular research site.

Students took the assessment via Campus Labs encrypted site. A URL specific to this study was generated and distributed to participants. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes for the student to complete. The participant's information was de-identified at the appropriate time after analysis in order to complete the proper preparation for the qualitative phase. Students had a four-week period to allow time for student responses. Students signed an electronic consent form that was approved by the IRB. There five official invitations to participate in the study sent over the time period.

Focus Groups

Based on a preliminary analysis of the survey results, I conducted two, one and a half hour focus groups during a one month period. Focus groups are useful to research when the phenomenon is seen as a social experience and when participants can offer a greater sense of

breadth and depth as a collective body as a homogeneous group (Connelly, 2015; Fern, 2001). The focus groups consisted of FGCS who participated in the phase one survey and opted to be considered for the second phase, which will serve as the commonality between the participants. Focus groups allow for a certain type of connection and synergy to happen amongst participants with shared experiences that cannot happen in an individual interview (George, 2012). The focus groups were broken down between participants in retention-based support programs (6 participants) and participants that are not affiliated with a retention-based support program (4 participants). The amount of 4-5 participants per focus group constitutes as a minigroup. This was selected in order to offer the opportunity for the participants to share more in-depth responses compared to a full group size (Greenbaum, 1998). Utilizing the method of focus groups, allowed me to focus on the experiences of the participants and allowed the participants to share the experience amongst each other. I chose this method in order to allow a sense of comfort for participants, when people share a similar identity it creates a safer environment for them to share about their experiences (Morgan, 1993). A sample of the focus group questions have been provided in Appendix A. To add to the comfort level and participant engagement, the focus group took place on campus in a conference room setting that was easily accessible for students and food was provided. An audio recording device was used to capture the stories and an online transcription service was used to transcribe the data. Transcription allowed me to code the text into sections that was further examined to draw conclusions (Morgan, 1993). The audio recording was important in order to preserve the voice of the student and provide more accuracy to the experiences shared by the students. Collecting data via focus groups added to the richness of data that helped to further explore the ability of FGCS to thrive.

Virtual Interview Journals

The next step in data collection included conducting interviews over a one month period. Interviews are one of vital source of evidence for case studies (Yin, 2014). Interview participants were targeted from amongst the focus group participants. There were three additional participants that could not attend a focus group, but were adamant about participating in the study and were invited to participate in the virtual interview journal portion of the second phase. Participants were invited to participate in interviews via an asynchronous communication process that allowed participants to respond to a question based around the topic and provide an in-depth, well thought out response. Asynchronous communication tools allowed respondents to have a deeper level of thinking by allowing more time to respond and process thoughts (Hou & Wu, 2011). The writing prompt focused on questions targeted at helping these participants to tell the personal story of his or her journey at SCU as a FGCS. The student received five to seven questions per week for a 4-6 week period that they were asked to respond to. The questions focused on further exploring their ability to thrive based on the factors and other influencers of thriving gathered from the other points of data. A sample of the interview questions has been provided in Appendix B. I chose this method to best capture the story and experience of the student. This eliminated the pressure of developing an answer in the moment, but instead allowed the participant to process the response. Allowing the student to respond to the prompts in his or her own voice validated the student experience and ensures that the student's voice is not lost throughout the translation. This process also helped to protect the participants time. As explored in the research, this student population is often busy with time dedicated to academics, work, family obligations, and more. I was able to reach more students with this method and it allowed for the students to respond at their convenience. The use of this method produced the largest set of data from the second phase with four weeks of interview data from ten participants.

Data Analysis

Thriving Quotient

The analysis happened in multiple phases over a five month period. The quantitative portion of the data was evaluated through examining the data in SPSS. I took the results and completed a descriptive analysis. The descriptive analysis provided an analysis of how the participants scored on the five factors associated with the assessment: social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective compared to the national sample. For the next series of analysis of the quantitative data, individual sample t-tests were used to compare the ability to thrive based on participation in a support group. Each portion of this analysis informed the qualitative phase through a preliminary analysis of the data. The data collected helped me to further develop the protocol for the next phase.

Focus Groups and Virtual Interview Journals

The analysis of the qualitative phase was completed in parts. The first set of analysis took place following the focus groups and before the writing prompts was sent to participants. This was a preliminary analysis of emerging themes I developed through the data gathered from the focus groups. This process helped me to develop further questions for the virtual interview journals. As a next step of analysis, I used the process of transcribing data to analyze the information gathered from the focus groups and interviews. A method of coding and condensing codes was used to gather the themes through the use of a software program, Dedoose. The process of coding and condensing the codes allowed me to aggregate data, seek evidence, label the codes, develop themes, and interpret data (Creswell, 2013). Using software helped with organizing data, but I was required to do a great deal of analysis apart from the computer-based

assistance tool (Yin, 2014). It was vital that I took the appropriate amount of time to connect the codes and themes with the initial research questions.

In order to support the study, I implemented a series of member checks and the use of data triangulation throughout the study. Member checks helped participants be well informed and cross check the data; “As qualitative researchers, we have an obligation to our participants to allow easy access to field notes, journals on the research project, interview transcripts, and initial and final categories of analysis” (Janesick, 2011, p. 187). The use of multiple data sources added reliability and trustworthiness through triangulation, which focuses on the added value of using various methods to gather information (Patton, 2015). Allowing the participants to member check the information only helped me to better tell the story and analyze the narrative in a credible manner. Adding credibility helped to address researcher bias and uphold the voice of the participants throughout the study.

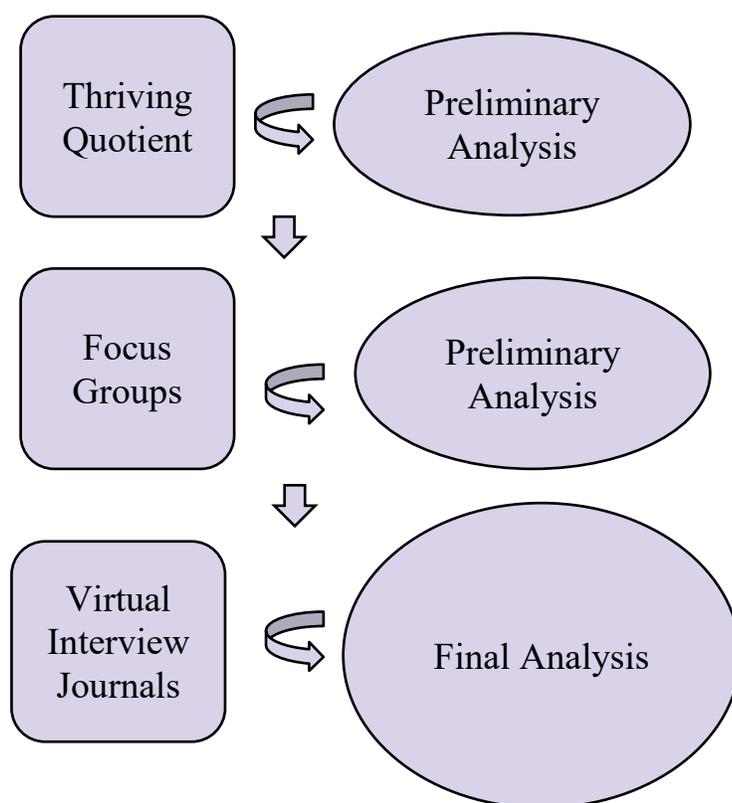
The focus groups and interviews created strong data points. For the final analysis, a method of organizing data and synthesizing emerging themes was used to produce results from the study. Each of these steps helped to address the research questions through the examination of the case. The patterns and themes identified through the analyzing process were pertinent to the case study. The patterns and themes are centered on the 5 Factors of Thriving (Schreiner, 2012):

- Social Connectedness
- Engaged Learning
- Diverse Citizenship
- Academic Determination
- Positive Perspective

These factors served as a starting place for themes and codes. I took all of the data points from this mixed methods study to make sense of the lived experiences of FGCS and their ability to thrive. The data collected from the survey provides statistics on how FGCS score on their ability

to thrive and was paired with the qualitative data that gives an in-depth description of what thriving means to the students based on a series of focus groups and virtual interview journals. The case study presents the results from each data point in a way that is clear and concise for the audience to comprehend. This has led to a strong analysis (see figure 3) of the data and provides beneficial results for the purposes of the research regarding the lived experiences of first-generation college students at SCU.

Figure 3.1. Explanation of Analysis



Confidentiality

In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, each student was assigned a pseudonym. No identifiable information was used for the study. Audio recordings and emails

were deleted after the focus groups were transcribed; interview and focus group transcripts were stored on a password protected computer until the data analysis phase was completed. All consent forms and documents are kept electronically via an encrypted and password protected site and in secure filing system in the principal investigator's office. The owners of the Thriving Quotient requested access to the data to be used as a part of their national sample. Proper clearance from the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs was obtained as a form of approval on behalf of the administration. There is also a copy of the approved IRB on behalf of the overall Thriving Project provided in the appendices (see Appendix C).

Ethical Considerations

I worked diligently to ensure that the research study is ethically sound. Precautions were taken like minimizing the amount of risks, upholding confidentiality of the participants, helping the participant understand his or her voluntary role, and other methods. Participation called for the participant to disclose information on his or her experience and offer suggestions to improve the experience. To minimize this risk, the results of the study do not include any identifying information for the student. This was important in order to avoid the risk of the participant withholding information or not being as open if he or she fears the risk of one's identity being exposed. Participation in this study resulted in a loss of time for participants. The participant were asked to participate in the survey that took 15-20 minutes, one and a half hour focus groups, and a series of virtual interview journal questions that were completed at the convenience of the participant. To minimize this risk, the participant was notified of the loss of time in advance to participation in the study. Participation in this study potentially caused participants to recall stressful or challenging points of his or her lives. To minimize this risk, the participant was free to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time prior to

analysis. There was also information for counseling and assistance listed on the consent form that the participant was reminded of.

Confidentiality and the security of the participants' information were of utmost importance to me. In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, each student was assigned a pseudonym. After transcription of the data, each student was given a pseudonym to be used in the results. No identifiable information was used for the study. Audio recordings were deleted after the focus groups were transcribed; interview transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer until the data analysis phase was completed. All consent forms and documents are kept in a locked file drawer in the Principal Investigator's office on the SCU campus for a minimum of three years. This process helped me avoid the risks associated with presenting both positive and negative results. Each of these steps was taken to not only minimize risks, but to ensure that no harm is done to the participant. The story and voice of the participant will be the primary focus of the analysis and presentation of findings. The data was shared with the proper sources including university administration, faculty, peer reviewers, and other researchers/scholars. This brought in other ethical considerations regarding my positionality. I have a personal investment in the program as a former employee of a department that works with FGCS. I am an advocate for FGCS and want to see support programs for this population succeed. I kept this in mind as the study was conducted to prevent from only presenting the positive findings. I also have a number of years of work experience with this population at various types of institutions. I did not let these experiences impact how the findings at SCU were analyzed. I made every effort to remain objective in the process, but did consider these factors. I considered all ethical considerations in order to conduct an impartial and thorough study.

Summary

This chapter addresses the purpose of the study and the research questions that were addressed through the research design. The chapter described in details the research design, research site, participants, data collection, data analysis, confidentiality, and ethical considerations. This explanatory sequential mixed methods study applied the appropriate methods needed to address the research questions for this study. The next chapter presents the data analyzation of the findings from the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

First-generation college students (FGCS) have been a part of the literature for higher education for decades. The research has served a vital purpose in helping to serve this population of students and to help encourage government entities and institutions to build programs to offer access to FGCS. However, there is a gap in the research as it pertains to building a positive perspective of FGCS and focusing on their holistic experience. The goal of this study was to challenge deficit thinking and focus on FGCS ability to thrive by operating from an asset-based model. This study covered an explanatory sequential mixed methods study that took place in three phases: quantitative, qualitative, and case study analysis. This chapter will present the findings from the study by addressing the research questions:

1. Do first-generation college students (FGCS) thrive or merely survive based on the 5 Factors of Thriving?
2. How does being connected to a retention-based support group impact the thriving of FGCS?
3. What aspects of a FGCS experience and being impacts his or her ability to thrive?

Phase One

Subjects

Phase one of the study was the process of administering the Thriving Quotient (TQ) assessment. Phase one was conducted January-February 2017. The TQ was sent to 952 students that fit the definition of FGCS used for this study: “as a student whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year college or university”. There were a total of five invitations to participate sent to the population sample. There was a response rate of 10.8% equaling 103 respondents. Over 78% (92 participants) of the respondents completed the entire assessment. The results were analyzed using SPSS version 23. The national sample provided by the TQ

research team was used as a benchmark to identify the level of thriving for the population of this study. The national sample included an n of 3,435.

Research Demographics

It is important to understand the demographics of the research participants. The demographics play an important role in the identity and experience of the participant as it relates to being a FGCS and how they experience college. To highlight some of the demographic areas while more detailed information is shared below: about 60% of the participants identified as a person of color compared to 38% of the national sample identifying as a person of color. The age distribution of participants varied from with national norm with 70% of the research participants reporting to be between 18-20 and on a national level only 61% report the same. As it relates to class level, the populations are similar. The highest percentage of research participants identified as sophomores (30.8%) and a close percentage of first year students (28%) were second. For the national sample, the majority of the students are first year students (36%) and then sophomores (23%). The family income for both populations is similar with about 69% reporting a family income under \$90,000. 66% of the research participants reported working for money compared to 58% of the national sample. It is also important to note that 65% of participants at the research site are the first in their immediate family to attend college while only 21% of the national sample reported the same. The demographics reported here are important to understanding the ability of FGCS at this research site to thrive compared to national norms that includes both FGCS and non-FGCS and many other varying demographic and identity factors.

Table 4.1. *Comparison of Ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Nat (%)	SCU (%)
African American/Black	4.1	10.3
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4	0
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	11	3.8
Caucasian/White	62.9	39.7
Latino/ Hispanic	11.6	38.5
Multiethnic	5.3	6.4
Prefer Not to Respond	4.2	1.3

Table 4.2. *Comparison of Age*

Age	Nat (%)	SCU (%)
17 or younger	1	0
18-20	61.9	70.5
21-23	25.2	29.5
24-26	3.6	0
27-30	3	0
Over 30	5.3	0

Table 4.3. *Comparison of Classification*

Classification	Percentage	
	Nat	SCU
First-year student	36.2	28.2
Sophomore	23.7	30.8
Junior	19.1	19.2
Senior	20.9	15.4
Other	N/A	6.4

Table 4.4. *Comparison of Degree Aspirations*

Degree Aspirations	Nat (%)	SCU(%)
None	1.1	0
Bachelor's Degree	27.3	16.7
Teaching Credential	2.7	0
Master's Degree	42	50
Doctorate	14.9	17.9
Medical of Law Degree	9.9	15.4
Other	2	0

Table 4.5. *Comparison of Family Income*

Family Income	Percentage	
	Nat	SCU
Less than \$30,000 a year	20.2	20.5
\$30,000-\$59,999	26.8	28.2
\$60,000-\$89,999	21.6	20.5
\$90,000-\$119,999	15.8	17.9
\$120,000 and over	15.6	12.8

Table 4.6. *Comparison of Employment Status*

Employment Status	Percentage	
	Nat	SCU
No	42	34.6
On campus	26.9	25.6
Off campus	23.3	23.1
Both on and off campus	7.9	16.7

Table 4.7. *Comparison of High School Grades*

Grades	Nat (%)	SCU (%)
Mostly A's	47.8	52.6
Mostly A's and B's	33.3	35.9
Mostly B's and C's	9.4	6.4
Mostly C's	1.9	0
Below a C Average	0.9	0

Table 4.8. *Comparison of College Grades*

Grades	Nat (%)	SCU
Mostly A's	29.2	Not available
Mostly A's and B's	40.6	Not available
Mostly B's	10.5	Not available
Mostly B's and C's	2.6	Not available
Below a C Average	1	Not available

Table 4.9. *Comparison of Certainty of Major*

Certainty of Major	Nat (%)	SCU (%)
Very Unsure	4.1	2.6
Unsure	3.4	3.8
Somewhat Unsure	12.4	6.4
Sure	28.5	33.3
Very Sure	47.4	50

Table 4.10. *Comparison of Additional Demographics*

Additional Demographics	Percentage	
	Nat	SCU
Percent who are the first in their immediate family to attend college	21.9	65.4
Percent enrolled full time	91.2	100
Are you an international student?	5.9	6.4
Percent who live on campus	70	67.9
Percent who transferred into this institution	16	1.3
Percent for whom this institution was their first choice at enrollment	69.4	71.8
Percent who are student athletes	11	5.1

Thriving Quotient

Five Factors of Thriving and Other Components

In an effort to challenge deficit thinking as it pertains to FGCS, it is important to understand if students are thriving or surviving. Thriving focuses on creating a quality experience for all students and the impact the journey can have on students beyond college and throughout life (Schreiner, et al., 2012). Phase one of the study supported the idea that at the research site FGCS are thriving compared to national norms. This notion is derived from comparing the scores of FGCS at the research site to the national norms of the Thriving Project.

The TQ team utilized questions specific to each of the five factors (social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective). The data collected in this section is self-reported by the respondents. The data has been analyzed according to the five factors in order to address the research questions. Items are on a 6-point scale with 6 indicating “strongly agree”.

The TQ survey addressed the levels of thriving for participants in the study. There was statistical difference in levels of thriving for FGCS at the research site compared to the national norms for the TQ. Overall compared to the national sample, research participants at the site are thriving in all five of the factors: social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective. Certain areas were significant when compared to the national sample: engaged learning ($t=2.127$, $p=.0359$), diverse citizenship ($t=4.3712$, $p=.0000$), and academic determination ($t=3.075$, $p=.0027$). In the areas of engaged learning, diverse citizenship, and academic determination the research participants scored significantly higher than the national sample.

Table 4.11. *Comparison of Results of Thriving*

Factor of Thriving	t-value	p-value	df	M(National)	M(SCU)
Social Connectedness	0.8661	0.3889	86.29	4.05	4.1626
Engaged Learning	2.127	0.0359	97.5	4.73	4.935
Diverse Citizenship	4.3712	0	92.9	4.77	5.063
Academic Determination	3.075	0.0027	100.4	4.75	4.976
Positive Perspective	0.06551	0.5141	85.87	4.56	4.6341

Social Connectedness

Items reported on in TQ as it pertains to Social Connectedness:

Social connectedness refers to a student's ability to feel connected with others in a healthy manner (Schreiner, et al., 2012). Compared to national norms, the participants appear to feel connected with others. Data supports this finding whereas 79.9% strongly agreeing or agreeing that their friends really care about them and 76.6% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they are content with the kinds of friendships they currently have. To support the notion of their ability to feel connected, only 17% strongly agreeing or agreeing that it is hard to make friends on campus and 23.1% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they often feel lonely due to only having a few close friends to share their concerns with.

Table 4.12. *Comparison of the Social Connectedness Scoring*

Social Connectedness	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Other people seem to make friends more easily than I do. (reverse-scored)	3.24	1.46	3.68	1.54
I don't have as many close friends as I wish I had. (reverse-scored)	3.5	1.58	3.37	1.77
I feel like my friends really care about me.	4.91	1.06	5.16	0.95
I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have.	4.62	1.1	5.04	1.2
It's hard to make friends on this campus. (reverse-scored)	4.13	1.35	3.1	1.45
I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns. (reverse-scored)	3.9	1.52	2.96	1.63

Engaged Learning

Items reported on in TQ as it pertains to Engaged Learning:

Students must be able to develop a connection with the academic environment both inside and outside of the classroom, making engaged learning essential to success (McKay and Estrella, 2008). Compared to the national norms, participants appear to be thriving in the area of engaged learning. The data supports this with 88.3 % F that they are learning things in their classes that are worthwhile to them as a person and 73.8% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they are finding ways to applying the knowledge they learn.

Table 4.13. *Comparison of the Engaged Learning Scoring*

Engaged Learning	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I feel as though I am learning things in my classes that are worthwhile to me as a person.	5.02	0.98	5.24	1.031
I can usually find ways of applying what I'm learning in class to something else in my life.	4.79	0.98	5.01	1.022
I find myself thinking about what I'm learning in class even when I'm not in class.	4.71	1.1	4.79	1.153
I feel energized by the ideas I'm learning in most of my classes.	4.41	1.11	4.7	1.117

Diverse Citizenship

Items reported on in TQ as it pertains to Diverse Citizenship:

As an important component of thriving, diverse citizenship combines a student's ability to value differences and the openness to others, along with the desire and confidence to make contributions to one's community (Schreiner, et al., 2012). Participants in this study exemplify the ability to thrive in this area. There valuing differences is shown whereas 73.2% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they value interacting with people that hold different viewpoints. Of the respondents, 81% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they can make a difference in their community and 76.8% strongly agreeing or agreeing that becoming more aware of perspectives of those from various backgrounds has influenced their views.

Table 4.14. *Comparison of the Diverse Citizenship Scoring*

Diverse Citizenship	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own.	4.68	1.03	4.96	0.886
I know I can make a difference in my community.	4.79	0.99	5.22	0.845
It is important to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	5.3	0.83	5.49	0.604

It's important for me to make a contribution to my community.	4.74	1.06	5.05	0.928
My knowledge or opinions have been influenced or changed by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	4.81	1.04	5.02	1.018

Academic Determination

Items reported on in TQ as it pertains to Academic Determination:

Programs like TRiO, living and learning communities, learning assistance centers, and more have contributed to increased levels of determination and motivation for FGCS and other students (Stableton and Soria, 2012; Arendale, 2004; Gallardo, 2009). The factor of academic determination focuses on a student's sense of motivation to excel in college and the willingness to do what it takes to succeed. These students understand that their academic determination will help them to reach their goals (Schreiner, et al., 2012). In comparison to the national norms, research participants are thriving in the area of academic determination. There thriving is contributed to items such as: 80.1% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they are confident they will reach their educational goals and 92.5% strongly agreeing or agreeing that others would said they work hard.

Table 4.15. *Comparison of the Academic Determination Scoring*

Academic Determination	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Even if assignments are not interesting to me, I find a way to keep working at them until they are done well.	4.64	1.07	4.93	1.087
I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success.	4.8	1.04	4.92	1.131
I am good at juggling all the demands of college life.	4.31	1.17	4.5	1.124
Other people would say I'm a hard worker.	4.95	1.02	5.43	0.716

When I'm faced with a problem in my life, I can usually think of several ways to solve it.	4.76	0.94	4.89	0.941
--	------	------	------	-------

Positive Perspective

Items reported on in TQ as it pertains to Positive Perspective:

Students who can reframe negative opportunities and build coping mechanisms to deal with reality are thriving in the area of positive perspective. Students thriving in this area can take a long-term overview of events that occur and see them from various viewpoints (Schreiner, et al., 2012). The data supports that students at the research site are thriving in this area compared to the national norm. 52.1% report that they strongly agreeing or agreeing that they tend to see the glass “half full” rather than “half empty” and 65.7% strongly agreeing or agreeing that they look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless.

Table 4.16. *Comparison of the Positive Perspective Scoring*

Positive Perspective	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
My perspective on life is that I tend to see the glass as “half full” rather than “half empty.”	4.49	1.2	4.5	1.238
I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless.	4.63	1.05	4.73	0.943

Other Components of Thriving

The creators of the Thriving Quotient have deemed other components as essential to a student’s ability to thrive such as: psychological sense of community, spirituality, and institutional integrity. Research participants showed a statistical significance in each area with psychological sense of community ($t=2.029$, $p=.0451$) and institutional integrity ($t=2.283$, $p=.0249$) contributing to their thriving. Compared to the national sample, the research

participants at this site considered themselves to be less spiritual ($t=2.725$, $p=.0078$) than their counterparts.

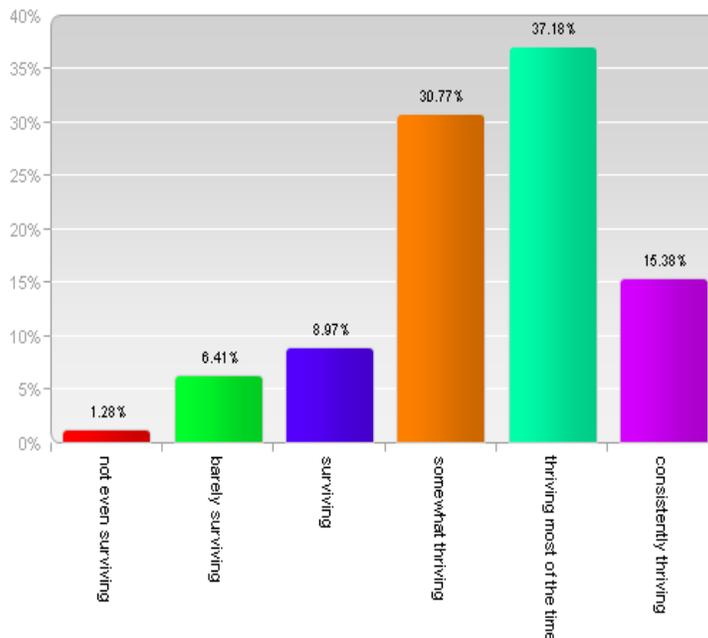
Table 4.17. *Comparison of the Other Components of Thriving*

Other Components of Thriving	t-value	p-value	df	M(National)	M(SCU)
Psychological Sense of Community	2.029	0.0451	100.11	4.69	4.88
Spirituality	2.725	0.0078	84.176	4.82	4.346
Institutional Integrity	2.283	0.0249	87.02	4.75	4.988

When asked, “We are interested in what helps students thrive in college. Thriving is defined as getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience. Given that definition, to what extent do you think you are THRIVING as a college student this semester?” respondents reported that 15.8% consider themselves to be constantly thriving, 37.1% reported to be thriving most of the time, and 30.7% reported to be somewhat thriving.

Figure 4.2: *Self-Reported Thriving*

Q87. We are interested in what helps students thrive in college. Thriving is defined as getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience. Given that definition, to what extent do you think you are THRIVING as a college student this semester?



Psychological Sense of Community

Psychological sense of community is important to the ability of a student to thrive. For this study, 59.7% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they belong here. 86.9% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they are proud of the college they attend. 53.2% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that there is a strong sense of community on campus.

Table 4.18. *Comparison of the Psychological Sense of Community Scoring*

Psychological Sense of Community	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Being a student here fills an important need in my life.	4.62	1.14	4.89	1.063

I feel proud of the college or university I have chosen to attend.	4.9	1.18	5.41	1.007
There is a strong sense of community on this campus.	4.54	1.21	4.5	1.144

Spirituality

Spirituality is connected to thriving. The participants at the research site fared lower than the national norms on this scale item. 57.3% reported that strongly agreeing or agreeing that their spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning and purpose to their life. Under half of the respondents, 46.6%, reported that they strongly agreeing or agreeing that spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of their approach to life.

Table 4.19. *Comparison of the Spirituality Scoring*

Spirituality	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life.	4.66	1.5	4	1.656
My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning and purpose to my life.	4.89	1.39	4.4	1.624

Institutional Integrity

Institutional integrity is a measure of how a student views and values the experience of his or her institution. Students at the research scored higher on this scale than the national norm. 86.5% strongly agreeing or agreeing that the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators are consistent with the mission of the institution and 63.3% strongly agreeing or agreeing that the experiences on campus so far have met their expectations.

Table 4.20. *Comparison of the Institutional Integrity Scoring*

Institutional Integrity	Nat		SCU	
	(N= 3,435)		(N=92)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Overall, the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators on this campus are consistent with the mission of the institution.	4.97	1.01	5.3	0.965
My experiences on campus so far have met my expectations.	4.67	1.21	4.82	1.229

Impact of Support Groups

Institutions have worked for decades to develop retention based programming to support the persistence and matriculation of students (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Tinto, 2012). This study desired to test the hypothesis that retention based (support) programs are important to retaining students and overall student success. Therefore, tests were conducted utilizing the self-reported information provided by participants to break them down into two groups- students who reported to be a part of a support program and students who reported to not be a part of a support program. Of the respondents in phase one, 44.9% reported to be connected with a support program while 55.1% reported to not be associated with a support program. The tests compared the TQ scale item scores between both groups.

Thriving Quotient

TQ Scales Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and T-Test Results. Levene's test was used to test the assumption of equal variances for all variables. Two-tailed independent t tests were then computed for all variables for both the support group and no support group sets of data to determine if there were significant differences. A p-value less than the .05 level was used to determine if the item was significant. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed that the variances for Psychological Sense of Community and Institutional Integrity showed a statistical difference between the two groups. T-test results revealed that there are no significant

differences were found to exist between the two groups (support and no support) in the mean scores on the Engaged Learning Scale, the Academic Determination Scale, the Diverse Citizenship Scale, the Social Connectedness Scale, the Positive Perspective Scale, the Spirituality Scale, the Psychological Sense of Community Scale, the Student-Faculty Interaction Scale, and the Institutional Integrity Scale. Results for the full test can be found below in Table 21.

Table 4.21. *Thriving Quotient Scale Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and Independent Samples T-Test Results*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Item	Equality of Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Engaged Learning	Equal variances assumed	0.208	0.65	-0.037	76	0.97	-0.008	0.21416	-0.43452	0.41857
Academic Determination	Equal variances assumed	0.739	0.76	0.739	76	0.462	0.11196	0.15147	-0.18973	0.41365
Diverse Citizenship	Equal variances assumed	0.135	0.715	1.455	76	0.15	0.19646	0.13502	-0.07246	0.46537
Positive Perspective	Equal variances assumed	2.631	0.109	1.826	76	0.072	0.39103	0.2141	-0.03539	0.81745

Social Connectedness	Equal variances assumed	0.569	0.453	0.542	76	0.59	-0.1362	0.25145	-0.63701	0.36459
Thriving Quotient	Equal variances assumed	0.082	0.775	0.89	76	0.376	0.11105	0.12482	-0.13755	0.35965
Psychological Sense of Community	Equal variances not assumed	4.244	0.043	1.677	71.66	0.098	0.31561	0.18821	-0.0596	0.69083
Faculty	Equal variances assumed	0.831	0.365	0.156	76	0.877	0.02917	0.18711	-0.34349	0.40182
Institutional Integrity	Equal variances not assumed	5.883	0.018	1.432	65.06	0.157	0.28416	0.19845	-0.11216	0.68049

TQ Scales and National Norms. As revealed earlier, the overall population of participants at the research site exceeded that of the national norm in most areas. The purpose of this test was to see where the data may differ when separated between support and no support group. The area that this proved to be true was for Positive Perspective. There was no significant difference between the research participants and the national norm, but there was a difference in the means for the support and no support group compared to the national norm. The support group mean ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.80$) was higher than the national norm ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.13$) and the no-support group mean ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.04$) was lower. Table 22 has a complete listing of the TQ scale descriptive.

Table 4.22. *Thriving Quotient Scale Descriptive*

	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Engaged Learning	Yes	35	4.9571	1.00639	0.17011
	No	43	4.9651	0.88402	0.13481
Academic Determination	Yes	35	5.081	0.67685	0.11441
	No	43	4.969	0.65592	0.10003
Diverse Citizenship	Yes	35	5.181	0.55036	0.09303
	No	43	4.9845	0.62553	0.09539
Positive Perspective	Yes	35	4.9143	0.79968	0.13517
	No	43	4.5233	1.04057	0.15868
Social Connectedness	Yes	35	4.1429	1.00825	0.17043
	No	43	4.2791	1.17667	0.17944
Thriving Quotient	Yes	35	4.8552	0.55078	0.0931
	No	43	4.7442	0.54625	0.0833
Spirituality	Yes	35	4.6381	1.39881	0.23644
	No	43	4.186	1.67506	0.25544
Psychological Sense of Community	Yes	35	5.0714	0.63469	0.10728
	No	43	4.7558	1.01402	0.15464
Faculty	Yes	35	3.4943	0.89802	0.15179
	No	43	3.4651	0.75463	0.11508
Institutional Integrity	Yes	35	5.1524	0.57929	0.09792
	No	43	4.8682	1.13188	0.17261

TQ Items Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and T-Test Results. To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of retention-based on programs on the population, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and separate t-tests were applied to each of the items associated with the TQ instrument. The results revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the support and no-support group means on numerous items. The following results break down the differences as it pertains to each factor and other components to thriving: social connectedness, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, and positive perspective, psychological sense of community, spirituality, and institutional integrity, and other items not

associated with a specific scale. Table 3 provides a presentation of t-test results for all TQ items. A complete listing of TQ item descriptive may be found in Table 4.

Social Connectedness

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the t-test results confirmed that the "I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have" item presented a significant difference, $t(76) = 1.92$, $p = 0.059$. The support group mean ($M=5.37$, $SD = 0.69$) was higher than the no-support group mean ($M= 4.91$, $SD = 1.29$).

Engaged Learning

No items on this scale reached a significant difference.

Diverse Citizenship

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the t-test results confirmed that the "I know I can make a difference in my community" item demonstrated a significant difference, $t(76) = 2.47$, $p = 0.016$, between the two group means. The support group mean ($M=5.51$, $SD = 0.66$) being higher than the no-support group mean ($M=5.05$, $SD = 0.95$).

Academic Determination

The Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not significant and equal variances were assumed. The t-test results revealed that the "Other people would say I'm a hard worker" item demonstrated a significant difference, $t(76) = 2.07$, $p = 0.042$, between the two groups. The support group ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 0.59$) had a higher mean than the no-support group ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.62$).

Positive Perspective

No items on this scale reached a significant difference.

Psychological Sense of Community

After an examination of the scale scores, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and separate t-tests were applied to each item of the TQ instrument. The item, "Being a student here fills an important need in my life" also showed significant differences, $t(76) = 2.84$, $p = 0.006$, between the two group means. The support group mean ($M=5.26$, $SD = 0.85$) was higher than the no-support group mean ($M=4.58$, $SD = 1.18$).

Spirituality

Overall both groups scored statistically lower than the national norm on this item. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the t-test results confirmed that an item that was significant between the two groups was "My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult," $t(61) = 1.79$, $p = 0.077$. Though lower than the national norm, the support group mean ($M=5.06$, $SD = 1.39$) was still higher than the no-support group mean ($M=4.40$, $SD = 1.79$).

Institutional Integrity

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant for three items in this area including: "My experiences on campus so far have met my expectations"; "The institution was accurately portrayed during the admissions process"; and "Overall, the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators on this campus are consistent with the mission". The t-test results did not reveal significant items. Other items not associated with a particular scale. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the t-test results confirmed that items in this area were significant. The "I am confident about the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run" item showed significant differences ($t(76) = 3.34$, $p = 0.001$). The support group mean ($M=4.97$, $SD = 0.86$) was higher than the no-support group mean ($M=4.02$, $SD = 1.49$). The "I

intend to re-enroll at this institution next year” item also demonstrated significant difference ($t(61) = 2.15, p = 0.036$), between the two groups, with the support group ($M = 5.90, SD = 0.31$) having a higher mean than the no-support group ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.26$). Levene’s Test and T-test results for participation items may be found in Table 23.

Participation item descriptive information is located in Table 24.

Table 4.23. *Thriving Quotient Item Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and Independent Samples T-Test Results*

					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confiden ce Interval of the Differen ce	
Scale item	Equalit y of Variance s	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2- taile d)	Mean Differen ce	Std. Error Differen ce	Lower	Upp er
I am learning worthwhile things in class	Equal variance s assumed	0.988	- 0.32 3	- 0.42 1	76	0.675	-0.102	0.243	-0.587	0.382
I apply class learning outside of class	Equal variance s assumed	0.149	0.7	0.33 4	76	0.739	0.08	0.241	-0.399	0.56
I am confident in reaching my educational goals	Equal variance s assumed	0.525	0.41 7	0.30 8	76	0.759	0.076	0.248	-0.418	0.571
I think about what I learn in class outside of class	Equal variance s assumed	2.566	0.11 3	- 0.08 2	76	0.935	-0.021	0.26	-0.539	0.497
Even if assignments are not interesting, I persist until they are done well	Equal variance s assumed	0.043	0.83 7	- 0.69 6	76	0.489	-0.177	0.254	-0.683	0.329
I feel energized by ideas I am learning in most of my classes	Equal variance s assumed	0	0.99 6	0.04 2	76	0.966	0.011	0.268	-0.522	0.544

I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success	Equal variances assumed	0.022	0.883	0.657	76	0.513	0.173	0.264	-0.353	0.699
I am good at juggling the demands of college life	Equal variances assumed	1.79	0.185	0.882	76	0.38	0.233	0.264	-0.293	0.76
Other people would say I'm a hard worker	Equal variances assumed	0.987	0.324	2.065	76	0.042	0.285	0.138	0.01	0.56
I feel like I belong here	Equal variances assumed	2.081	0.153	0.385	76	0.702	0.113	0.294	-0.472	0.698
Other people seem to make friends more easily than I	Equal variances assumed	0.25	0.618	1.153	76	0.253	0.397	0.345	-0.289	1.084
Being a student here fills an important need in my life	Equal variances assumed	2.994	0.088	2.838	76	0.006	0.676	0.238	0.201	1.15
I spend time making a difference in other people's lives	Equal variances not assumed	6.633	0.012	1.222	73.53	0.226	0.288	0.236	-0.182	0.759
I feel proud of the university I have chosen to attend	Equal variances not assumed	4.514	0.037	1.669	70.6	0.1	0.35	0.209	-0.068	0.767
I don't have as many close friends as I wish I had	Equal variances assumed	0.01	0.921	0.509	76	0.612	0.207	0.406	-0.601	1.015
There is a strong sense of community on this campus	Equal variances assumed	.927	0.339	0.468	76	0.641	0.124	0.265	-0.404	0.652
I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own	Equal variances assumed	0.004	0.948	0.624	76	0.535	0.127	0.203	-0.278	0.532

I feel like my friends really care about me	Equal variances assumed	0.07	0.792	0.31	76	0.757	0.066	0.212	-0.357	0.488
I know I can make a difference in my community	Equal variances assumed	1.232	0.27	2.469	76	0.016	0.468	0.189	0.09	0.845
It is important to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds	Equal variances assumed	0.158	0.693	0.715	76	0.477	0.101	0.141	-0.18	0.382
I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have	Equal variances not assumed	8.046	0.006	2.034	66.6	0.046	0.464	0.228	0.009	0.92
My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult	Equal variances not assumed	5.094	0.027	1.837	75.87	0.07	0.662	0.369	-0.056	1.379
When I'm faced with a problem in my life, I can usually think of several ways to solve it	Equal variances assumed	1.282	0.261	0.408	76	0.684	0.08	0.197	-0.312	0.473
My perspective on life is that I tend to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty"	Equal variances assumed	3.173	0.079	1.915	76	0.059	0.537	0.28	-0.022	1.095
My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning and purpose to my life	Equal variances assumed	1.457	0.231	0.736	76	0.464	0.274	0.373	-0.468	1.017
It's hard to make friends on this campus	Equal variances assumed	0.397	0.531	1.134	76	0.26	0.373	0.329	-0.283	1.029
It's important to me to make a contribution to my community	Equal variances assumed	1.085	0.301	0.776	76	0.44	0.166	0.214	-0.23	0.593
I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless	Equal variances assumed	1.602	0.21	1.267	76	0.209	0.245	0.194	-0.14	0.631

My knowledge/opinions have been influenced by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds	Equal variances assumed	0.707	0.403	0.12	76	0.905	0.029	0.238	-0.445	0.502
I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns	Equal variances assumed	0.015	0.904	1.018	76	0.312	0.37	0.363	-0.354	1.094
My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life	Equal variances assumed	1.329	0.253	1.114	76	0.269	0.42	0.377	-0.331	1.171
I am confident that the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run	Equal variances not assumed	8.275	0.005	3.522	69.05	0.001	0.948	0.269	0.411	1.485
I intent to re-enroll at SCU next year (graduating seniors please leave blank)	Equal variances not assumed	19.43	0	2.307	37.656	0.027	0.514	0.223	0.063	0.966
I intend to graduate from SCU	Equal variances not assumed	12.107	0.001	1.769	47.964	0.083	0.236	0.133	-0.32	0.503
Given my current goals, SCU is a good fit for me	Equal variances assumed	3.182	0.055	1.209	74	0.231	0.242	0.2	-0.157	0.642
If I had to do it over again, I would choose a different university to attend	Equal variances assumed	0.116	0.734	-0.203	76	0.84	-0.066	0.328	-0.719	0.586
I really enjoy being a student here	Equal variances assumed	3.424	0.068	1.363	75	0.177	0.329	0.241	-0.152	0.809

My experiences on campus so far have met my expectations	Equal variances not assumed	4.067	0.047	1.41	73.750	0.163	0.359	0.255	-0.149	0.867
The institution was accurately portrayed during the admissions process	Equal variances not assumed	5.459	0.022	0.769	73.26	0.444	0.199	0.258	-0.316	0.713
Overall, the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators on this campus are consistent with the mission	Equal variances not assumed	6.145	0.015	1.406	85.05	0.164	0.294	0.209	-0.124	0.712

Table 4.24. *Thriving Quotient Item Descriptive*

	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
I am learning worthwhile things in class	Yes	35	5.2	1.232	0.208
	No	43	5.3	0.914	0.139
I apply class learning outside of class	Yes	35	5.06	1.056	0.178
	No	43	4.98	1.058	0.161
I am confident in reaching my educational goals	Yes	35	5.29	1.202	0.203
	No	43	5.21	0.989	0.151
I think about what I learn in class outside of class	Yes	35	4.89	1.278	0.216
	No	43	4.91	1.019	0.155
Even if assignments are not interesting, I persist until they are done well	Yes	35	4.8	1.188	0.2
	No	43	4.98	1.058	0.161
I feel energized by ideas I am learning in most of my classes	Yes	35	4.69	1.231	0.208
	No	43	4.67	1.128	0.172

I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success	Yes	35	5.06	1.11	0.188
	No	43	4.88	1.199	0.183
I am good at juggling the demands of college life	Yes	35	4.63	1.262	0.213
	No	43	4.4	1.072	0.164
Other people would say I'm a hard worker	Yes	35	5.66	0.591	0.1
	No	43	5.31	0.618	0.094
I feel like I belong here	Yes	35	4.86	1.033	0.175
	No	43	4.74	1.465	0.223
Other people seem to make friends more easily than I	Yes	35	3.89	1.491	0.252
	No	43	3.49	1.533	0.234
Being a student here fills an important need in my life	Yes	35	5.26	0.852	0.144
	No	43	4.58	1.18	0.18
I spend time making a difference in other people's lives	Yes	35	4.8	0.833	0.141
	No	43	4.51	1.242	0.189
I feel proud of the university I have chosen to attend	Yes	35	5.63	0.69	0.117
	No	43	5.28	1.141	0.174
I don't have as many close friends as I wish I had	Yes	35	3.49	1.788	0.302
	No	43	3.28	1.777	0.271
There is a strong sense of community on this campus	Yes	35	4.54	1.039	0.176
	No	43	4.42	1.258	0.192
I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own	Yes	35	5.06	0.938	0.158

	No	43	4.83	0.856	0.131
I feel like my friends really care about me	Yes	35	5.23	0.843	0.143
	No	43	5.16	0.998	0.152
I know I can make a difference in my community	Yes	35	5.51	0.658	0.111
	No	43	5.05	0.95	0.145
It is important to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds	Yes	35	5.54	0.611	0.103
	No	43	5.44	0.629	0.096
I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have	Yes	35	5.37	0.69	0.117
	No	43	4.91	1.288	0.196
My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult	Yes	35	5.06	1.392	0.235
	No	43	4.4	1.788	0.273
When I'm faced with a problem in my life, I can usually think of several ways to solve it	Yes	35	5.06	0.906	0.153
	No	43	4.98	0.831	0.127
My perspective on life is that I tend to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty"	Yes	35	4.89	0.993	0.168
	No	43	4.35	1.395	0.213
My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning and purpose to my life	Yes	35	4.6	1.538	0.26

	No	43	4.33	1.714	0.261
It's hard to make friends on this campus	Yes	35	3.26	1.482	0.251
	No	43	2.88	1.418	0.216
It's important to me to make a contribution to my community	Yes	35	5.14	1.004	0.17
	No	43	4.98	0.886	0.135
I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless	Yes	35	4.94	0.765	0.129
	No	43	4.7	0.914	0.139
My knowledge/opinions have been influenced by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds	Yes	35	5.03	1.043	0.176
	No	43	5	1.047	0.16
I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns	Yes	35	3.11	1.568	0.265
	No	43	2.74	1.62	0.247
My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life	Yes	35	4.26	1.54	0.26
	No	43	3.84	1.745	0.266
I am confident that the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run	Yes	35	4.97	0.857	0.145
	No	43	4.02	1.488	0.227

I intent to re-enroll at SCU next year (graduating seniors please leave blank)	Yes	35	5.9	0.31	0.058
	No	43	5.38	1.256	0.215
I intend to graduate from SCU	Yes	35	5.94	0.236	0.04
	No	43	5.71	0.814	0.127
Given my current goals, SCU is a good fit for me	Yes	35	5.65	0.646	0.111
	No	43	5.4	1.014	0.156
If I had to do it over again, I would choose a different university to attend	Yes	35	2.14	1.353	0.229
	No	43	2.21	1.505	0.229
I really enjoy being a student here	Yes	35	5.4	0.736	0.124
	No	43	5.07	1.257	0.194
My experiences on campus so far have met my expectations	Yes	35	5.06	0.906	0.153
	No	43	4.7	1.337	0.204
The institution was accurately portrayed during the admissions process	Yes	35	4.94	0.906	0.153
	No	43	4.74	1.364	0.208
Overall, the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators on this campus are consistent with the mission	Yes	35	5.46	0.611	0.103
	No	43	5.16	1.194	0.182

There are other pieces of the student experience that impact student success in combination with being a member of retention focused support program as identified by the TQ developers. The

following section will explore the results from other items tested: participation, faculty/student interaction, satisfaction, thriving self-rating, demographics, and grades.

Participation Items

Campus involvement has been deemed to be vital to student success. Researchers found that “extracurricular or peer involvement may expose FGCS to classmates with a better understanding of behaviors that help individuals succeed in and maximize the benefit they receive from college” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 278). The Levene’s Test of Equal of Variance revealed a significant difference in three areas including: student organizations on campus, community service, and campus ethnic organizations. To further test this theory, t-tests were run on participation items to examine differences between the support and no-support group. There were several areas of significant differences revealed by the tests as it pertains to campus involvement. These differences occurred with participation in “Student organizations on campus,” $t(76) = 3.184$, $p = 0.002$; “Leadership of student organizations,” $t(76) = 4.275$, $p = 0.000$; “Community service,” $t(76) = 2.247$, $p = 0.028$; and, “Campus ethnic organizations,” $t(76) = 3.523$, $p = 0.001$. There proved to be a significant difference based on most of the items where the support group mean was higher than the national average while the no-support group mean was lower than the national average. This was demonstrated for the item “Student organizations on campus” with the support group mean ($M=4.06$, $SD = 1.70$) being higher than both the no-support group mean ($M=2.98$, $SD = 1.30$) and national average ($M=3.75$). “Leadership of student organizations” followed the same theme with the support group ($M=4.26$, $SD = 1.63$) exceeding the others, no-support group ($M= 2.72$, $SD = 1.53$) and national ($M= 2.85$). The support group average ($M=3.63$, SD

= 1.70) was also higher than the no-support group mean (M=2.86, SD = 1.32) and the national average (M=3.33) for “Community service”. The item measuring frequency of participation in “Campus ethnic organizations” was the only item that demonstrated a significant difference between the two groups but did not hold the over-under pattern. Both groups were above the national average (support group mean (M=3.23, SD = 1.80); no-support group mean (M=1.98, SD = 1.34); national average (M=1.86)). Levene’s test and T-test results for participation items may be found in Table 25. Participation item descriptive information is located in Table 26.

Table 4.25. *Participation Items Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and Independent Samples T-Test Results*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Scale Item	Equality of Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Student organizations on campus	Equal variances not assumed	16	0	3.099	62.67	0.003	1.08	0.349	0.384	1.777
Campus events or activities	Equal variances assumed	2.67	0.11	1.717	76	0.09	0.553	0.322	-0.088	1.195

Leadership of student organizations	Equal variances assumed	1.44	0.23	4.275	76	0	1.536	0.359	0.821	2.252
Community service	Equal variances not assumed	5.66	0.02	2.19	63.25	0.032	0.768	0.351	0.067	1.469
Interaction with faculty outside of class	Equal variances assumed	0.03	0.87	0.773	76	0.442	0.269	0.348	-0.424	0.962
Fraternity/sorority	Equal variances assumed	0.43	0.51	0.118	76	0.907	0.057	0.486	-0.91	1.024
Religious services or activities	Equal variances assumed	1.73	0.19	-0.13	76	0.901	-0.048	0.382	-0.808	0.713

Campus ethnic organizations	Equal variances not assumed	5.49	0.02	3.419	61.34	0.001	1.252	0.366	0.52	1.984
-----------------------------	-----------------------------	------	------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	------	-------

Table 4.26. *Participation Items Descriptive*

	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Student organizations on campus	Yes	35	4.06	1.697	0.287
	No	43	2.98	1.3	0.198
Campus events or activities	Yes	35	3.6	1.499	0.253
	No	43	3.05	1.344	0.205
Leadership of student organizations	Yes	35	4.26	1.633	0.276
	No	43	2.72	1.533	0.234
Community service	Yes	35	3.63	1.699	0.287
	No	43	2.86	1.32	0.201
Interaction with faculty outside of class	Yes	35	3.57	1.558	0.263
	No	43	3.3	1.505	0.229
Fraternity/sorority	Yes	35	3.06	2.195	0.371
	No	43	3	2.082	0.317

Religious services or activities	Yes	35	2.74	1.521	0.257
	No	43	2.79	1.794	0.274
Campus ethnic organizations	Yes	35	3.23	1.8	0.304
	No	43	1.98	1.336	0.204

Faculty/Student Interaction Items

The connection students feel to faculty is important. Student interaction with faculty can be a strong predictor for student learning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). To test for differences between the two groups regarding contact with faculty and advisors, Levene's test and t-tests were run on each Faculty-Student Interaction item. None of the items demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the groups (Table 27). Though there were no significant differences between the two groups, when compared to the national norm about a half of the items revealed the over-under pattern with the support group being over the national average and the no-support group being under. "Frequency met with your academic advisor" held this pattern with the support group mean ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.57$) exceeding the national average ($M = 3.33$) and the no-support group mean ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.50$) being less than the national average. The support group average ($M=3.31$, $SD = 1.69$) for "Frequency discussed career or grad school plans with faculty" was over the national average ($M=3.13$) whereas the no-support group average ($M=2.74$, $SD = 1.58$) was under. The same pattern occurred with the "Frequency of interaction with faculty outside of class" with the support group average ($M=3.57$, $SD = 1.56$) exceeding the national average ($M=3.51$) and the no-support group average ($M=3.30$, $SD = 1.51$) being under. Two of the faculty-student interaction items demonstrated that both group means were below the national average. On "Frequency discussed academic issues with faculty"

(support group (M = 3.09, SD = 1.84); no-support group (M = 3.07, SD = 1.67); national (M = 3.16)) and “Frequency e-mailed, texted, or Facebooked faculty” (support group (M = 3.43, SD = 1.52); no-support group (M = 3.35, SD = 1.49); national (M = 4.20)) both support and no-support group means were lower than the national average. The only item where both the support group mean (M = 3.54, SD = 1.60) and the no-support group mean (M = 3.58, SD = 1.58) exceeded the national average (M = 3.33) was the “Frequency met with faculty during office hours” item.

Descriptive information for faculty-student interaction variables may be found in Table 28.

Table 4.27. *Faculty-Student Interaction Items Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and Independent Samples T-Test Results*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Scale item	Equality of Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Met with your academic advisor	Equal variances assumed	0.421	0.518	1.398	76	0.166	0.488	0.349	-0.207	1.183
Discussed career or grad school plans with faculty	Equal variances assumed	0.406	0.526	1.537	76	0.128	0.57	0.371	-0.169	1.309
Discussed academic issues with faculty	Equal variances assumed	0.212	0.647	0.04	76	0.968	0.016	0.397	-0.775	0.807
Met with faculty during office hours	Equal variances assumed	0.021	0.886	-0.107	76	0.915	-0.039	0.361	-0.758	0.681
E-mailed, texted, or Facebooked faculty	Equal variances assumed	0.21	0.648	0.233	76	0.817	0.08	0.343	-0.603	0.763

Interaction with faculty outside of class	Equal variances assumed	0.027	0.871	0.773	76	0.442	0.269	0.348	-0.427	0.966
---	-------------------------	-------	-------	-------	----	-------	-------	-------	--------	-------

Table 4.28. *Faculty-Student Interaction Item Descriptive*

	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Met with your academic advisor	Yes	35	3.37	1.573	0.266
	No	43	2.88	1.499	0.229
Discussed career or grad school plans with faculty	Yes	35	3.31	1.694	0.286
	No	43	2.74	1.575	0.24
Discussed academic issues with faculty	Yes	35	3.09	1.837	0.311
	No	43	3.07	1.668	0.254
Met with faculty during office hours	Yes	35	3.54	1.597	0.27
	No	43	3.58	1.577	0.241
E-mailed, texted, or Facebooked faculty	Yes	35	3.43	1.52	0.25
	No	43	3.35	1.494	0.228
Interaction with faculty outside of class	Yes	35	3.57	1.558	0.263
	No	43	3.3	1.505	0.229

Satisfaction

First the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was conducted and did not reveal a significant difference. Afterwards, the test t-tests were performed on the items and also demonstrated no statistically significant differences between the two groups (Table 29).

An important data point to note here is that on each item related to satisfaction, except for "The amount of money you personally have to pay to attend college here," both the support group and

no-support group means were below the national average. On “The amount of money you personally have to pay to attend college here,” the support group mean ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.74$) was higher than the national mean ($M = 3.38$) and the no-support group mean ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.54$) was below. Descriptive information for satisfaction items may be found in Table 30.

Table 4.29. *Satisfaction Item Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and Independent Samples T-Test Results*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Scale item	Equality of Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
The amount you are learning in your classes	Equal variances assumed	2.55	0.114	-0.07	76	0.943	-0.027	0.368	-0.76	0.707
Your overall experiences at this university	Equal variances assumed	0.316	0.576	0.271	76	0.787	0.098	0.364	-0.626	0.822
The amount of contact you have had with faculty this year	Equal variances assumed	0.005	0.943	-0.113	76	0.239	0.399	0.337	-0.271	1.07
The kinds of interaction you have with other students on campus this year	Equal variances assumed	0.015	0.904	1.186	76	0.239	0.399	0.337	-0.271	1.07
The quality of interaction you have with faculty on this campus so far this year	Equal variances assumed	0.014	0.907	0.543	76	0.589	0.195	0.36	-0.521	0.912
The interactions you have had with students of different ethnic backgrounds	Equal variances assumed	0.135	0.715	1.544	76	0.127	0.537	0.348	-0.156	1.229

The amount of money you personally have to pay to attend college here	Equal variances assumed	1.693	0.197	1.94	76	0.056	0.72	0.371	-0.019	1.458
Faculty sensitivity to the needs of diverse students	Equal variances assumed	0.3	0.586	0.361	76	0.719	0.122	0.339	-0.553	0.798
Faculty encouragement for students to contribute to diverse perspectives in class discussions	Equal variances assumed	1.783	0.186	-1.25	76	0.214	-0.447	0.356	-1.156	0.263
The degree to which faculty include diverse populations in the curriculum	Equal variances assumed	1.647	0.203	-1.21	76	0.229	-0.437	0.36	-1.155	0.28
Your physical health right now	Equal variances assumed	1.294	0.259	1.203	76	0.233	0.405	0.336	-0.265	1.075

Table 4.30. *Satisfaction Item Descriptive*

	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The amount you are learning in your classes	Yes	35	3.86	1.517	0.256
	No	43	3.88	1.693	0.258
Your overall experiences at this university	Yes	35	4.03	1.618	0.273
	No	43	3.93	1.58	0.241
The amount of contact you have had with faculty this year	Yes	35	3.54	1.521	0.257

	No	43	3.58	1.484	0.226
The kinds of interaction you have with other students on campus this year	Yes	35	3.77	1.416	0.239
	No	43	3.37	1.528	0.233
The quality of interaction you have with faculty on this campus so far this year	Yes	35	3.8	1.549	0.262
	No	43	3.6	1.606	0.245
The interactions you have had with students of different ethnic backgrounds	Yes	35	3.89	1.491	0.252
	No	43	3.35	1.557	0.237
The amount of money you personally have to pay to attend college here	Yes	35	3.74	1.738	0.294
	No	43	3.02	1.535	0.234
Faculty sensitivity to the needs of diverse students	Yes	35	3.66	1.434	0.242
	No	43	3.53	1.533	0.234
Faculty encouragement for students to contribute to diverse perspectives in class discussions	Yes	35	3.6	1.499	0.253

Thriving Self-Rating	Equal variances not assumed	7.8	0.007	1.745	70.664	0.085	0.425	0.243	-0.061	0.91
----------------------	-----------------------------	-----	-------	-------	--------	-------	-------	-------	--------	------

Table 4.32. *Thriving Self-Rating Item Descriptive*

Column1	In Retention Program?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thriving Self-Rating	Yes	35	4.66	0.8	0.136
	No	43	4.23	1.3	0.202

Demographics

Understanding the impact demographics has on the experience of FGCS is essential. FGCS will stem from a variety of backgrounds, demographics, needs, and strengths (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). To better understand this impact, a series of chi-square analyses were completed on the demographic items of the TQ instrument. Chi-square analyses on demographic items such as “Gender” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 0.258, p = 0.611$), “Age” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 1.342, p = 0.247$), “Race/Ethnicity” ($\chi^2(5, N = 78) = 6.821, p = 0.234$), “International status” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 0.494, p = 0.482$), “Religion” ($\chi^2(13, N = 75) = 11.266, p = 0.589$), and “Athlete/Non-athlete” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 0.045, p = 0.832$) showed no significant differences between the two groups.

No statistically significant differences were found to exist within academic related items such as “First in family to attend college” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 2.222, p = 0.136$), “Class level” ($\chi^2(4, N = 78) = 6.594, p = 0.159$), “Enrollment status” (100% of participants were enrolled full-time), “Transfer status” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 0.825, p = 0.364$), “Living on campus” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 1.171, p = 0.279$), “First choice” ($\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 1.159, p = 0.282$), “Certainty of major” ($\chi^2(5, N = 78) = 6.406, p = 0.269$), “Degree aspirations” ($\chi^2(3, N = 78) = 3.021, p = 0.388$), and

“High school grades” ($\chi^2(3, N = 78) = 1.708, p = 0.635$) either. Frequency tables for these demographic items may be found in Tables 33-36.

Table 4.33. *Gender x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program			Male	Female	Total
			Yes		
		Count	8	27	35
		% within in retention program	22.9%	77.1%	100.0%
		% within gender	40.6%	46.6%	44.9%
		% of total	10.3%	34.6%	44.9%
	No				
		Count	12	31	43
		% within in retention program	27.9%	72.1%	100.0%
		% within gender	60.0%	53.4%	55.1%
		% of total	15.4%	39.7%	55.1%
	Total				
		Count	20	58	78
		% within in retention program	25.6%	74.4%	100.0%
		% within gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	25.6%	74.4%	100.0%

Table 4.34. *Age x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program			18-20	21-23	Total
			Yes		
		Count	27	8	35

		% within in retention program	77.1%	22.9%	100.0%
		% within age	49.1%	34.8%	44.9%
		% of total	34.6%	10.3%	44.9%
	No				
		Count	28	15	43
		% within in retention program	65.1%	34.9%	100.0%
		% within age	50.9%	65.2%	55.1%
		% of total	35.9%	19.2%	55.1%
	Total				
		Count	55	23	78
		% within in retention program	70.5%	29.5%	100.0%
		% within age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	70.5%	29.5%	100.0%

Table 4.35. Race/Ethnicity x in Retention Program Frequency

In Retention Program		Race/Ethnicity	Count	% within retention program	% within race/ethnicity	% of total
	Yes					
		African-American/Black	4	11.4%	50.0%	5.1%
		Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	5.7%	66.7%	2.6%
		Caucasian/White	10	28.6%	32.3%	12.8%
		Latino/Hispanic	17	48.6%	56.3%	21.8%
		Multiethnic	1	2.9%	20.0%	1.3%

		Prefer not to respond	1	2.9%	100.0%	1.3%
		Total	35	100.0%	44.9%	44.9%
	No					
		African-American/Black	4	9.2%	50.0%	5.1%
		Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	2.3%	33.3%	1.3%
		Caucasian/White	21	48.8%	67.7%	26.9%
		Latino/Hispanic	13	30.2%	43.3%	16.7%
		Multiethnic	4	9.3%	80.0%	5.1%
		Prefer not to respond	0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
		Total	43	100.0%	55.1%	55.1%
	Total					
		African-American/Black	8	10.3%	100.0%	10.3%
		Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	3.8%	100.0%	3.8%
		Caucasian/White	31	39.7%	100.0%	39.7%
		Latino/Hispanic	30	35.5%	100.0%	35.5%
		Multiethnic	5	6.4%	100.0%	6.4%
		Prefer not to respond	1	1.3%	100.0%	1.3%
		Total	78	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4.36. *International Student x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program			Yes	No	Total
	Yes				
		Count	3	32	35
		% within the retention program	8.6%	91.4%	100.0%
		% within are you an international student?	60.0%	43.8%	44.9%
		% of total	3.8%	41.0%	44.9%

	No				
		Count	2	41	43
		% within in retention program	4.7%	95.3%	100.0%
		% within are you an international student?	40.0%	56.2%	55.1%
		% of total	2.6%	52.6%	55.1%
	Total				
		Count	5	73	78
		% within in retention program	6.4%	93.6%	100.0%
		% within are you an international student?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	6.4%	93.6%	100.0%

Household Income

Students who identify as low-income and FGCS are nearly four times more likely to leave an institution after the first year than students without these risk factors; after nearly six years 43% of the students had left higher education without attaining a degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This statistic made it important to get a better understanding of the income level of the population. There were significant differences found between the two groups in the items associated with financial concerns. The “Estimated household income,” $\chi^2(4, N = 78) = 15.914$, $p = 0.003$ presented a significant difference. For the support group, 66% of the students reported an estimated household income of less than \$60,000 per year, whereas 65% of the students in the no-support group reported estimated household incomes over \$60,000 per year. The frequency table for this item is located in Table 37.

Table 4.37. *Estimated Household Income x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program		Estimated Household Income	Count	% within retention program	% within estimated household income	% of total
	Yes					
		less than \$30,000 a year	11	31.4%	68.8%	14.1%
		\$30,000 to \$59,999	12	34.3%	54.5%	15.4%
		\$60,000 to 89,999	9	25.7%	56.3%	11.5%
		\$90,000 to \$119,999	1	2.9%	7.1%	1.3%
		\$120,000 and over	2	5.7%	20.0%	2.6%
		Total	35	100.0%	44.9%	44.9%
	No					
		less than \$30,000 a year	5	11.6%	31.3%	6.4%
		\$30,000 to \$59,999	10	23.3%	45.5%	12.8%
		\$60,000 to 89,999	7	16.3%	43.8%	9.0%
		\$90,000 to \$119,999	13	30.2%	92.9%	16.7%
		\$120,000 and over	8	18.6%	80.0%	10.3%
		Total	43	100.0%	55.1%	55.1%
	Total					
		less than \$30,000 a year	16	20.5%	100.0%	20.5%
		\$30,000 to \$59,999	22	28.2%	100.0%	28.2%
		\$60,000 to 89,999	16	20.5%	100.0%	20.5%

		\$90,000 to \$119,999	14	17.9%	100.0%	17.9%
		\$120,000 and over	10	12.8%	100.0%	12.8%
		Total	78	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Working for Pay

Working for pay is often associated with FGCS that are working to build financial capital taking precedence over social integration (Ward et al, 2012). There were no significant differences with this item, with 77% of students in the support group working and only 56% of the no-support group doing some type of work for pay. The frequency table for this item may be found in Table 38.

Table 4.38. *Work for Pay x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program			No	On campus	Off Campus	Both On and Off campus	Total
			Yes				
		Count	8	13	10	4	35
		% within in retention program	22.9%	37.1%	28.6%	11.4%	100.0%
		% within do you work for pay?	29.6%	65.0%	55.6%	30.8%	44.9%
		% of total	10.3%	16.7%	12.8%	5.1%	44.9%
	No						
		Count	19	7	8	9	43
		% within in retention program	44.2%	16.3%	18.6%	20.9%	100.0%
		% within do you work for pay?	70.4%	35.0%	44.4%	69.2%	55.1%

		% of total	24.4%	9.0%	10.3%	11.5%	55.1%
	Total						
		Count	27	20	18	13	78
		% within in retention program	34.6%	25.6%	23.1%	16.7%	100.0%
		% within do you work for pay?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	34.6%	25.6%	23.1%	16.7%	100.0%

Difficulty Paying for School

Analysis of “Difficulty paying for school expenses” showed no significant differences, $\chi^2(4, N = 78) = 6.655, p = 0.155$, between the support group and the no-support group. However, while 34.3% of support group students reported experiencing difficulty, 51.2% of the no-support group students reported experiencing difficulty. Almost 21% of students in the no-support group reported experiencing “great difficulty” whereas only 2.9% of support group students selected this option. The frequency table demonstrating this difference may be found in Table 39.

Table 4.39. *Difficulty Paying for School Expenses x in Retention Program Frequency*

In Retention Program			No Difficulty	A Little Difficulty	Some Difficulty	A Fair Amount of Difficulty	Great Difficulty	Total
	Yes							
		Count	15	8	6	5	1	35
		% within in	42.9%	22.9%	17.1%	14.3%	2.9%	100.0%

		retention program						
		% within do you work for pay?	57.7%	44.4%	46.2%	45.5%	10.0%	44.9%
		% of total	19.2%	10.3%	7.7%	6.4%	1.3%	44.9%
	No							
		Count	11	10	7	6	9	43
		% within in retention program	25.6%	23.3%	16.3%	14.0%	20.9%	100.0%
		% within do you work for pay?	42.3%	55.6%	53.8%	54.5%	90.0%	55.1%
		% of total	14.1%	12.8%	9.0%	7.7%	11.5%	55.1%
	Total							
		Count	26	18	13	11	10	78
		% within in retention program	33.3%	23.1%	16.7%	14.1%	12.8%	100.0%
		% within do you work for pay?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	33.3%	23.1%	16.7%	14.1%	12.8%	100.0%

Grades

Though the concept of thriving looks beyond grades into the overall experience, it is important to understand how students are performing in the classroom (Schreiner, 2013). Although not statistically significant, $t(68) = 1.27$, $p = 0.210$, the cumulative GPA of the students in the support group demonstrated a higher GPA ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.39$) than did the students in the no-support group ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.63$). Pearson correlation analyses were run for each group separately to test the relationship between cumulative GPA and Thriving Quotient score. The two variables demonstrated no significant relationship for the support group ($r(32) = 0.005$, $p = 0.979$) or the no-support group ($r(34) = -0.210$, $p = 0.218$). The no-support group did demonstrate a negative relationship even though it was not statistically significant.

Phase Two

Interviews and Focus Groups: Phase Two

For the second phase of this explanatory mixed methods study, I implemented the use of focus groups and interviews to create a narrative to tell the story of these students. Focus group and interview questions were developed based on the results from phase one. Questions were compartmentalized based on the Five Factors of Thriving in order to support the premise of this research and its effort to promote thriving versus preventing failure. The questions were designed to discover what contributes to the success of a first-generation college student in a holistic manner that will allow the literature to shift the focus from deficit thinking to a practice of focusing on the student's assets. The second phase of the study had 13 participants for the focus groups and ten of those participants completed the virtual interview journals. There was a total of four weeks of virtual interview journals with an average of four to six questions per week.

Table 4.40. *Phase Two Participant Demographics*All data self-reported by participant*

Name	Gender	Race	Age	Economic Class	Classification	Support Group
Thomas	Male	Caucasian	21	Lower-middle class	Senior	Yes
Terrance	Male	Latino	20	Middle	Sophomore	Yes
Freda	Female	Latina	18	Lower-middle class	Freshman	No
Cavon	Female	Asian	18	Middle class	Freshman	No
Ryan	Female	White	20	Middle class	Sophomore	No
Morgan	Female	Black	19	Middle class	Sophomore	No
Nicole	Female	Black	21	Lower class	Junior	Yes
Monica	Female	Black/Asian	Young Adult	Middle class	Sophomore	Yes
Maria	Female	Hispanic	20	Poor	Sophomore	Yes
Charles	Male	Latino	19	Middle class	Freshman	Yes
Hudson	Male	White	21	Middle class	Senior	Yes
Christina	Female	Latina	19	Lower-middle class	Sophomore	Yes
Peggy	Female	Latina	19	Middle class	Freshman	Yes

Focus Groups and Virtual Interview Journals

As a reminder, this study used a sequential explanatory mixed methods design in order to further explore the results of the quantitative data. Phase two of the study allowed a deeper understanding of what factors influence a student's ability to thrive. The phase began with two focus groups and immediately following a pre-analysis was conducted to develop questions for the virtual interview journal segment. Following the entire phase, the data was transcribed and analyzed in a manner to preserve the original intent and meaning of participants. The data was coded and themes were developed based around the information that emerged (Creswell, 2013).

Codes were assigned to specific sections in the initial coding and later aggregated into themes and patterns. Quotes from the transcripts were extracted based on a reexamination of the dataset for information that provided support for the themes. Through analyzing data from the focus group and virtual interview journals the qualitative portion of the study tells the story of what the quantitative portion revealed. As a reminder, there were a total of 13 focus group participants and ten of those participants completed the entire second phase including the virtual interview journals. The analyzation of phase two is presented throughout the next section.

Identity

Identity takes shapes with new experiences and influences the way in which individuals approach life (Strayhorn, 2012). Identity and the intersectionality between identities emerged as a major theme of how these students thrive. Throughout phase two participants were challenged to explore the layers of their identity, with their identity of FGCS at the center. Each focus group began and ended with the same challenge where participants were asked to respond to the statement: “Being a first-generation college student is”. The purpose of this activity was to explore their view on this piece of their identity and to see the impact the use of strengths-based thinking throughout the session could have on their view. For the opening statement participants responded with words like: stereotyped, lost, experimental, challenging, new, strong-minded. For the closing statement participants responded with words like: opportunistic, determined,, feisty, amazing, focused, resilient. Throughout the stories of these participants, readers will begin to explore how and why they view their identity as a FGCS in this manner:

“We have something to prove, not only to ourselves but to everybody else in our family, because they're all looking at us. They're all looking at the first person who gets to go to college in the family. That is forever the label that you have on you. It doesn't matter, even at way past your graduation, to your deathbed you will be the first person who went to college in the family. It's just the drive that the first-gen students have, and just that

little person in the back of your mind saying, "You have to do this." It's just that's something that a lot of us have that most other generation students don't."-Christina

And

"I was so scared and felt so much pressure not to fail. I didn't want to look clueless, so I did my own thing and to be tired to be independent. I came in very open-minded yet, stubborn. I knew the curriculum would be harder, but I thought I be fine because I'd always been a straight A student. However, I didn't let myself be delusional so if things got too hard, I would ask for help. However, it wasn't just grades. I couldn't relate to other students or understand all aspects of college life in social terms. I didn't understand anything about sororities, so when friends asked if I was rushing, I didn't know what they were talking about. I only focused on academics, so I didn't sign up for many clubs or organizations besides the ones friend would write my name down. I still have more things to experience and understand, so I think I'm still transitioning. I'm just going along with the flow, but if it gets to hectic, I know I can get help from someone."-Freda

The FGCS status of a student plays an integral role into their journey in all aspects.

Five Factors of Thriving and Other Components

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness focuses on the presence of healthy and a positive relationship that allows a student to feel connected with others (Schreiner, et al., 2012). In order for FGCS to thrive, it is important that they experience these types of relationships. Ensuring that students are connected to the campus community is important to student success. Through connections to social and peer networks, individuals are able to sharpen skills like critical and cognitive thinking, increase chances of retention and persistence, and take ownership of his or her academic experience (Pascarella et al., 2004). A number of themes and patterns emerged around this concept of social connectedness and thriving. Social Factors and Healthy Relationships

Outside the institution: familial. Familial support is critical to the success of FGCS

(Ward et. al, 2012). Participants viewed family as the foundation of their support system outside of the institution as supported by the responses below:

"I have very support parents who are always there for me when I need them as well as an older sister. My sister is a year older than me and we have the same major, so she is extremely helpful when it comes to school, however she also serves as emotional support. For example, earlier this semester, I was freaking out because I still didn't have plans for the summer and I kept hearing people talk about all the internships they were getting. I

felt like a failure, but after talking to my sister she told me it was okay and encouraged me to keep applying to places.”-Christina

and

“My family and my boyfriend are my biggest supporters outside of SCU. They are always pushing me to do my best and encouraging me when I need it. Since all of us live in different time zones, someone is always available for me to talk. Whether I have to rant, cry, or anything, I know that they are there for me.”-Morgan

Within the institution: mentors/advisors and friends. Retention efforts for FGCS have included programs like TRiO and increased efforts in mentoring and advising (Choy, 2001; NCES, 2010). Within the institution the participants had a pattern amongst the important roles mentors/advisors (student affairs staff, scholarship coordinators, academic advisors, student organization advisors, etc.) have on their thriving. The responses below support this theme:

“Personally, who's helping me now are my advisors for my scholarship. You know, they want to make sure that for one I'm mentally healthy. I'm really strong-minded, because for one, you're stereotyped. You're going through something, you're lost, you're challenged, and you're experiencing it all. With their help, you know, and they want to focus on what I want to do. Sometimes I feel like I may be losing focus, and if I ever feel like that, you know, I go back to them. There's somebody I could lean on and somebody who can help me grow.” -Maria

And

“Student Support Services has been my foundation. The staff there is like family and they are in your best interest. Instead of going to the library, SSS is where I do all of my studying. They are the number one reason I have been able to thrive. The other reasons I have been able to thrive are due to my involvement on campus and dedication to school.”-Terrance

And

“My transition from high school to college was a tough one. It was very different to be out on my own and living away from my family. Since no one in my family went to college, I had no idea what to expect and there was not much help that they could provide me so I felt completely alone. In high school, I didn't have to study as much because the

information was very simple and easy to grasp. College was very different from high school and I struggled a lot my first semester. I had no idea how to study and what worked for me, I didn't know how to manage my time, and I was still trying to figure out how college worked at the same time. I begin to get discouraged because things were so tough. My family could only provide emotional support but not the resources I needed. I was very lost and it was times when I thought that maybe college wasn't for me. Luckily, my Uncle was friends with one of the nursing directors and she wanted to meet with me. This woman became my "go-to" person for everything. If I had questions she answered them for me, if I needed help she gave me directions. From that point on, I knew that in order to survive in college I had to create relationships with those who could help me and find my own resources. I continued to network and work hard and I didn't give up. I begin to understand how college classes worked and my grades begin to increase, but my social life was still at a stand-still. I didn't know anyone and I couldn't find my fit on campus. I found myself going home almost every day and commuting to my classes. It wasn't until this very year, 2017 of my junior year, that I begin to make a lot of friends and become involved on campus. All in all college is a huge step up from what high school was and even though I'll be graduating in a year, I find myself still adjusting to this new life (that's not quite so new anymore)."-Nicole

Involvement

Being involved in student organizations helps FGCS build tools for success inside and outside of the classroom and feel a stronger connection to the campus (Pascarella et al., 2004, Strayhorn, 2012). Participants in the study are connected to a range of organizations including academic based, leadership, and cultural. Participants exemplified their passion for involvement throughout the study as shared through the stories below:

"So I applied for the extended orientation camp and I got it. I then got involved with every single program in that office. Connections, transfers and all that are just like my jam and I would never have realized that if it wasn't for staff in this office who I love so much."-Ryan

And

"I didn't think there were so many opportunities to be involved socially or in so many different groups! I honestly thought it was going to be showing up, going to class, going home at the end of the day. I never really thought about juggling work, student

organizations, and all the various things that have since defined my college experience.”-
Thomas

Things to Consider

As practitioners create environment conducive to support FGCS in the area of Social

Connectedness, it is important to understand that for some students this may look different. It is important to understand that familial support comes in various forms and can differ based on culture and the type of support offered:

“Usually it's my friends who are giving me verbal and emotional support. It's different in my family because of how our culture is, in that it's very rare they praise me and it's more often expected for me to thrive in an educational environment. This doesn't bother me, because I know how much harder I have to work and prove myself. It keeps me going, whereas if they continuously praised me, I would think I've done enough.”-Cavon

And

“My Family is technically a support system, as I occasionally need some financial assistance, but prefer not to be involved with them as we do not have a terribly healthy relationship.”-Thomas

Social connectedness appeared as a theme throughout the data and was most prominent amongst demographic factors including: students from in-state that reside on campus, connected to a support group, and are employed.

Engaged Learning

Students should feel they are able to connect what they learn inside the classroom to what they experience outside of the classroom. According to Schreiner (2012), “The very word thriving implies that success involves more than surviving a four-year academic obstacle course. Students who thrive are vitally engaged in the college endeavor--intellectually, socially, and emotionally” (p. vii). Thriving intellectually calls for engagement with faculty and other academic personnel on various levels.

Intentions

The intent behind attending college can often serve as a motivator for success and engagement in the classroom. The main motivating factor for participants emerged from the intent for a better future that derived from a number of places like pre-college/college preparatory, parents, and higher education as a necessity.

Pre-college/college preparatory. The investment that K-12 schools have made in college preparatory programs proved to be an important motivator in the educational process of the participants.

“When I was in 7th grade, I enrolled in a class called AVID which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. This class introduced me to college and at that point the question was no longer *if* I was going to college, but instead it was *where* I was going to college. My parents always stressed the importance of furthering my education and were super supportive along the way. During my junior year of high school, I decided I wanted to go into the engineering field.”-Christina

Parents. The role parents played in the intentions behind a student’s reasoning for being engaged in the classroom proved to be a main factor in why students strived to excel academically. Parents of the participants instilled within them the importance of learning and furthering their education.

“Watching my mom struggle growing up has been the hardest thing for me to do. Although it was a struggle for my mom to provide for us she has never failed in doing so. I vowed to myself that I would help care for my mom and the rest of my family once I grew up and that I wouldn’t struggle the way the rest of my family has done in their lifetime. I knew that the only way that I could accomplish this goal was by going to college and getting a good career. Since setting this goal for myself at an early age I have strived in school and excelled in all classes so that I could get a full ride to college and that’s exactly what I did.”-Nicole

and

“My parents instilled a hard working mentality into whatever we did. Be it sports or school, my parents expected the best of us, but they always kept us grounded to your potential. They didn’t demand more and didn’t allow less. My older brother struggled with grades but exceeded in sports, specifically soccer. I was an average athlete, in the other hand school came easy to me and received exceptional grades. I became the smart child, so my parents held me at a higher standard than my brothers. I maintained that ideal to make my parents proud. I didn’t hear about college until I was in middle school, through an AVID program. The program helped aid as college prep class and tutor, advisement to help us become successful independent students. Without my parent’s knowledge of the college system, I looked at my teacher and tutors to gain knowledge about continued education after high school. I would go home to tell my parents about what I learned in the program and how I hoped to go to college. I knew with my grades and involvement I could get into a great school. My parents worried about the cost of attending the university, but knew I had opportunities to receive scholarships. They helped me stay focused on grades and looked for scholarships or extracurricular activities to apply for. They helped with the best of their knowledge to get resources that get me the best resources to get accepted. Seeing their hope of me getting a better education, I knew college was my path to take. I knew along the way I’ve have my parents looking out for me.”-Freda

Higher education as a necessity. There was an apparent theme amongst the participants that displayed higher education as a necessity to upward mobility and to the future of the student. The participants’ desire for stability and a certain future served as a major motivation to their desire for higher education.

“I remembered growing up thinking that I wanted to help people, and the best path to doing that seemed to be being a Doctor (Thank you early 2000s medical dramas). So, as I asked around, turned out college was a necessary first step for that.”-Thomas

and

“I’ve heard stories from them about how hard it is to keep a job when everyone's fighting for it. My goal is to be so good at what I do, people need me. I want to have options, something they don't have. I'm not going to throw everything they worked so hard for away because I didn't want to go to college. I need to make something out of myself and show them their love and sacrifices paid off before it's too late.”-Cavon

Assistance Navigating.

Some students need to connect with their faculty to help them with personal issues that impact their progress inside the classroom:

“I’m a little over a year sober, and I work a 12-step program, and do all that. When I first got sober, I was taking 18 hours, because I was about to drop out of school last fall, two falls, no, last fall. Not this past, but the fall before. I went to my academic advisor, who I had really never met with. I had my base professor sign off on whatever classes I was taking. He was like, “Why haven’t I met with you before?” I was like, “I don’t know dude.” You know, because no one told me really who my academic advisor was.

My primary advisor was my base professor, and he doesn’t know very much about my degree plan and things like that. He, my academic advisor, was my music history teacher. The first semester of music history class is incredibly difficult, incredibly difficult. I went to him and explained my whole situation, and I let him know, “Hey, I need to pass your class. Really, I really need to pass your class.” I asked him how to do it, and he told me. I think having the honesty and openness to tell him my situation and you know, be able to talk with him as a mentor was something that’s really helped me in the past year and a half.”- Hudson

And

“Usually with my core professors, I don’t talk to them outside of office hours, which is a pretty bad thing. I don’t know, I just don’t like to talk to some of my professors. Because for me, I just feel really awkward as a personality thing. A lot of my choir directors I’m very, very close to just because I have that common interest with them. I’ve always been more closer with my choir directors ever since like middle school than all my other teachers ever. That’s who I usually confide into.”-Peggy

Faculty members are also needed to help navigate students inside the classroom and throughout the learning process to help them apply what they are learning:

“I believe that I am really benefiting from my class work. Almost everything that I have learned has tied into each other, which makes me more excited to learn. I have been able to use a lot of my studies outside the classroom, even if it’s a random fact I learned early on. It took a lot of discipline for me to get to this point. I had to stay focused, study, and keep working hard. If I needed help, I was almost always able to ask my mentors or teachers for help.”-Morgan

Faculty members are essential to helping FGCS integrate to the university setting. Academic integration describes the levels of engagement and experiences of a student in the academic components of a university, both formal and informal (Tinto, 1993). As students integrate academically they can thrive at higher rates.

Things to Consider

Faculty members and others that impact the academic integration of FGCS must work to understand their role and how it impacts the experience of the student. FGCS come from all different backgrounds and are said to lack academic preparedness (Braxton, 2013, Ward et. al, 2012). Therefore, it is vital that individuals consider such things when working to build success methods and efforts for FGCS to be engaged learners. can choose to focus on the student's strength or further support deficit thinking. The support of deficit thinking and the marginalization of students can be damaging or the encouragement of focusing on strengths can be rewarding to a student:

“Usually student like me come from lower tier schools and got accepted by lower standards because of policies like affirmative action and because we come in differently it's not like we are immediately ready for change.”-Charles

And

“Personally for me, it's very difficult, because I'm a mechanical engineering major, I am Hispanic, which is not really the norm. It's like when I talk to people, sometimes they'll be like, "Really?" They'll be like, "I thought you were a nursing major." They put me in that stereotypical categories, just because it's not super common in my field. However, I do get a lot of positive and, "You go girl, you do it." It's really cool, and it's also very helpful because I know that growing up in my community I never saw, I never even heard of the word engineering or engineer. My junior year in high school, my sister told me she wanted to be an engineer, and I was like, "That sounds complicated, no." - Christina

Students begin to internalize what they hear and in ways begin to believe it.

Engaged learning appeared as a theme throughout the data and was most prominent amongst demographic factors including: from in-state, reside on campus, are members of a support group, and employed.

Diverse Citizenship

Diverse citizenship highlights the ability an individual possesses to value differences and make contributions to society (Schreiner et. al, 2012). A number of themes emerged as important items to how FGCS are able to connect with the world as diverse citizens.

Student's Background

Student's values and approaches to life and its experiences stem from their background.

Student's background plays an integral role in how they view society and their role in life:

“My childhood was great, looking back nowadays we did not have much but I was always among others who didn't have much either so we never felt less than any other person. On the contrary hearing my parents speak of their struggles always encouraged me to do good in school and recognize that school was a privilege and not a right. I have learned to value things and not take my life for granted and that comes from being able to take a step back from everyday life and recognizing where we stand as individuals in this path. Whenever I did that I realized just how blessed I was to be alive and then the place where I lived. I truly believe that I can do better but the way I was tells me I have outdone my expectations and the standards that I set will be followed by generations to come.”-Charles

And

“I think that it takes a lot of courage to be a first-generation college student. You're figuring things out without any parental guidance at all, you know? My dad jumped straight into the service. My mom went right into the workforce. You know, they don't know college applications or how to talk to a major orchestra or doing administrative work and things like that. They don't know these different things. We're all kind of just figuring it out as we go, and figuring out what makes us happy and what makes us work harder, and what generally we're doing here. That's what I'm figuring out, at least. I've been trying to figure that out since freshman year, and I think I finally did. I'm pretty cool with it.”-Hudson

Money and Finance.

FGCS may experience financial barriers that impact their experience (McCleaf, 2012). FGCS benefit from job opportunities, scholarships, and financial literacy: **Work for experience and necessity.** There was a clear theme that emerged amongst the students where they worked to make money out of a desire to not be a burden to their family and a need to contribute financially:

“So they never had any huge funds for us at all. So they help all they can, but I'm responsible for my education costs.”-Ryan

And

“ Yes, I do work. I work to take the stress off my mom back at home by providing as much as I can for myself without having to ask her for much. I work to pay a few bills (credit card bill, and insurance for car), gas, groceries, as well as for personal expenses such as shopping, Netflix, nights out, etc. I have a twin sister who is also at a local community college. Unfortunately, my twin doesn't have a full ride scholarship like I do so my mom steps in and helps my sister as much as possible financially when additional charges that financial aid doesn't cover. I just feel that it would be less of a financial strain on my home if my mom only has to focus on our home and on one daughter instead of two. Currently, I work at a gas station about 8 minutes away from campus. I now work 15 hours a week, but Freshman year up until my first semester of Junior year I would work as many as 35 hours a week at times, but on a regular basis about 25 hours.”-Nicole

Fear of being a financial burden. There was a pattern amongst the participants where they expressed angst of being a financial burden to their families even if they were employed:

“I do not work. My parents suggested I focus on my studies and they would be responsible for the cost. However, by next semester I will be working. I feel like I need to transition away from depending on my parents for money. I have three younger siblings, and I don't want to continue to add to my parent's finances. I don't want to make them stressed over money or sacrificing other things for my education. They have already done so much for me.”-Freda

and

“The reason I work as an RA is because I wanted to make an impact on others and get more involved on campus, since I was living at home for the 1.5 years and felt

disconnected from campus...In general, the reason I work is because I don't like asking my parents for money when I'm going to do stuff with my friends, for example going to dinner or a movie. Fortunately, my parents are very helpful when it comes to paying my cell phone bill or buying me clothes, but I do not expect them to pay when I'm having fun with my friends by my choice.”-Christina

Value Difference and Engaging with Others

FGCS value difference and engaging with people from various cultures in an effort to learn and grow. Exposing FGCS to these opportunities is important to them on a personal level:

“In order to thrive you need to be grounded in your school and the best way to do that is to be involved in campus and meet as many people as possible.”-Charles

And

“The events on campus bring new experiences I probably would have never been able to do. I've never been to a concert before or a comedy show, but with the weekend events set up by the school organizations I could see one of my favorite singer, and laugh to a childhood comedian. I also have met people from all different areas of the world. I've been exposed to diverse cultures from their stories and experiences.”-Freda

Commitment to Community through Increased Exposure

FGCS deemed exposure as important to building a college going culture in the community they originate from. Some participants acknowledged some of the current work happening by the institution and others expressed a need for continued growth in this area of increased exposure:

“Our school already does this in some capacity with programs that mentor youth and those that bring youth to campus. I think these are marvelous programs and promote the college going culture and these programs should serve as examples for what colleges should do to promote the college going culture.”-Terrance

and

“Providing avenues to get to college and taking the time to explain ways that college can be a more realistic option for people. Talking about (and providing) realistic financial aid options.”-Thomas

And

“I grew up in two distinct communities, a Californian city and North Texas suburb. From cousins and friends who still live in California, they don’t see themselves in college. Teachers worry more on their student’s livelihoods and try preventing them from joining gangs or getting involved in harmful habits. They want to see them graduate, but they want them to be alive. The students aren’t exposed to college as much as just announcements and a yearly meeting with a counselor. The students would be first generation, but not having guidance or perspective can diminish a student’s confidence to apply. In Texas, I grew up in a community that most parents had a college degree. Our schools had banners and posters of colleges and universities in the halls and classes. They had constant college representatives come to the schools and talk to students. Every day we heard about college prep programs and steps to succeed in education. Greater exposure allows communities to be more college oriented.”

The breadth and depth of experiences and backgrounds that FGCS bring to college campuses support their thriving in this area of diverse citizenship.

Things to Consider

Connection between finances and other factors. Socioeconomic status varies amongst FGCS. Even students who are not from low-socioeconomic backgrounds may have a difficult time adjusting to a culture where they perceive themselves to be in a lower class than the peers around them. Even with this feeling, the student’s do not want to be treated as if they are not equal or as a person in need. Institutions should ensure that this is a part of the conversation as they promote diversity and inclusion on their campuses:

“And I'm dating a Trustee scholar. They are all amazing genius and that is so incredible that they got that, but it's also a little, wow, I'm so jealous of you. But we had an argument because she wanted to go to a comedy club at downtown Ft. Worth one night when her friend was in town. And I said, "You know what, I can't go". I don't really have \$25 bucks to just, I have to budget. I have to maintain a budget every month and I have this much money to spend going out and going to dinners and stuff, I can't. I don't have

room for that. Unless you got it from somewhere else and I'm not going to pay the rest for your otherwise. And she didn't really understand that. She was like, "Well, can I pay for it." That's the biggest ... And I said, "No, you can't pay for it. I don't want you too." They think that is going to solve everything but that is so degrading and I know they don't mean it like that but I think all of our problems right now are coming down to money and that's the biggest challenge for me for sure.

Just being in an environment where it's, I don't know, she ended up getting a little upset with me because I wouldn't let her pay for me and I wasn't going to go with them. I was like no way, I felt uncomfortable with that, but people don't realize, hey, do you want a ... Ooh girl scout cookies,"-Ryan

There was a pattern amongst both students who worked and those who did not work that revealed they are cognizant of the financial impact their educational experience has on their family:

"No I do not work. I am fortunate enough to have my parents who want me to strongly focus on my education. They do everything they can to help me out with costs. While I don't pay for large expenses, I am very aware of how hard they work for their money, so I always aim to save on the little things."-Cavon

Diverse citizenship appeared as a theme throughout the data and was most prominent amongst demographic factors including: in-state origin, resides on campus, belong to a support group, and are employed.

Academic Determination

Academic determination focuses on a student's desire for success and achieving goals (Schreiner et. al, 2012). As demonstrated through this study, FGCS have the innate ability to overcome challenges with resilience, they have a desire to excel academically, and remain inspired through various mechanisms of motivation.

Overcoming Challenges

The transition from high school to college is an integral part of the overall success of students. FGCS may face various obstacles when transitioning to college (Ward et. al, 2012).

There was a pattern of finding the transition to college to be difficult and isolating but responding to it with perseverance:

“Everyone at orientation came from some well-known school and somehow connected so easily with each other. What made me the most uncomfortable was being around their parents. I didn't bring my mom or dad to orientation, because my choices in college are more independent, but in meeting parents at tables and listening to the conversations, not bringing them was a sound choice in my opinion. They all would talk about the same things, their job, their travels, and of things I only wished to provide for my parents instead of it having been the other way around like in their case. I felt sick to my stomach that day. In short, I've grown a lot in these past months and while I still don't have a clear idea of what I want to do for my future, as long as I graduate college and become someone respected, I believe that it will provide for me the opportunities that my parents did not have.”-Cavon

And

“I grew up in a family that encouraged independence and hard work, so adjusting to the college course load and life in general was not challenging. The challenging part was seeing that not everyone had that gift. My classmates seemed entitled. Their parents covered all their financial costs, and I grew jealous. I faced and continue to face a lot of adversity that my peers don't. This frustrates me and causes me to compare myself to other students. As they say, comparison is the thief of joy, and I have had to learn how to navigate through those emotions. My parents always remind me why I am here. I don't deserve anything; I'm not supposed to be given anything. I am not entitled. I am blessed with all that I am and have. I am strong. I am more than willing to do what others do not to reach new heights.”-Ryan

Grades and Academic Performance

Grades and academic performance are key to the success of the student. The FGCS studied in this research deemed grades and academic performance to be important to them. They persevere through motivation to reach success and obtain a degree:

Success defined by FGCS. Understanding how a student views success is important. Thriving encourages institutions to focus on promoting student success versus preventing student failure (Schreiner, 2013). When asked to define success, the participants associated success with achieving goals and the chance to make others proud:

“Success is everything that every member of my family ever wanted but couldn’t quite achieve. Success is me being the first person to graduate from college in my entire family. Success is keeping the promise that I made to my grandma before she passed that I will complete college no matter what. Success is getting a good career so that I could support myself and help support my family in any way possible. Success is making my mom proud, to let her know that she raised me right and she did it all on her own. Success is what drives me every single day, through every single quiz, through every exam. Success means everything to me, because it determines the future for myself and for my family.”-Nicole

Strength to reach academic goals. Students see their adaptability, sense of independence, perseverance, and motivation as a strength they brought to college that makes them confident that they can reach their educational goals with motivation being the most prominent:

“Being able to be flexible to quick changes and being able to adjust at a moment's notice. As someone who didn't have much money growing up I learned to take life day by day. To plan for the future but be able to have multiple plans because life was not simple and we got by as best as we could.”-Charles

And

“Thankfully before coming to college, I was already good at being a self-starter, organizing my work, and managing my time. I am generally able to push myself to do the things that I need to do. If that’s not possible, I am able to seek out the resources that I need in order to do so. So far college has only helped me improve on this.”-Morgan

Obtaining a degree. Degree completion is of utmost importance to the respondents. It’s important to understand the why behind this for FGCS, which is opportunity for them as individuals and their villages:

“Earning my degree in Mechanical Engineering means so much to me. I am earning my degree not only for me, but also for my family and community. My parents have always been super supportive and I really appreciate that, thus my life goal is to be able to buy my parents a house in order for them to retire in a better neighborhood than the one we currently live in. I want to give back to them for willingly having jobs that can be hard at times in order for my sister and I to be able to go to college. Earning my degree will also allow me to go back to my community and prove that if you have a dream, it is attainable. I want to be the inspiration for generations to come, especially for young Latinas like me.”-Christina

And

“Earning this degree means the world for not only myself but for my family as well. To be the first to graduate, especially from a school as prestigious as SCU, is one of the biggest accomplishments that I’ll ever achieve in my lifetime. I feel that I am setting the bar higher for my family. I feel that I’ll start a trend for my family and set the example that if I could do it, then it is possible for any member of my family to do the same as well. I have little cousins that are 13-15 years old, I have a half-sister that’s 6, and a half-brother that’s 10 that all look up to me and I want them to do if not the same then more than myself. Earning this degree will end some of the financial struggles that my family still faces today. The most important long-term goal that I set for myself when I was around 13 years old in middle school was that I will make sure that my mom is taken care of and financially stable for the rest of her life once I graduated from college. My mom has sacrificed SO MUCH for my sister and I and I want to show her that she has done right by us and all her hard work and struggles raising us will pay off. My grandma was the happiest person when she found out I got a full ride scholarship to college. She always told me how proud of me that she was and how much she couldn’t wait to see me graduate. She supported me in any way that she could, along with my mom, and made sure each year that I moved into my dorms/apartments, that I had more than I even needed. Unfortunately, my Nana passed due to a stroke a month before I began my sophomore year in college. Earning this degree means making her proud of me as she watches over me. I feel that I would be keeping an unspoken promise that I made to my Nana that I would complete this journey and that I will take a different path that my family could never seem to find or to make it on. I will make it seem possible to my younger family members, and I will help them in any way that I can. Earning my degree will change not only my life, but the life of my family as well.”-Nicole

Completing a degree is beyond just graduation for a FGCS and encompasses the goals of thriving and gaining the maximum benefit from being in college.

Things to Consider

It is important to understand what a degree means to FGCS. They are highly motivated to achieve this level of success. Institutions should ensure that they are equipped with the tools to best utilize the degree after exiting the university setting.

“I understand that education is everything and if I want to do anything, my SCU degree will open the door for me to do whatever I choose.”-Terrance

Academic determination appeared as a theme throughout the data and was most prominent amongst demographic factors including: in-state origin, on-campus residents, support group, and employed.

Positive Perspective

Positive perspective deals with a student's view of reality and how he or she approaches the reality (Schreiner et. al, 2012). The ability to reframe negative experiences and see the positives are impacted by psychological and attitudinal factors which is tied to this area.

Psychological and Attitudinal Factors

Hardiness. The participants were able to express their positive perspective based on areas that are at times associated negatively with FGCS. The college application process can be daunting for FGCS and research talks about the lack of support FGCS have in the process.

FGCS seek support in various forms like teachers, counselors, college readiness coaches, and others:

“Since my school was a college preparatory school, I had a high school college counselor that helped guide me through the process. My mother was also very invested in learning the process to try and help me through it. I regularly used College Board to research colleges and other sites to look at scholarships. For the most part, my counselor was my biggest help.”-Morgan

And

“Finally there was a librarian who was an awesome help when it came to writing my essays, I believe if it was not for her I would be in a very different place because she really went through my essays and helped me greatly when it came to writing my story., She saw straight through my intentions and could easily help me navigate through common mistakes that students made in order to succeed in the college application process.”-Charles

FGCS are said to have lower academic expectations and goals than non-first generation college students (Choy, 2001). The research discovered through this study challenges this notion

through a theme of determination and perseverance. While these students may face certain challenges, they are extremely determined to excel academically and to earn a degree:

“Success for me means not giving up and making something for myself. My parents worked so hard, and still are, in order to give me the chance to go to college. I worked so many hours in order to do this. There is so much that was put into me making it to college that giving up is not an option. I want to make the best of the time I have here and to build something for myself.”-Morgan

The opportunity to achieve at the next level appeared to be important to this population. There was a pattern of a desire to leave a legacy inspired by their ability to overcome difficult situations and to help the community around them:

“Having worked in HRL, I've thought about this a lot, as they ask us that question a lot. I want to leave a legacy that emphasizes the importance of human relationships and community. Obviously college is a time of growth, both personal and academic, but having a community of support and care for one another through those times of challenge and growth is something we could all strive to contribute more to.”-Thomas

And

“I want potential students to see that people from all diverse backgrounds can thrive, and work towards accomplishing our own individual goals. They shouldn't fear being a non-traditional student, or even see limitations and disadvantages in their circumstances. The fear of not knowing shouldn't be a discouragement.”-Freda

Hardiness is a theme that was apparent throughout the story shared through the participants.

Things to Consider

It is important that institutions also approach FGCS from a positive perspective. The students should not feel defeated based on the response of others to their needs as a FGCS. Instead, individuals should help to eradicate the gap of understanding and knowledge pertaining to navigating college:

“While there's nothing wrong with having fun in college, all my expectations and goals always keep me grounded and focused. The one thing I really want people to understand

about first generation college is that things are different from our perspective, especially at SCU. It's harder to get by if people automatically have assumptions of you when you show them that you don't really know what college really is - if that makes sense. Certain aspects of college that parents have shown to their kids through the years are basic to them, but in my eyes, it's brand new information. I understand everyone has different opinions because they were raised differently, but it would help so much if people had more consideration for background of first-generation college students.”-Cavon

Positive perspective appeared as a theme throughout the data and was most prominent amongst demographic factors including: in-state origin, on-campus residents, support group, and employed.

Other Components to Thriving.

Psychological sense of community. Terrell Strayhorn “frames sense of belonging as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in certain social contexts where some individuals are prone to feel unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely, or in some social contexts where certain individuals are more likely to feel that way” (Strayhorn, 2012). FGCS find a sense of belonging in areas where they feel comfortable and accepted such as spaces dedicated to inclusion and cultural identity. On the other end of the spectrum, there was a lack of belonging at the institution due to the lack of diversity leading to feelings of isolation:

“Being around my community scholar family and the friends that I have made makes me feel comfortable. Finding my crowd/fit on campus was one of the hardest things that I’ve had to do and it took a long while for me to do so. When I didn’t have any friends and when I wasn’t involved too much on campus I was very uncomfortable being at school and I begin to go home so much that I missed out on a lot of on campus and student experiences my first couple of years in college. The culture shock of this particular school also made me feel very uncomfortable. In middle school, I attended a predominately white school and I would’ve thought that it would prepare me for this school but it didn’t. The culture on campus definitely took about 2 years to get used to.”- Nicole

and

“One of the most open spaces on campus for me is SSS. Not only are most of my friends in the program, but the staff is also very helpful and supportive. One of the best

experiences that I've had on campus has been the Hispanic Heritage month celebration hosted by the United Latino Association. The event was full of diverse cultures and authentic food that allowed the campus to experience that. Typically events that I know that an event is going to make me uncomfortable, I do not see many advertisements for them, thus I tend not to attend.”-Christina

Members of a community can show that a person matters by helping one to feel that their needs will be met through a commitment to one another (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is important that FGCS garner a sense of belonging.

Identity conscious programming. FGCS have a need for programming that focuses on their needs as a FGCS in a holistic manner:

“Reaching out to first generation students. Like myself in the beginning I didn’t ask for help and tried to do my own thing. From friends, who are also first – generation, they didn’t ask for help either. In a sense, we were on our own, and we didn’t know what to ask or how to ask certain questions. There is like an invisible gap between us from the rest of the student’s body. Also, a further orientation for first- generation students to explain things further than just dorms and signing for classes.”-Freda

And

“I think having the ability to bring first-generation college students together in a more concrete and deliberate way. Having community is an essential part of any experience and working to bring together people going through a shared experience is a great way to enhance their experience and allow them to form their own support network.”-Terrance

Things to Consider

It is important that institutions recognize that there are other factors that impact the sense of belonging for FGCS outside of the racial makeup and background. There are other things that lead to feelings of isolation such as being a commuter student or even majority students’ from a lower socioeconomic status:

“Since I live off campus, study rooms are basically like a real room to me where I can be alone and focus on something without feeling like someone is judging or eyeing my work. That might not be the case, but it still makes it harder for me to focus. When I say secluded areas, I mean corners, or spots that are out of people's way. I usually will always avoid the middle tables in favor of the corners or even the single cubbies in-between the

bookshelves at the library. This just makes me feel more comfortable when I do work, maybe it's because SCU lacks diversity, but I know that it relaxes me a lot more than if I was around people.”-Cavon

And

“At times I feel uncomfortable in terms of the people I go to school with, as SCU is a very wealthy campus, but there haven't been any specific places or experiences that make me feel uncomfortable. The business school has at times made me feel uncomfortable and disadvantaged because of small things I would have known had my parents graduated from university because it is very common sense based and the expectations are extremely high for its students.”-Ryan

Spirituality

Spirituality is important to students during times of transition and is essential to the development of students (Astin et. al, 2011). For this study, spirituality was mentioned a few times but there were no themes that emerged in this area.

Institutional Integrity

Institutional integrity focuses on the consistency the institution shows to creating a student experience that aligns with its mission and goals (Schreiner et. al, 2012). FGCS should feel their experience is consistent with their expectations and the mission of the institution.

Expectations versus Reality

The participants discussed how they were unsure of what to expect from college and/or how college did not meet their expectations. Overall college exceeded the expectations of the participants:

“I didn’t know what to expect social life to be like. In high school, I stayed with the same group of friends all four years, which consisted of the soccer team and middle school friends. I had at least one of them in each of my classes, we hang out on weekends, and studying and did all group projects together. We signed up for the same clubs and tried out for the same leadership roles in those organizations. I knew I could depend on them. I knew going into college the first few weeks I’d be alone for most it. However, the friends I met at orientation and frog camp were familiar faces I could talk too. Even students from my high school that I usually never talked to before, I could catch up with on campus. Also, my best friend from high school got accepted, so even though we didn’t

have any similar classes, she was there to help me out with studying or personal issues.”-
Freda

And

“In my personal case, I can sum it all up by saying that I realized how much SCU had to offer and I wanted to make sure I was getting the most out of SCU that I could. (Still trying to do so.)”-Terrance

Barriers to Thriving

It was important to this study to understand barriers and obstacles from the perspective of a FGCS. The participants responded to being asked about barriers or obstacles that prevent thriving amongst FGCS as being the lack of resources (financial, knowledge about navigating college) and a lack of guidance as themes:

Minimal resources. It is not the lack of desire or ability that prevents these students from thriving, it is instead the access to minimal resources that emerged as a perceived barrier to thriving for FGCS.

“I think a lack of information or resources prevents most first-gen students from really thriving. First-generation students are often already driven, motivated, and want to succeed. In terms of academics, they are brilliant and willing to do the hard work to come out on top. Most are unable to do this though because they struggle with financial problems or access to opportunities that they just don't know about. A lot of the things I learned within my first two years of SCU I had never known about. When I started school, my mother and I had to self-educate ourselves on this entirely new system of grants, scholarships, tuition, FAFSA and so on. I was really lucky that I had education benefits from my parents' military service, otherwise I would have had to start working much sooner to help pay for school. All in all, had I known a lot of the things I know now, and how to do them, it would have made managing school a lot easier.”-Morgan

Minimal guidance. There is a need for increased guidance according to the participants.

There was a pattern that emerged showcasing a shared norm of feeling there is a need for more guidance and support targeted at FGCS and their unique needs.

“I think the biggest obstacle is having adequate support from family and from friends as well. Usually first generation students have no idea how to navigate college and are at a disadvantage to knowing what to expect. First generation students don't have their cousins to talk to about college and how they cope with their troubles. They also usually don't have parents that know people within the university and help them get into certain activities and opportunities. They might hear about the student government and about the debate team, but since they have no one to tell them about it then they usually find out about opportunities late or don't have social connections to feel accepted in those in groups.”-Charles

And

“Some of the barriers that first-generation students encounter are knowing the availability of resources the college or university provides. Also, sometimes it can be hard to feel unguided and alone in college.”-Christina

Removal of Boundaries

Institutions place value in being involved and engaged with the campus community.

When asked about what they would do with their time if all boundaries were removed, there was a theme that emerged around increased engagement and involvement:

“ If all boundaries and challenges were removed, I would spend my time being more of a college student. Due to work, scholarship requirements, and family, all on top of my difficult major and regular school requirements, I don't have much time in a day to do what a normal college student would do. Football at SCU is very huge deal and I haven't been to one football game my entire 3 years I've been here. I find myself cramming a lot because I have to work around my work schedule and my to-do list for my scholarship. If all challenges were removed I wouldn't work at all. Instead of the 3.2 that I have, I may have closer to a 4.0 because I could study more. I would spend my time getting on top of any work that I have, relaxing, doing more fun student activities, and enjoying what should be the last exciting 4 years before you're taking on the responsibilities of being an actual adult. At times, I feel like I'm an adult now instead of a college student.”-Nicole

Increased involvement can lead to an increased sense of support, acceptance, and belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Yet, research says that FGCS are less likely to get involved (Ward et. al, 2012). The research here reveals that FGCS have a desire to be involved, but may face other challenges that prevent this from happening at the rate of other students.

Prevailing through Challenges

The ability to face various obstacles and overcome them was repeated throughout the data. When asked to summarize the overall experience of being a FGCS a theme of prevailing through challenge emerged:

“As a first-generation college student it can be difficult when you’re not sure how to work on a ten page paper for the first time, not being able to call your parents for help on an assignment, trying to not internalize stereotypes of a black student at a PWI. It is a nice reminder that I am the first in my family to graduate, nothing is out of your reach if you seek help and not give up.”-Monica

And

“Coming to college was an exciting yet terrifying experience. I wanted to show myself that I could do college on my own, I would figure out things along the way. However, it soon hit me that it’s a great mentality to be independent but it can be very difficult to do. I became aware that I didn’t know exactly what I was doing, and was just painting a false sense of comfort. I didn’t want people to know that I had no clue of what they were talking about, but I soon realized it shouldn’t matter. If I want to make the best of my college experience, I had to ask questions, and expand my knowledge outside just curriculum. It’s going to be a tough time, but the important thing is that you’re not alone. College is what to make of it, what you apply in your studies shows in results, and what you sign up for brings different experiences. Soon the limitations of not knowing how things work, or what to do diminish along the way.”-Freda

These students showed that they have the grit and determination to maximize the opportunity.

Things to Consider

While the students adjusted to college after it being different than expected were more in the positive areas, there were still areas of concern. There were some students that had concerns

that can impact their in-class and out-of-class experience regarding the representation of people from diverse backgrounds. These concerns support the notion that representation matters:

“College is a little different than expected because of the racial makeup. I was not surprised that most of my professors were Caucasian males but it would be nice in the future to have more professors of color to look up to. I did expect smaller classes since it's a private university and teachers that care about your wellbeing.”-Monica

and

“ College is not at all what I envisioned before arriving. I believed that college was a place that I would get easily adjusted too. Coming to college, especially to a private college such as SCU, it was a major culture shock and I didn't adjust at all for the full first year. I found myself commuting to college and home since I'm local and live very close by. I had a dorm but rarely used it. I didn't make friends as easily as I thought I would and I found it impossible to find my fit. I also envisioned college as difficult, but not as difficult as nursing school has been. I've never been mentally challenged like I am now ever and that also took major time to adjust too. I had to really figure out how to manage my time, which I'm still working on today, to be able to get all my work completed and to maintain decent grades.”-Nicole

The stories told through the qualitative phase of the study created a greater depth of understanding the experience of FGCS.

Phase Three

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to determine the ability of first-generation college students to thrive at SCU. A mixed methods approach was used in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon that will lead to potential solutions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This section will present the case by identifying areas of phases one and two that add to the complete story of FGCS at SCU and address the research questions:

1. Do first-generation college students (FGCS) thrive or merely survive based on the 5 Factors of Thriving?
2. How does being connected to a retention-based support group impact the thriving of FGCS?
3. What aspects of a FGCS experience and being impacts his or her ability to thrive?

Research Question #1

When compared to national norms, the research results support the idea that FGCS are able to thrive. Overall, the results prove that FGCS have the capacity to thrive and promotes the shift from deficit-thinking to strengths-based thinking. The next section will examine specific items from each of the five factors to provide the perspective of FGCS using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Social connectedness. The study showed that FGCS at the research site value the friendships they have and their ability to connect with others through social connectedness ($M(SCU)=4.16$, $M(National)=4.05$). The study supports that FGCS build healthy relationships through their campus involvement, mentor relationships, friends, support from family, and other avenues such as connection to ethnic-based groups.

“My college experience as a first-generation college student has been a tough and long ride. It was in no way easy at all and it takes strength and perseverance to make it through. For 2 ½ years in college, I ran away from challenges that getting adjusted to college took and I missed out on a lot of student experiences. As a Junior in my second semester of college I’m finally settling in to the college life, making friends, and enjoying myself outside of the classroom. I was able to network and find individuals that could help me in my times of need when my family couldn’t. I work, yet I try to be involved on campus and my campus involvement continues to grow to this day. I’m going to graduate, I’m going to become a nurse, and I will be sure that more individuals in my family graduate college.”-Nicole

Engaged learning. The data revealed that FGCS at SCU connect their experience inside the classroom to the impact faculty have on their overall experience through engaged learning

M(SCU)=4.935 M(National)=4.73). Their opportunity to receive assistance from faculty members and advisors is key to their thriving in this area.

“I’m too lucky because my teachers, they don’t seem alien to me. I think like all the faculty at SCU is like you feel a certain level of comfortability with them. Especially with the office hours just being available to you. I can come to you during these hours and you ask you any amount of questions I want to know, okay, and you are not going to send me away.”-Morgan

Diverse citizenship. The items in the area of diverse citizenship (M(SCU)=5.063, M(National)=4.77) are crucial to thriving for FGCS. Participants revealed that they value interacting with people from varying perspectives and have a desire to do so. It was apparent that the background of the participants and their identity played a major role in their view of valuing difference. Their passion for their community is connected to their motivation for success.

“It’s like I’m not doing this just for me, I’m doing it for my community and to give back, and to show that it is possible, even though the odds may literally ... It’s not necessarily in my favor.”-Christina

Academic determination. FGCS have the motivation and drive to be successful academically. Their academic determination (M(SCU)=4.976, M(National)=4.73) shows that they willing to work hard and overcome challenges. They are motivated to reach their goal of degree completion.

“The skill that I came to college with and that has helped me throughout my entire life is perseverance. If it wasn’t for my pure determination I would’ve gave up a long time ago. College has been by far the toughest journey that I have taken in my life. Through the countless all-nighters, mental breakdowns, and mental exhaustion, I continued to push myself and set high goals for myself. A skill that I have built while in college is learning how to communicate and network. Gathering resources in college is the main reason for my success so far. If I don’t know the answer to something I know a person to call that will. In high school I was very timid and I didn’t like to speak out. I let my mom talk for

me at any time possible. I've learned how to have a voice and communicate professionally and effectively to all.”- Nicole

Positive perspective. FGCS look for the best in situations and are able to reframe negative situations into positives as indicated through the data on positive perspective (M(SCU)=4.63, M(National)=4.56). The study revealed that through their experiences in life they have developed hardiness and a motivation for success that gives them the innate ability to thrive in this area.

“It isn’t easy, but it isn’t impossible. It takes a lot of discovery and independent research to figure out all that your school offers, but the resources are there, you just have to find them. You can’t ever feel discouraged because you are the only kid of color in your classes, you must recognize that you are just as capable as everyone else around you and you’ve made it this far, so have confidence in your abilities. Simply put, never give up.”- Terrance

Research Question #2

Institutions have responded to the needs of FGCS with solutions like retention programs that offer support to this population. While overall, the results of the TQ showed that there was only a significant difference in the areas of Psychological Sense of Community and Institutional Integrity, there were numerous specific items that supported the impact of retention programs. The role retention programs play in the experience of FGCS proves to be positive in a number of areas. In order to understand the impact of retention programs, I analyzed all data sets to provide a complete picture.

Social Connectedness. The item “I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have” ($t(76)=1.92, p=0.059$) presented a significant difference between the two groups. A similar pattern emerged through the qualitative analysis showing that while friendships were important to both groups, the support group connected friends as a part of their support system

within SCU whereas the group that is not connected to a formal retention group reported friendship to be a key role to their support systems both inside and outside of SCU.

“ I know I'll always have my family to support me in anything I do. Spiritually and mentally they help me with their guidance and wisdom. They help me see things outside of just school and grades. Also with friends I grew up with. The friends from high school that I can call and meet up. Talking to them helps me feel better knowing they're going through the same process with struggles and achievements. I also have an abundance of teachers, I can reconnect with in case I need help.”-Freda

Other items presented a significant difference between the support and no-support group in the area of campus involvement that were supported by the themes that emerged the qualitative datasets.

Involvement. The data reveals that areas like participation in student organizations, community service, campus ethnic organizations, and leadership of the organizations were more prevalent with support group participants versus no-support group. Other than “campus ethnic organizations”, each of the other items held the over-under pattern when comparing support group and no-support group to the national norm. “Campus ethnic organization” participation led to both groups being above the national average (support group mean (M=3.23, SD = 1.80); no-support group mean (M=1.98, SD = 1.34); national average (M=1.86)).

“So far, my college experience as a first generation college student has come with challenges, however I have gotten involved with many organizations, such as SSS, that have helped me transition. Although we are considered to be at a disadvantage, I feel as though I have turned it into a positive and would love to share my experience for future generations of first-generation college students.”-Christina

Engaged Learning. There were no items with a significant difference as it relates to this factor, but there were items in areas related to faculty/student interaction that were significant. It is important to mention that while their relationship to faculty members is important and valued with both groups, faculty interaction was less of a theme with the participants not connected to a

support group. The realms of their relationship with faculty were more connected to office hours than any other component of student/faculty interaction. The support group connected more with advisors and faculty and met with them about career and graduate school plans.

“My support system within SCU continue to grow to this day. I’m a part of the student support service (SSS) program here at SCU which is mainly for first generation college students as well. They provide me with free tutors if I need it, a place to study, free access to the lab and printing, as well as open sessions with advisors for further help. I’m beginning to build relationships with professors and is utilizing office hours to understand how to increase my grades and be successful in and out of the classroom. I make sure that I maintain my relationships will all advisors and set up meetings from time to time to make sure that I am on the path to graduate.”-Nicole

Diverse Citizenship. The item “I know I can make a difference in my community” demonstrated a significant difference ($t(76)=2.47$, $p=0.016$). This did not emerge through the qualitative data. Both groups appeared to value community and the impact they could have:

“I would like to have had a legacy for empowering others and bridging the gap for people.”-Terrance

And

“I want to be known as a servant leader who made every place better than it was before. I also want to represent a minority population with grace and integrity. By getting involved as much as possible, I hope to maintain a high leadership presence on campus.”-Ryan

Other items that presented an over/under for support/no-support when compared to the national norm that emerged as themes under this factor are presented in this section.

Demographics. While there were no significant differences presented through the TQ. The stories told throughout the second phase supported thriving to be higher amongst participants that were connected to a support group, from in-state, reside on-campus, and are employed.

Money and Finance. Household income was significantly different between the two groups. The 66% of the support group reported an income less than 60,000 per year and 65% of the no-support group over 60,000 per year. The support group reported working more than the no-support group (77% versus 56%, respectively). In contrary to this, 51% of the no-support group reported difficulty paying for school compared to 34% of the support group. Themes emerged throughout the qualitative data that support these results, including there being more discussion around the difficulty to pay for school amongst the no-support group while interestingly enough there being more discussion around working for pay with the support group.

“Because my family isn’t financially well off, I’ve managed to maintain a part-time job throughout my college experience so that I can support myself in some ways financially to take some of the stress off my home. Some weeks in the past I worked as many as 35 hours, but recently I’ve declined my hours to not exceed 15 hours a week. I feel that work takes a lot out of my college experience and I miss out on a lot of things at time. Work makes my schedule a lot more difficult to work around and takes some time out of my studying while others get the full day to study for class. I feel that is another obstacle that blocks my ability to thrive at times.”-Nicole

Academic Determination. The item “Other people would say I’m a hard worker” demonstrated a significant difference between the two groups ($t(76)=-2.07, p=0.042$). The qualitative data expressed a theme throughout both groups that both challenge and support this notion. While both groups are motivated and determined to reach their goals, the difference in how they approach the resources to support their commitment to hard work differed.

“There are a unique set of challenges that face first-generation students, ranging from financial to social to academic. Ultimately, every first-generation student has the capacity to succeed and seek out the supports that they want and need, even if they are sometimes found in unconventional places.”-Thomas

and

“Being a first-gen student is an exhilarating experience. It is not a setback, but rather a new beginning. As I am one, this gave me the opportunity to define myself as a part of a very strong, stubborn group of people. Adversity only made me stronger. Everything was a learning experience and I appreciated the lessons I learned. While it was frustrating to not know a lot of information that seemed almost common knowledge for others, it just made me push through it. Being a first-gen student has taught me to keep fighting on and not give up.”-Morgan

Positive Perspective. Results from phase one deemed that although not statistically different, the support group is more apt to see the glass half full versus half empty ($t(61)=1.92$, $p=0.059$). The second phase supports this based on how students reframe negative situations and solved issues. It is important to note that both groups did appear to have a theme of resilience and the ability to reframe, but maybe using different methods.

“What really made the transition difficult was my dorm room situation when I arrived at SCU. Since the freshman class was so big, I was put into a forced triple room. I arrived there later, but other two roommates were rushing for sororities and got to the dorm before me. When I got there, they had already taken up majority of the dorm room. I was left with barely a corner. This had upset me, had pissed off my mother, and caused an uproar within my family. I was almost pulled from the school. My mom thought I was being taken advantage of, especially since my roommates were always out for rushing, so nothing could be moved around. She was only in town for the weekend and she wanted it fixed before she left or she was taking me back home with her. We had to go through a lot to get it fixed, but luckily it was. So, for my first literal experience at SCU, it made me very wary about what the rest of the experience was going to be like. Thankfully it got better.”- Morgan

And

“Obstacles that I have that blocks me from thriving with being a first-generation college student is not having as many resources or help that others may have who are not first generation students. All of individuals that I have met, such as professors and advisors, I have met by networking or scheduling personal meetings. I made sure to develop relationships with these individuals so that I can go to them when I’m in need since my family, who’ve never experienced college, could answer questions that I’ve had in the past or guide me through this new and very different experience.”-Nicole

Overall, the impact of support groups on the experience of FGCS appears to be positive. While both groups when put together are thriving above national norms, there were clear differences between the methods of thriving between the two groups.

Research Question #3

Exploring thriving as it pertains to FGCS helps to paint a complete picture of what is needed for the population to get the maximum benefit from being in college. It is important to acknowledge that FGCS have many layers to who they are and to approach work with the population from a holistic standpoint. It is vital to understand the role the student's identity and background play into their sense of belonging and how they connect with the institution. Both psychological sense of community ($t=2.029$, $p=.0451$) and institutional integrity ($t=2.283$, $p=.0249$) displayed significant differences and contribute to FGCS thriving.

The Role Identity and Student Background Have on the Psychological Sense of Community and its Relationship to Institutional Integrity. “Sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Both of these areas intertwined throughout the data building a strong relationship between the two and the thriving of FGCS. The data also shows the relation and impact the identity and background of the student has on how they experience college. There was a theme throughout the data that support there being a strong sense of community. Students appeared to be proud of the institution they attend and feel that the institution carries out its mission:

“The reason why I've surprisingly nearly made it through my freshman year is thanks to how approachable and helpful the teachers at SCU are, even the TA's are amazing. I haven't had an unreasonable teacher yet, and they're all approachable thanks to their office hours...my friends are also a resource I go to frequently, they always know something about SCU that I don't.”-Cavon

And

“I had mental health issues, or I currently have mental health issues, and I come from a background of alcoholism and drug abuse in my family. You know, that kind of carried on to me coming into college and I didn't start going to the therapy, counseling center and stuff like that until last year. Because I didn't know about it. I think those are really important resources, especially if you come from a background of where I came from, and you have a background of not really understanding depression or anxiety and stuff like that. Because I didn't have much of a grasp on that until I came here. That's, I think, something pretty important.”-Hudson

Lack of Understanding. There are still major concerns that need to be considered as it relates to FGCS thriving in this area. The concern is for the students who do not feel like they

belong or that are experiencing other mishaps that impede their growth. It is again important for the community to understand the unique needs and experiences of FGCS.

“In my experience, students that know I'm first gen tend to try to one-up because they think I'm at a disadvantage. A lot of students are uninformed and don't treat me the same amidst SCU's comparison culture. When people find out that I pay for college myself, they often ask me things like "Do your parents not care?" "Are your parents mean?" "It sounds like your parents aren't supportive." Summing up, the main issue is the lack of understanding and perspective from peers, professors, and staff members at SCU. There are small things that only first gen students really worry about, and they're often discredited. Even the smallest things like picking classes becomes extremely difficult for me, and I don't have my mom to call and ask about that, because she doesn't really know, as she has never had that experience.”-Ryan

And

“I think part of it is the assumption on the part of professors and other support staff is that students have some kind of general understanding of what college is supposed to be like. I know I had several conversations where I was asked things about where my parents went to school, etc. and felt unprepared to answer those. Because I genuinely don't believe I knew how to manage all the various aspects of college life.”-Thomas

The study revealed a number of aspects that impact the experience of FGCS and their ability to thrive.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore the ability of FGCS to thrive at a predominately white, mid-sized, private institution. This explanatory sequential mixed methods study used both quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore this phenomenon. This chapter described the statistical analysis of the quantitative data gathered through the Thriving Quotient assessment in addition to the qualitative data gathered through focus groups and virtual interview journals. The data analysis revealed themes and patterns that emerged from both sets of data. The quantitative data presented areas of significant difference between the sample and the national norm. The data revealed that FGCS at the institution are able to thrive based on the Five Factors of Thriving with certain areas rendering a significant difference when compared to the

national sample. There was also a statistical analysis exploring the impact of participation in retention-based support groups comparing support group participants to participants that are not linked to a support group. There were areas of significant difference pertaining to items on the scales when comparing the two groups. Data from interviews revealed themes based around the factors and other components like identity and student background playing an important role in their ability to thrive. The data sets also revealed the factors such as sense of community and belonging and institutional fit and integrity that impact a FGCS experience at an institution. The data presented in this chapter will be further discussed and tied to the existing literature in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: CHALLENGING DEFICIT THINKING WITH PURPOSE

Fueled by Passion and Purpose

How many times have we heard politicians, community organizers, higher education leaders, and others utter phrases about “creating opportunities”? If we are to create opportunity, we must do so by assuming the responsibility of creating said opportunities. Financial challenges should be accounted for when creating opportunities, but the institutional barriers to success that impede the growth and development of individuals should also be addressed.

The system has to take responsibility for its role, the system being those that set the policies and rules in place for others to access the opportunity or those that help aide in how the rules are created. This is the way we challenge deficit thinking. We consider the role of the system and create opportunity based on removing barriers to success and promoting well-being. This has been the premise of my research from the beginning. This has driven the foundation and perspective of the research to build systems that promote the success of FGCS versus preventing failure.

The passion behind this research has indeed created opportunity, even for me. I have had the chance to share my work with a number of entities from higher education leaders to policymakers. No one has given me resistance with the thought of this perspective being off-kilter, but I have had people wonder how we make this happen or who is responsible for making it happen. For example, I had the chance to present this work at a conference in Washington D.C. In order to maximize my time there, I decided to schedule meetings with people on “The Hill” to talk about the plight of FGCS and how we can help them thrive. I received confirmation that this was an important concept from party members on both sides of the aisle. The people I met with confirmed that FGCS and access to education was an important factor and many mentioned TRIO during the meetings. At first this was comforting to know that what I believed

in was important and seemed to be worth the meetings. This feeling lasted (with the exception of a few outliers) until the last meeting where the commitment to FGCS was challenged by a policy analyst. The analyst supported the work I presented, but challenged the system. He challenged the system by posing the question “Is creating opportunity for FGCS just a buzz phrase to use for political platforms?” His words added depth in that moment to the purpose of my research. This conversation has continued to ring clear and loud in my heart and mind as I watch programs like Upward Bound be defunded on a local level, benefactors from the DREAM Act feel dehumanized, students and families desiring for their child to attend college but not knowing where to start, and other instances that remind me of the why. FGCS can thrive and their thriving can be supported by changing our perspective and building a more positive narrative. FGCS are not to be used for political gain or for a method of promoting an agenda.

This research was designed with taking this conversation beyond those who implement and operate programs each day. Those frontline workers are important to changing this narrative, but we also have to be strategic and understand how to challenge the system. Systems perpetuate and support deficit thinking, so we have to develop methods to change the thought process of those individuals that make up the system. The narrative of the participants in this study shows the importance of thriving and the role it plays in promoting success for *all* students.

Purpose of the Study

This study reveals that FGCS are able to thrive based on the 5 Factors of Thriving and other pertinent components that must be considered. This phenomenon was explored using the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach in three phases. An explanatory sequential mixed methods study uses the descriptive numeric data of the quantitative study from phase one

to set the stage for the second phase of qualitative data that will help explain the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The first phase of the study included a survey assessment of the Thriving Quotient. The results from the assessment measured the experience of students from an academic, social, and psychological lens. Each of the five factors served as predictors of student success in areas like academic success, institutional fit, retention and graduation, and a student's overall satisfaction with college. A preliminary analysis was conducted on the quantitative portion of the study that was used for the second phase. The qualitative phase took a deeper dive into the lived experiences of FGCS. The third phase of the study intersected the likes of the quantitative and qualitative phases by addressing the research question of the case of the experiences of FGCS through the use of mixed methods. The case study allowed the information from the first two phases to be combined to paint a clearer picture of the overall phenomenon. The combination of these methods added more robust and comprehensive picture of what the true narrative of a FGCS is in this setting.

The Perspective of FGCS and Their Ability to Thrive

The premise of this study tells the experience of FGCS and explores the needs of FGCS all from the perspective of the students themselves. Through the use of nationally used assessments, focus groups, and interviews the story of these students at SCU was brought to life based on their view. The use of the concept of thriving was intentional and used to enhance the work and initiatives built around FGCS. Thriving takes the conversation beyond access and graduation to shift the focus to include what happens during the dash, the time between when a student enters the institution through graduation and beyond. The study explored the impact of retention-based programming on the ability of FGCS to thrive. The study encourages practitioners, policy makers, scholars, and anyone else contributing to or prohibiting the success

of FGCS to change this mindset by shifting from deficit thinking to strengths based thinking and understanding the population of FGCS from the perspective of the student. The next sections will interpret the data findings in an effort to contribute to this shift by telling the story the FGCS desired to tell based on their willingness to share their story and be transparent throughout the process.

Challenging Deficit Thinking by De(constructing) the Experience of FGCS

The purpose of this study was to explore the ability of FGCS to thrive while also challenging deficit thinking. Deficit thinking negates the role of the system and places the blame on the student and family (Valencia, 1997). Through use of deconstruction, the next section will incorporate this method in order to provide a foundation for shifting the narrative of FGCS to a more positive perspective based on data. It should be noted that this is not an effort to dismantle the research of brilliant minds, but instead to add a narrative that reflect the resilience and grit of FGCS and to challenge institutions to take a more active role in promoting student success versus preventing student failure throughout the various transitions of college. Transition can be either a positive or negative experience. The experiences that are positive help a student move forward and negative experiences stifle growth and confidence (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). College students are in a constant stage of transition. “For students from high-risk backgrounds or from populations historically underserved by higher education, transition is an almost daily occurrence as they constantly move in and out of differing subcultures and environments (Schreiner, et al., 2012, p. 1).” It is imperative that the bridge between current and future research recognize the constant stage of transition for FGCS and begin to tell the story from the perspective of the student by peeling back layers of deficit thinking that reinforce systems of oppression.

Identity

At the core of this research is the identity of the participants. The way in which they thrive and experience college is shaped by their identity. As we work with FGCS, we must understand that their identity is a huge component of how they transition to and through college. Identity is continuously shaped by new experiences and environments (Wilkins, 2014). Yet the core of who they are still impacts how they move through college. The status of FGCS was a constant piece of their identity in college that was highlighted throughout their stories. Their connection to being a FGCS impacted how they accessed college, matriculated through college, view the opportunity for higher education, and more. Identity influences how they navigate each of the factors associated with thriving. Institutions must be aware of the layers of identity that FGCS can encompass. Many of those layers are associated with FGCS being at-risk students (students of color, low-income, academically underprepared, non-traditional student) (Ward et. al, 2012). This study challenges the thought of the students being “at-risk” based on those identifiers because it perpetuates deficit thinking. The system must consider that the reason these students may face challenges is not due simply to parts of their identity, but instead due to entering a system that was not created for their success. These students that identify with these demographics are accessing a system that was never designed for them to enter, yet after years of exclusion they are now invited to enter. This is the very essence of deficit thinking when we call these students at-risk due to their not identifying with the dominant culture and ignoring the fact that the system itself was not designed for these students. There has been an opportunity gap that took years to create. The people oppressed by this gap did not voluntarily enter into this deficit that placed them at a disadvantage (Pendakur, 2016). Therefore, the system must also take responsibility in helping these students transition into and navigate this new territory. “Some students whose entering characteristics seem to

predispose them to success adjust poorly and fail to persist. In contrast, many students experience profound success despite profiles that seem predictive of academic failure or dropout” (Schreiner, et al., 2012, p. 43). If not supported in the right way any student can fail, but there is a certain level of empowerment that comes with intentionality to help students be successful. I understand that it’s difficult to create change with systemic oppression, but I firmly believe that if a individuals we work to create a shift in our perspective and approach that it will lead to a change in our actions and eventually in the overall system. Individuals created the gap in opportunity and access, therefore individuals can bridge the gap.

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness is proven to improve the overall experience and contribute to the well-being of the student (Strayhorn, 2012; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). This study revealed that healthy relationships are possible for FGCS and that they matter. Those relationships exist outside and within the institution. Outside of the institution, the relationship that appeared to be most important was the connection to family. The role the parents and other family members play was essential to the thriving and success of the student. For decades, researchers have focused on the lack of parental support and the disadvantages FGCS face due to their parents not graduating from college (Ward et. al, 2012, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The story shared through this study both challenges and supports this. While the students were aware of hardships they faced due to their parents not having the shared knowledge about college, they also made it clear that their parents provide a level of support that is unmatched and vital to their being. The type of support focused on here was that of emotional support. The emotional support their parents and family show is integral to their experience. Institutions should focus time and efforts on including the family of FGCS into campus community. This focus should

commit institutional time and resources into including these families and changing efforts that exclude these families. “Providing programming and resources for these families empowers them to support these students, despite the fact that they have historically been left out of opportunities in which to participate and that would help them better understand higher education” (Arzuaga, 2016, p. 10). Efforts to do so can take place in the orientation, parent and family programs, and inclusion in other opportunities to connect with the family. Institutions should be aware of the language they use and how they help build the knowledge of all families to help build awareness for helping the student be successful. The participants in the study made it clear that their parent’s support their endeavors and many of them are motivated to excel based on the desire to make their families proud and to change the trajectory of their family for generations to come.

Inside the institution the relationships with advisors, peers, student organizations and faculty members matter. Institutions must find ways to connect FGCS with advocates that are committed to building upon their strengths. The data made it clear that these relationships are invaluable to the success of the student. The relationships that made the largest impact were those that focused on the core of the student and creating opportunity for student success. Programs like Student Support Services appeared to be vital to the success of the students. Student involvement in other programs both academic and nonacademic was important to their success as research supports (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 278). The students shared a desire to be engaged in leadership roles and to continue building on the skillsets they already possess. They are engaged with campus activities like fraternity/sorority life, cultural based groups, and more. Researchers have found that FGCS are less likely to get involved (Ward et. al, 2012). The research in this study further explores this notion in order to explain why this may

be. Practitioners must understand that it is not due to a lack of desire to be engaged, but could call for institutions to be more intentional about providing the framework for the importance of being engaged in campus activities and the sharing the benefits of involvement. The students shared a common regard for first focusing on academics. It is important to understand that from the student's perspective they fear of "ruining" this opportunity for an education for themselves and their family. Institutions must have a regard for helping the student navigate what it means to be a FGCS from an overall standpoint and how they can excel in multiple areas, because the desire to be socially connected is there.

Engaged Learning

Engaged learning focuses on the ability of a student to connect the knowledge they have and what they desire to learn both inside and outside of the classroom (Schreiner et. al, 2012). The research says 80% of FGCS compared to 50% of non-first generation college students are less motivated to obtain a higher level of degree as early as eighth grade (Choy, 2001). This study revealed that these students are highly motivated to obtain a degree and much of this stemmed from college preparatory work that has been instilled over the years. They have been engaged in college preparatory initiatives starting in their local K-12 schools and are encouraged by their parents to further their education. The role programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), college and career readiness coaches, teachers, and counselors played in their motivation to garner more knowledge should be recognized. Institutions should focus on how to partner with primary and secondary educational entities to build college-readiness models that will help change statistics like the one above by continuing to shift the priorities for students. The two entities are co-dependent upon one another and should not

attempt to do the work separate from the other. These partnerships work and are of value to building the foundation for engaged learning for FGCS.

FGCS are said to lack academic preparedness and graduate from lower performing schools (Braxton, 2013). The performance of schools and levels of academic preparedness are based on a number of factors like test scores, rigor of the curriculum, location of the school, and more. A consideration for the student must be at the forefront of this discussion. Institutions must be aware of the damaging experience this has on the student with their academic value and ability being placed on the school they graduated from. Instead institutions should change the thought process to focus on how to build models of learning and academic integration that will support students from any tier school to create an environment for engaged learners. If we continue to label students and group them based on the school they came from and ignoring the fact that they are in some instances outperforming students from more “prestigious” schools we will continue to miss the mark on helping the student’s transition into the academic environment. Institutions can do this through the support of learning centers, tutoring efforts, and programs that focus on improving the learning skills of students.

Some of the most important stakeholders to building engaged learners are the faculty members and academic advisors. Faculty members and academic advisors have proven to be important in helping the students navigate college. These FGCS shared a high regard for the relationships they have with individuals from academic affairs. They see these individuals as important to their personal and academic journey. It is important that institutions equip people working in every area to understand the plight of FGCS and develop a strategy for student success. They must understand the multiple pieces of identity that play into the in-class experience of FGCS and be advocates for ensuring that these students are successful despite of

preconceived notions of the students ability or lack thereof. This study shows that when given the opportunity, the students are able to rise to the occasion and this is supported by the data point of FGCS at the research site having higher grade point averages than the national norm.

Promoting student success in the area of engaged learning will change the perspective of individuals working with the students no matter their academic background. This is an area that was not as apparent throughout both sets of data and should be focused on as an opportunity for growth and impact. The knowledge that students learn inside the classroom is dependent upon the environment in which they learn. If institutions shift their thinking and begin focusing on how to engage FGCS as learners the data could continue to shift in this area and be integrated throughout the experience of students.

Diverse Citizenship

Valuing difference in a shared community of people different from you is the heart of diverse citizenship (Schreiner et. al, 2012). The study showed that engaging with others matters to these students and much of this comes from their own personal background. FGCS arrive at institutions from a wide variety of backgrounds that all play a role in how they navigate college and view society (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Institutions cannot look at the background of FGCS as limiting to their success, but must understand how attending college coupled with their background can help them to thrive. Institutions and practitioners that consider thriving as a model of student success understand that student backgrounds are not a limiting indicative of success once you consider the various factors of thriving. Students that are thriving on campuses are more likely to graduate regardless of their entry characteristics. This supports the notion that interventions can be designed to help support the likelihood of success

for all students (Schreiner, 2010). Their own background propels them in this area making them have a strong desire to not only be understood, but to understand the experience of others.

The background of FGCS also relates to the cultural and financial capital that FGCS bring with them of which they are said to lack both (Ward et. al, 2012). While financial capital is less objective and is based on the amount of money and equity a person may or may not possess, cultural capital is much more subjective. Institutions place value on cultural capital that is centered around the dominant culture of the campus. We cannot shun the cultural capital that FGCS have to equal a lack of cultural capital. Instead we must recognize that the type of cultural capital they bring to the table as it relates to their background is not valued by institutions. This is in fact a disservice to not only the institution, but to each member of the campus community. If institutions truly value diversity and inclusion, they will value the cultural capital of which students like FGCS bring to campus. Often times, instead of valuing this type of capital that differs from the dominant culture, the students are forced to assimilate and adhere to the dominant culture. In this case it is not a matter of lacking cultural capital, but instead a lack of regard from the system that is placed on the cultural capital of marginalized groups (Carter, 2005). Institutions must shift their focus to how knowledge can be shared across groups and the contributions that can be made to build and expand the cultural capital of FGCS. It is essential that this is done without making FGCS feel forced to disassociate with their own culture in order to better connect with the dominant culture. Students should instead be supported to grow through reframing their view and approach to life through connecting with others (Strayhorn, 2012). This allows for both FGCS and others to learn and grow from one another.

Financial capital is a component that plays into the role of how FGCS thrive in this area of diverse citizenship. Nearly 4.5 million students are both FGCS and low-income (Opidee,

2015). The study revealed that participants placed pressure on themselves regarding their desire to not be a financial burden to their family and the desire for their degree to provide upward mobility. A number of the students were employed and some worked multiple jobs all while still attempting to be engaged with the campus life. For students who worked and those who did not work, they placed importance on having work experience and working out of a necessity. Institutions should be aware of this desire and need for FGCS to work and promote on-campus job opportunities to these students. Another piece to the attention to financial capital is issues with classism. The overall population at the research site are perceived to be wealthy students by their peers who may not identify as wealthy. Class and socioeconomic status are important factors that should be acknowledged and discussed throughout the campus community. FGCS shared a concern for finances and their ability to pay for school while at the same time not wanting to be viewed as needy or less than due to their limited finances. Another concern that institutions can help address is the opportunity for FGCS to connect with others and build networks that will be beneficial to their future. The desire to complete internships, understand the social networks of professionals, and how to navigate these spaces was a resounding desire for students and is an area that the right efforts can help improve.

Diverse citizenship encourages a commitment to community. The data revealed that community is major to FGCS. The participants agreed that exposure and representation within their community is important. They value the role they have the opportunity to play in their community as being one of the first people to graduate from college. They have a desire to serve as mentors and trailblazers for their people. The participants expressed a desire for the institution to work to increase the college-going culture in their respective communities by having a presence in the schools and neighborhoods. The stories of the FGCS told a story of

hope and motivation to improve not only the lives of their immediate families, but to show others in their community that college is achievable.

Academic Determination

Students that have a desire for success and achieving goals display an ability to thrive in the area of academic determination (Schreiner et. al, 2012). FGCS in this study displayed a strong desire in this area. The story of these students tells a story of the ability to overcome challenges and strive for success no matter the obstacles presented. These students use their academic determination to help them perform well academically. Institutions should focus on the strengths that these students bring to campus that motivates them to work hard. From the perspective of the students they bring skills like adaptability, independence, time management, and perseverance to the table that help motivate them for success. It is important to understand what motivates these students to excel and what degree completion means to them. The story behind their motivation is a desire to complete the degree not only for their family and community, but to create opportunity. Institutions should put effort into helping FGCS build plans for the opportunity that the degree provides. A focus on career readiness, graduate school preparation, and goal-setting for life post-graduation are all areas institutions can focus on. These initiatives should be designed and implemented with the consideration for their needs as a FGCS.

There is a strong link between the impact academic determination has on engaged learning and social connectedness. Based on the stories shared by these participants, the academic determination possessed by FGCS is what keeps them committed to completing their degree. Focusing on this strength of students can help to propel their thriving in other areas. The area of academic determination is important to the focus on the shift from just grades and degree

completion to include a focus on the overall experience. The overall experience can include increasing knowledge and opportunity for FGCS in areas like internships, study abroad, student leadership, and other areas that may be a part of the typical experience of a non-first generation college student and contributes to their growth. If institutions can focus on the will of FGCS to achieve goals and build a connection to other tools FGCS need to help them understand the value of all experiences, it can help the students gain the maximum benefit from being in college.

Positive Perspective

A student's ability to cope with reality and reframe negative experiences is attributed to his or her positive perspective (Schreiner et. al, 2012). The participants displayed this throughout the study by showing they deal with challenges by focusing on their overall goals. Institutions must be challenged to focus on providing students with the context of building on their assets and strengths versus their limitations. This focus on the positive assets helps to shift the thinking of students and boost confidence (Chickering, 2006). This shift in thinking will support the perspective of the student. The students were not naive to the fact that they struggle with a number of things and had hardships transitioning. Through their ability to be transparent and open, they revealed that in spite of those moments of feeling defeated or uncertainty, they are willing to work tirelessly to keep going. This is what institutions can use to maximize the experience for FGCS. If students can continue to find ways and outlets to display their hardiness, they can release the stress and pressures they face each day.

There is a desire from the student's to be understood by others reframing their view of FGCS. The stories revealed that students want institutional leaders and inhabitants to understand that they should be valued and supported. FGCS have a desire for others to understand their perspective and that of their families. They want to challenge others to understand that their

parents and families support them and that they do not think any less of their parents because they do not have a college degree. Instead, they want others to understand the amount of hard work and dedication their parents exude. Positive perspective is an area that can change the view from all areas of the reality of FGCS.

Psychological Sense of Community

At the center of the needs of any student is the desire and need to belong. This is no different for FGCS, but instead of the utmost importance. FGCS at SCU are proud of the school they attend even with the challenges they face with feeling a sense of community. The love and connection to their school helps to increase their desire to be there and belong at SCU. Institutions should strive to develop an environment that builds such strong connections that individuals feel so strong about the bond that it is difficult to sever ties (Strayhorn, 2012). The data showed that for these students this connection comes through their engagement with offices that focus on diversity and inclusion, cultural events, and other spaces and places that make an effort to make them feel as though they belong. Creating these spaces and providing proper funding for them is important to placing value on the benefit they provide to students from various backgrounds.

The sense of belonging and mattering is psychological and relates to a person feeling valued (Strayhorn, 2012). The data revealed that a number of students have a desire for there to be programming and initiatives that focus on FGCS. Surprisingly, in the overall scheme of the study there were more students that were not connected to a support group to complete the study versus those that were. Understanding that there is a base of support for FGCS at SCU considered as this was evaluated, but it did not change the fact that students are not aware of the resources. Institutions must ensure that they are providing adequate resources to students and

making sure that students know they exist and how to access them. Institutions must expand the focus on FGCS beyond just TRiO programs due to these programs being limited on the number of students they can serve. While TRiO is an important factor in improving the experience and success of FGCS, it is not the sole responsibility of these programs to promote student success for this population. Institutions must have programs and initiatives with open access and resources to FGCS that will help enhance their sense of belonging. Understanding that no one program can satisfy the needs of belonging for all FGCS, it is vital that this be an institutional priority that is weaved within each aspect and operating unit of the institution.

Institutional Integrity

Obtaining a degree is only a dimension of a successful college experience and institutions need to optimize on this by investing in student success for all students. The manner in which an institution is consistent with how they align with their mission and goals is how institutional integrity is measured (Schreiner et. al, 2012). The participants felt that the institution exceeded their expectations in a number of ways while also revealing that they did not know what to expect or did not have a grasp on what the realities of college included. Institutions can help improve the expectations of FGCS through support of college preparatory initiatives and continued onboarding of FGCS throughout the moments of transition they face. Institutions must expand their service to the transition of FGCS beyond just orientation and continue the process throughout their tenure. From the perspective of the students, there are barriers to their thriving that can be improved by the institution like access to minimal resources and minimal guidance. The data showed that students have a desire to be successful and are motivated to do so but face barriers like finances, not understanding the system and politics of the system, and a

need for more guidance from those within the institution to supplement for the guidance they are unable to receive from home.

The participants continued to challenge deficit thinking in this area as it pertains to their desire for engagement and academic learning when they reframed how they would spend their time if all boundaries were removed. A common thread of a desire to be more engaged with campus and the opportunity to explore more disciplines emerged. These students showed again that they have a passion for learning and want to be engaged with campus, but also understand that their reality pulls them in various directions. Institutions must recognize such barriers like working students demanding schedules, students who are unable to afford to live on campus, the affordability for students to explore various disciplines and courses, and the ability to navigate a system that was not built for them. Institutions can improve this by providing more need-based aid through scholarships and financial aid or providing more context for families of FGCS to understand the financial aid process. Institutions can provide more access to on-campus jobs and more ways to engage those students who do have to work. Opportunities for interdisciplinary studies inside and outside of the classroom would be of great benefit to FGCS and allow for them to learn new knowledge in a setting that is accessible.

Institutions should also recognize that FGCS may feel isolated due to a lack of diversity. This can be attributed to the various layers of identity that these students possess in addition to the status of FGCS, such as being students of color, socioeconomic status, and other areas. Institutions should recognize this and be reminded that representation matters. This representation matters in the faculty, staff, students, board members, and all stakeholders that impact the student's experience. This representation expands across racial boundaries and includes those of various classes. It is important for students to understand that they are not

alone and that they have people to look up to as mentors. This is also important in how the institution values diversity and inclusion through the makeup of the student body. Institutions cannot become complacent in this area and must constantly work to improve the experience of all students.

The Power of Support

A strong support system is the foundation to the success of FGCS and all students for that matter. Institutions must consider how they can build systems of support that focus on the overall well-being of the student. The study revealed that support is what these students cling to in order to navigate college and it's what they yearn for. The study compared the ability to thrive and the experience of FGCS based on their connection to a support group focused on retention.

Social Connectedness

The way in which students connect to campus appeared to be slightly different based on their connection to a support program. The support group students reported to feel more comfortable with the types of friendships they have made at SCU. Whereas, the students not connected to a support group appeared to remain connected to friends from their home community more so than the support group students. The data point that revealed the support group students are also more involved with campus-based organizations could have a correlation to this finding. Students who are more involved with the campus feel a stronger connection to campus (Strayhorn, 2012; Astin, 1984). Each of these items could be attributed to the support group students having more outlets for connection and making friends than the non-support group students. The non-support group participants appeared to use their involvement in student organizations as a basis for support and to create the atmosphere that allowed for connection to others. Finding ways to connect FGCS with support groups or support-like structures is important to their success and connection to campus.

Engaged Learning

FGCS and their ability to thrive inside the classroom is built around their relationships with faculty members and the academic units on campus. Programs and initiatives should focus on how to create a space for FGCS and faculty members to interact and garner an understanding of the needs and expectations of one another. These faculty members can work through governing bodies like faculty senate to share information regarding programming for FGCS, which can lead to stronger relationships between the students and faculty (Mata & Bobb, 2016). A student's ability to learn is highly related to his or her ability to interact with faculty (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). The students in the support group were shown to have more meaningful relationships with faculty and advisors that expanded beyond just questions about

class and office hour visits. These relationships led to conversations about graduate school and career options, as well as help navigating personal life issues. Support programs should be intentional about assisting in the formation of mentor and guidance based relationships between FGCS and academics.

Diverse Citizenship

The overall sample connected in the area of diverse citizenship with the understanding that their backgrounds and identities influence how they approach and value diversity. Though not as apparent in the qualitative data, the quantitative data found a stronger relation to the student's confidence in their ability to make a difference in the community amongst support group students. This could be attributed to support programs offering opportunities for the student to return to their home community to engage with other students in conversations about college or other opportunities for volunteerism. This is an important item for these students that shared a strong desire to be servants and help their communities.

Money and finance was a major area that showed some difference in how the two groups view their experience. The support group reported a lower household income, yet more of these students also reported that they are employed compared to the no-support group. Another link to this is that more of the no-support group respondents found it difficult to pay for school compared to the support group. These data points were interesting to find that even though the parents of the no-support group were reported to have a higher income than the support group, those same students find it more difficult to pay for school and still work less than the support group students. The common thread amongst the difficulty to pay for school with the no-support group students could be linked to the support group students also being connected in various ways to more funding and aid for school. Many of the support programs the students are

members of have a scholarship and/or grant component ranging from a full-ride scholarship to grants for courses or books. Providing funding in the form of scholarships and financial aid can help alleviate the woes of FGCS. Yet the fact that more of the students connected to a support program are still employed at higher rates means that these scholarships and grants do not alleviate all concerns of money and finances. Support for on-campus jobs and methods of income for FGCS is important. If support programs and institutions overall can find ways to connect students with meaningful work experiences that will not only provide income, but also build skillsets this can prove to be beneficial to FGCS. On-campus jobs are important in this grain because it allows the students to not only receive an income, but also helps build connections to campus influencing the overall thriving of a student. The support of on-campus employment can help students manage time for academic and social integration. These items continue to show the link between each of the five factors and how components of one are linked to others.

Academic Determination

FGCS throughout this study demonstrated their commitment to achieving their goals and excelling academically. Between the two groups, there was however a difference in how they approached the use of resources that assist them in achieving their goals. Students connected to a support group appeared to know more about the resources available on campus and had specific access to resources based on their membership with a support group. While both groups demonstrated the grit and resilience to persevere through challenges, the support group was more knowledgeable of how to navigate the system for their benefit. Support programs are essential to helping FGCS breakdown barriers to understanding the methods of which you need to navigate the university setting. For example, the support group students spoke more about resources for

tutoring and career preparation. The no-support group felt they were at a deficit when it came to things like accessing internships and understanding how to network. It is important that institutions build programs that will address the needs of FGCS who already have the motivation to excel, but may need help achieving various components of their goals.

Positive Perspective

The ability to reframe negative situations and to see the bigger picture is a quality that was apparent throughout the stories of both groups of FGCS. The support group did fair above the no-support group on their ability to see the glass half-full versus half-empty. Support group students were more apt to understand how to reroute a situation with less difficulty and feelings of defeat. This can be attributed to their access to resources and knowledge of said resources. Institutions can have endless resources to help students, but if students are unaware of these resources that is not beneficial to them. We must ensure that all students are aware of the resources available to help them solve problems and issues. This is an important reminder that FGCS may or may not know about specific resources, therefore it is our job to share those resources. We must take it a step beyond just sharing the existence of the resource, but make sure that they understand the importance of the resource and how to access it. University constituents should do an assessment of the resources they offer and think critically about the inner workings of how they offer the resource and how it is accessed from the lens of those who may not be from the dominant culture or group that accesses it the most. Throughout this process, it is important to remember that FGCS are very resourceful people and once introduced to the resource can use it for their success and to help others. Support programs can serve as an advocate for such evaluations of university units by promoting student success based on the concept of thriving.

The Shift to Strengths Based Thinking (Implications for Practice)

Perspective Matters

“Thank you for everything that you have done for us. I really value you time and dedication in bringing some light to this community. I really appreciate it and would love to keep in touch once this study is over! THANK YOU!!!”-Christina

Responses like this from students like Christina are the heart of this study. Understanding that students want the chance to share their perspective and their personal experience matters.

Centering the conversations around the strengths of FGCS helped to tell the story from a positive narrative. This shift did not exclude the struggles the students faced, but did allow for them to share how they overcame the struggles or the way in which they need help surpassing the challenges they are faced with. Posing questions and dialogue that focused on allowing the student to be transparent and share their personal experience as a FGCS allowed for the data to come to life while also serving as encouragement for the student.

Understanding Your Audience

In order to make FGCS an institutional priority, it is important to know who the students are on your campus. That begins with establishing an institutional definition of FGCS. Developing a common definition of FGCS will allow for advocates to target efforts to the needs of the students they are serving. There are many considerations for determining a definition that will fit the unique needs of FGCS on a particular campus. Institutional leaders should consult the research around the various methods of defining FGCS and properly assess the retention efforts and needs of their campus. The commitment to these students will be clear to the campus community and show an institutional commitment to the population.

Identity-Conscious

Understanding the role identity plays in the thriving of students is essential. In order to change the narrative of FGCS, we must begin focusing on identity-conscious programming and models for success. Identity-conscious programs focus on metrics of success that observe persistence, GPA, graduation rates, and other institutional success metrics (Pendakur, 2016). While they both have their place in higher education, there is a difference between identity-conscious and identity-centered approaches. Identity-centered focuses on helping a student further explore the piece of their identity (example: a program for Black men that focuses on helping the understand what it means to be a Black man) whereas identity-conscious efforts builds programs with identity at the core yet tied to student success (graduation rates, persistence rates, etc. that help the student understand how to navigate the system as a person that identifies in a certain way) (Pendakur, 2016). For FGCS, identity-conscious programming is essential to building pathways to success and should be an institutional priority. Institutions should examine key stakeholders to the success of FGCS focusing on offices like admissions, first year experience, diversity and inclusion, career services, academic services, financial aid, housing and residential life, counseling and mental health services, parent and family programs, athletics, and many more units. This effort starts from the process of recruiting students to graduation to building a strong sense of connection as an alumnus of the university.

Recruitment

Universities can be intentional about recruiting FGCS and showing them they are valued on the campus. This effort can start with the admissions team working to recruit FGCS directly. They can show they value FGCS and are prepared to serve them through efforts such as offering application fee waivers for FGCS status, workshops tailored towards the students and their parents that focus on the unique needs of FGCS, and collaborating with offices and units

that directly service this population. Admissions staff members should be knowledgeable about the services available and prepared to share the information with families. “Admissions counselors can promote your programs in the recruitment process and set realistic expectations for the amount of communication sent to prospective and newly admitted students” (Arzuaga, 2016, p. 15). The study revealed that students have a desire to connect with their community through giving back and helping other student’s access college. Counselors can help these students fulfill that need by inviting FGCS to return to schools in the local community to recruit students and conduct workshops. As often the first introduction a student has to a campus, the staff must be aware of the benefit of FGCS accessing and entering an institution and the importance of representation throughout the process.

Transition To and Through

The support of FGCS begins in the recruitment process and continues throughout their experiences on campus. Providing identity-conscious programs enhances the overall experience for everyone involved. Identity-conscious programs challenges units to think outside of the box and how they can offer intentional programming that will make a difference in how FGCS navigate our campuses. A good example of this presented by Andrea Arzuaga (2016) is hosting pre orientation events and kickoff events before school starts tailored towards the needs of FGCS. Creating this type of space allows FGCS and their families to feel more comfortable asking questions and the opportunity to connect in meaningful ways with faculty and staff on campus that begins the process of building a support system as explained by Arzuaga (2016):

“When the resources that offices provide to students are framed around the specific needs of historically underrepresented groups, the impact is twofold. First, these identity-conscious efforts build capacity in families, which will pay dividends in students’ success in

college. Second, marginalized identities are explicitly named and celebrated in these events, serving as a form of empowerment and support for members of these communities as they enter higher education” (p.17).

Individual programs and units can take this same effort and implement identity-conscious programming throughout the experience of FGCS by focusing on their needs and building efforts around those. These programs should focus on helping FGCS at each stage of the transition while equipping them with the necessary tools needed to be successful.

Advocacy that Empowers

Individuals committed to this work should find other advocates on their respective campus to help influence change. One should search for others that are committed to empowering FGCS versus limiting the individuals based on preconceived notions. Individuals need to incorporate empowerment into the heart of the work. Empowerment allows for meaningful exploration of the various layers of identity that students possess. Empowering students from marginalized groups helps them understand how to navigate a system and society with people who they do not identify with (Mata & Bobb, 2016). If educators ensure that empowerment is at the core of their efforts, they can begin to see the shift from deficit thinking take place. Advocates that focus on empowering FGCS are committed to not only equipping FGCS with the necessary tools to success, but are joining in the battle to tear down walls of systemic oppression.

Exemplars in the Field

Through my research on this topic and opportunities to share the results through various conferences and conversations, I have learned about efforts that support this type of work. Programs and initiatives around FGCS have taken on new roles and paths at institutions of all types and sizes at publics and privates alike such as: Brown, Stanford, Harvard, the University of

Arkansas Honors College, the University of California system, the University of Cincinnati, and other institutions. Recently the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) started a focus on empowering first-generation college students through the Center for First-Generation Student Success. This center has hopes to serve as a hub for best practices and exemplars in the field that are promoting student success for FGCS. Individuals looking to access resources and research around FGCS success should seek out this center that has data and information from institutions and programs across the nation. The center has established important partnerships with organizations and entities like the Suder Foundation and the Council for Opportunity in Education. The center will serve as a resource for individuals that work at all types of institutions and at all levels throughout the institution. I am honored to serve as an inaugural member of the center's advocacy group. There is an effort here to connect scholars, practitioners, administrators, and all for a heart for FGCS success together to change the narrative and experience of these students. Opportunities for service like this are what will continue to add to the research and continue bridging the gap for FGCS.

Limitations of Study

Though fueled with passion and purpose as motivators for this study, the study did not come without need for improvement and limitations. As the study progressed and more was learned about the complexity of the definition of FGCS, it was determined that the definition used for this study was limiting in ways. Though the initial intent was to expand the definition to be more inclusive it still limited other students that may identify with FGCS. For example, there was no way to determine if students who have a parent that graduated from college actually grew up with that parent in the household or if a student was adopted into a family where the parents

graduated but they are not the biological parents. There are a number of challenges with defining FGCS which was a limitation to this study.

The research is limited to students at SCU. One limitation for using only SCU is that the sample size was smaller than it may have been at other institutions that serve more FGCS. The study was also limited because using only SCU means research did not cover FGCS at a variety of types and sizes of institutions. The various types of institutions granting access to FGCS is widespread. SCU is a mid-size, private institution that is well-resourced and its selectivity is continuing to increase. SCU is attracting stronger students academically and has the ability to offer more aid to students and funding to programs which may make the experience of students different compared to other institutions. This is an important reminder that FGCS are not a homogenous group, neither are the types of institutions they enter. Yet, each institution has a level of responsibility to promote the success of FGCS if they are students on the campus.

The students were only selected based on their status as FGCS and other identifiers that impact their ability to thrive like socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, origin, and other identifiers were not considered when selecting students. Another limitation is that the study did not compare the student population to non-FGCS at the research site to see differences and similarities in their ability to thrive. The initial intent of the study was to avoid the comparisons against non-FGCS, but in retrospect it is believed that much of that comparison to the national sample has potential added value to the story of FGCS.

Though I worked hard to be objective throughout the process and to share the story and experience from the participants' perspective, there was a certain level of bias present. My identity as a Black woman played a role in how I internalized and processed the perspective of the students. Pieces of their story were pieces of my story which challenged me to make efforts

to separate my identity from the study. This was impossible to completely do so it instead encouraged me to use a critical lens to interpret the data.

My personal experience with this population developed a set of ideals around how the population can be better served that challenged how data was interpreted. My desire and passion for changing the narrative for FGCS had an impact on how I sought out the stories and the language I used to gather information. It was my hope to begin challenging deficit thinking from the inception of the study and to see the impact of the use of strengths-based thinking on the perspective of the student. Though this could have been a limitation to the study throughout the second phase, the first phase of the study allowed for subjectivity and presented data related and analyzed directly from the student. I also brought my familiarity and experiences with the population in general to the approach I took to the research. This all limited the opportunity to make claims and generalizations about the population as a whole.

Bridging the Gap with Current and Future Research

There is a great opportunity for future research to continue building on the concept of thriving and FGCS. This study led to more questions around the impact of intersectionality and identity on the overall experience of FGCS. Future research can delve deeper into the role of identifiers like race, gender, and socioeconomic status play into the experience of a majority FGCS and how they navigate college. These pieces of their identity cannot be separated from them and how they matriculate college. Many of these are more salient identities than their FGCS status and it important to understand how all of these identities play a specific role in the students thriving.

Individuals looking to continue this work can study the programs that are operating from a strengths-based model and the impact they have had over a period of time. The Thriving

Project itself has a huge arena for opportunity for future research as it pertains to FGCS. There can be exploration of comparing FGCS to non-FGCS at various institutions to see the impact of services and needs FGCS have compared to their peers. Developing programs and policies that promote thriving for FGCS is essential to creating a shift from deficit thinking to a focus on the strengths of students.

Future research should select a wider variety of institutions and students to study. There can be a comparison of the ability to thrive based on the type of institution (HBCU, PWI, private, public, two-year, four-year). These institutions may share a common goal at the core of their purpose being to educate students, they still approach it differently. While a student may have the necessary tools to thrive, it is imperative that the environment that surrounds them is conducive to thriving, which is why research at different types of institutions is needed. Further research can continue to empower individuals to create this shift which will in time change the narrative for FGCS.

Conclusion

The decades of research and efforts towards efforts to recruit and retain FGCS is well-respected and valued. This study was a step towards continuing to bridge the gap between research and practice with a focus on changing the narrative for FGCS. Through this study we learned that the students have the ability to thrive based on innate attitudes, skills, and ability they bring to college with them that are continuously evolving based on new experiences and opportunities. The responsibility the student has in his or experience is recognized and understood in this process. Yet, it is imperative that as we move forward with focusing on the overall well-being and experience of all students, we assess our programs and policies with a critical lens. We must assess these areas with a view of how to challenge deficit thinking by focusing on how to empower students by incorporating the strengths they possess while

equipping them with the resources and tools they need for student success. By challenging deficit thinking we recognize the role the system and history plays in how individual access and navigate our campuses. This is our chance to advocate for students and commit to a creating a more inclusive environment that promotes thriving and helping students get the maximum benefit from being in college. Creating change on this level can propel society to a level of change. Imagine the possibilities for our world if we take this concept of challenging deficit thinking beyond higher education and promote thriving versus surviving in all areas of life. What could our lives be?

References

- Anderman, L. H., & Freeman, T. (2004). Students' sense of belonging in school. In M. L. Maehr & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement: Vol. 13. Motivating students, improving schools: The legacy of Carol Midgley* (pp. 27-63). Greenwich, CT: Elsevier.
- Arendale, D. R. (2004). Mainstreamed academic assistance and enrichment for all students: The historical origins of learning assistance centers. *Research for Educational Reform*, 3-21.
- Astin, A.W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, 297-308
- Astin, A., Astin, H., & Lindholm, J. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
- Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention* (pp. 215-243). Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Belcastro, A. T. (2009). *Purposeful persistence: First generation college student success*
- Blundo, R. (2001). Learning strengths-based practice: Challenging our personal and professional frames. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 82(3), 296-304.
- Braxton, J. M. (2008). Toward a theory of faculty professional choices in teaching that foster college student success. *Higher education: A handbook of theory and research higher education*, 23, 181-207.
- Braxton, J. (2013). *Building Cultural Capital in First-Year Students*. Institute for Chief Academic and Chief Student Affairs Officers. Lecture conducted from Council of Independent Colleges, Pittsburgh.
- Brownstein, R. (2016, March 9). What do Americans think about access to education? *The Atlantic*.
- Buckingham, M. (2007). *Go put your strengths to work*. New York: Free Press.

- Bui, K. V. T. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal*, 36(1), 3.
- Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Cheah, B. C. (2011). *The college payoff education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, Center on Education and Workforce.
- Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013, June). Recovery job growth and education requirements through 2020. *Center on Education and the Workforce*.
- Carter, P. L. (2005). *Keepin it real: School success beyond black and white*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chickering, A. W. (2006). Every student can learn-if.... *About Campus*, 11(2), 9-15.
- Choy, S.P. (2001). Findings from the condition of education 2001: Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment (NCES 2001-126).
- Clifton, D. O., & Nelson, P. (1992). *Soar with your strengths*. New York: Dell.
- Connelly, L. M. (2015). Focus groups. *Medsurg Nursing*, 24(5), 369-370.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 67-85.
- DeNeui, D.L.C. (2003). An investigation of first-year college students' psychological sense of community on campus. *College Student Journal*, 37(2), 224-234.

- Department of Education. (2013). 50th anniversary: Federal trio programs fact sheet.
- Dumais, S. (2002). Cultural capital, gender, and school success: The role of habitus. *Sociology of Education*, 75(1), 44-68.
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access college success for low-income, first-generation students.
- Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- George, M. (2013). Teaching Focus Group Interviewing: Benefits and Challenges. *Teaching Sociology*, 41(3), 257-270.
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2011). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. New York: Springer.
- Greenbaum, T. L. (1998). *The handbook for focus group research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Greene, J. C. (2006). Toward a methodology of mixed methods social inquiry. *Research in the Schools*, 13(1), 93-98
- Heller, D. E., Marín, P., & Orfield, G. (2002). Foreword. In *Who should we help?: The negative social consequences of merit scholarships*. Cambridge, MA: Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
- Hope, J. (2016). Boost first-generation, low-income student attainment by removing barriers to success. *The Successful Registrar*, 16(9), 6-7.
- Hossler, D., & Bean, J. P. (1990). *The strategic management of college enrollments*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hou, H., & Wu, S. (2011). Analyzing the social knowledge construction behavioral patterns of an online synchronous collaborative discussion instructional activity using an instant messaging tool: A case study. *Computers & Education*, 57(2), 1459-1468.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of

- the campus racial climate on latino college students sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324.
- Janesick, V. (2011). *Stretching exercises for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.).
- Johnson, R. B., A. J. Onwuegbuzie, and L. A. Turner. "Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research." *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1.2 (2007): 112-33. Web.
- Katz, P. (2015). *Living-learning communities and independent higher education* (4). The Council of Independent Colleges.
- Keyes, C. L., & Haidt, J. (2003). *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Assoc.
- Kuh, G D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Long, B. (2012). *Supporting access to higher education: The college preparation and financial assistance programs of the war on poverty*. Manuscript, University of Michigan.
- Lundberg, C., & Schreiner, L. (2004). Quality and frequency of faculty-student interaction as predictors of learning: An analysis by student race/ethnicity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(5), 549-565.
- McCleaf, K.J. (2012, March). Improving our advisees' cultural capital. *Academic Advising Today*, 35(1).
- Mcintosh, E. J. (2015). Thriving and spirituality: Making meaning of meaning making for students of color. *About Campus*, 19(6), 16-23.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan, D. L. (1993). *Successful focus groups: Advancing the of the art*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- National Center for Education Statistics. *Moving beyond access*. (2010).

- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). *Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education*. Washington, D.C.
- Núñez, A.M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., & Carroll, C.D. (1998). First-generation students:
- Oldfield, K. (2007). Humble and hopeful: Welcoming first-generation poor and working-class students to college. *About Campus*, 11(6), 2-12.
- Pappano, L. (2015, April 8). First-generation students unite. *The New York Times*.
- Pascarella, E., Pierson, C., Wolniak, G., & Terenzini, P. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. (4th ed.).
- Pendakur, V. (2016). *Closing the opportunity gap: identity-conscious strategies for retention and student success*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Pitre, C.C., & Pitre, P. (2009). Increasing underrepresented high school students' college transitions and achievements through education opportunity programs. *NASSP Bulletin*, 93(2), 96-110.
- Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community Mental Health*, 2, 163-182.
- Sanders, B. (2015, October 22). Make college free for all. *The Washington Post*.
- Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological sense of community; prospects for a community psychology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schreiner, L. A. (2010). The “thriving quotient”: A new vision for student success. *About Campus*, 15: 2–10.
- Schreiner, L. A. (2013). Thriving in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2013(143), 41-52.

Schreiner, L. A. (2012). From surviving to thriving during transitions. In L. A. Schreiner, M. C.

Schreiner, L. A., Lewis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions: a research-based approach to college student success*. Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Schreiner, L. A., McIntosh, E. J., Nelson, D., & Pothoven, S. (2009). *The thriving quotient: Advancing the assessment of student success* [Scholarly project].

Seidman, A. (2005). *College student retention: Formula for student success*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Shields, C. M., Bishop, R., & Mazawi, A. E. (2005). *Pathologizing practices: The impact of deficit thinking on education*. New York: P. Lang.

Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective. *Sex Roles*, 59(5-6), 301-311.

Stebbleton, M., & Soria, K. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *TLAR*, 17(2), 7-20.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2005). Democratic education and public universities in america. *Journal of College and Character*, 6(3).

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students sense of belonging: a key to educational success for all students*. New York: Routledge.

Teddle, C., & Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 77-100. doi:10.1177/2345678906292430

Thayer, E. (2015, July 7). Mark Rubio calls for overhaul of the "cartel" of colleges. *The New York Times*.

Thomas, S. L. (2000). Ties that bind: A social network approach to understanding student integration and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), 591.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2000). Taking student retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*, 8.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125.
- Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., & Barefoot, B. O. (2005). *Challenging and supporting the first-year student: A handbook for improving the first year of college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Valencia, R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer Press.
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking : Educational Thought and Practice* (1). Florence, US: Routledge.
- Ward, L., Siegel, M., & Davenport, Z. (2012). *First-generation college students understanding and improving the experience from recruitment to commencement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weiner, L. (2006). Challenging deficit thinking: Urban teachers must question unspoken assumptions about the sources of their students' struggles. *Educational Leadership*, 64(1), 42-45.
- Weiss, R. S. (1974). *Loneliness: the experience of emotional and social isolation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wilkins, A. C. (2014). Race, age, and identity transformations in the transition from high school to college for black and first-generation white men. *Sociology of Education*, 87(3), 171-187. Zwerling, L. S., & London, H. B. (1992). First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 80, 1-117.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Appendices

Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol

INTRODUCTION: Good evening, thank you for your interest and participation in this study!

Since you are here tonight, that means you completed the first phase of the study which was the survey you completed. It is the goal of this study to allow you to share your experiences in an open and safe environment. Your story and insight will be used to build and enhance the experiences of first-generation college students for years to come. To facilitate our note taking, we would like to audio record our conversation today. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings, which will be deleted at the completion of the project. The consent documents state that: (1) all personal information will be kept confidential, your name will be coded or replaced with a pseudonym and will not appear on any study documents, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop the interview or withdraw at any time before analysis by notifying a member of the research team or the University IRB, and (3) the study does not present any more than minimal risk and (4) that this study will use audio recordings. If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form and media recording release form. [Pause to allow participants review the form.]

The focus of this study is to explore the ability of first-generation college students to thrive in college. Thriving is defined as receiving the maximum benefit from being in college. When a student is thriving they are fully engaged inside and outside of the classroom in all areas of their lives contributing to their overall success (Schreiner, 2012).

To provide context to you all about the study and our time together, we want to ensure that institutions understand the journey of first-generation college students. Tonight we will ask a series of questions that will allow you to share your experience. I ask that you be open and candid in your response. Remember that all of the names will be removed.

To give you background on why I am doing this research...talk about work with FGCS!

Share ground rules...

- Be open and honest
- Respect one another as we speak
- Stay focused
- If we could, please silence our cell phones and let's stay present in the room
- Share! :)
- Keep in mind that I may have to redirect the conversation to help us stay on task and to be mindful of time.

Activity: First just to take a few minutes for us to get to know each other and understand who is in the room, I want to start off with this identity wheel. This just shares a bit more about our identity. I will keep these at the end. I ask that you write your name, classification, major, and hometown.

I want this to be an open dialogue between you all. I will give you a question and I want you all to have a conversation about it. Are you all open to this?

First action:

Go to the board and write one word that about: "Being a first-generation college student".

Opening question:

What does being a FGCS mean to you using the word you wrote on the board?

Social Connectedness

Who do you consider to be important to you thriving in college and completing your degree?

How do you see yourself belonging at SCU?

Engaged Learning

Tell me about your relationship with faculty members and how you developed it.

Diverse Citizenship

Do you talk about being a FGCS?

How has your background and life experiences as a first-generation college student impacted your experience at SCU inside and outside of the classroom?

What skills did you come to college with or built since you have been here that have empowered you to thrive?

SCU cost about \$50,000 per year. How have you found the value in the overall experience to support the cost of the education?

Academic Determination

What resources or methods do you use to help you be successful academically?

What resources or methods could you use access to that can help you be more successful academically?

Positive Perspective

What is a strength you have as a FGCS that non-FGCS do not have?

As a first-generation college student, what does success mean to you?

Tell me how you motivate yourself to go to college and excel.

Who or what has contributed to your success at this point?

Final question:

What can SCU do to enhance the experience of first-generation college students?

What is something you want people to understand about first-generation college students?

Final action:

Go to the board and write one word that about: “Being a first-generation college student”.

Final thoughts:

As a reminder, your participation in the second phase of the study makes you eligible for other prizes including an ipad mini. Over the next few weeks, you will receive an email from me that has a writing prompt inside. We ask that you respond to the email with your thoughts. There is no certain length that you have to adhere to. You just write and respond sharing your thoughts and experiences. We are so grateful to have you join in this study and to help use enhance the experience of first-generation college students by telling your story.

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

Virtual Interview Questions

INTRODUCTION:

Thank you again for your time and willingness to contribute your story!

This process is about you! It's about you leaving your mark and creating a space at SCU that is inclusive for all, including first-generation college students. As we discussed, over the next few weeks I will give you that opportunity by sending you writing prompts for you to respond to. Please feel free to share openly and honestly. If you can answer the question in a couple of sentences that's fine, but if you want to share more on a particular response, please do so. Remember that your name will be removed from the final results. Please know that there is no right or wrong way to respond. The most important part is that it is your truth and your experience.

If you finish the process of the study, you will have the chance to win an iPad mini. There will be other prizes as well for participants to win!

As a reminder:

The focus of this study is to explore the ability of first-generation college students to thrive in college. Thriving is defined as receiving the maximum benefit from being in college. When a student is thriving they are fully engaged inside and outside of the classroom in all areas of their lives contributing to their overall success (Schreiner, 2012).

Throughout the focus groups, you all used words like: opportunistic, resilient, determined, feisty, focused, amazing, beginning, enduring, strength, and other words to describe being a first-generation college student.

Week One:

Prompt 1: Tell me about your background and your family.

Prompt 2: Tell me how you knew college was the path you wanted to take.

Prompt 3: Who or what helped you through the college application and selection process? What other help could you have used?

Prompt 4: Tell me about your transition from high school to college.

Is there anything else you would like to share with me this week?

Week Two:

Prompt 1: What skills did you come to college with or built since you have been here that have empowered you to thrive?

Prompt 2: As a first-generation college student, what does success mean to you?

Prompt 3: Tell me about your support system outside of SCU.

Prompt 4: Tell me about your support system within SCU.

Prompt 5: What areas of support do you feel you still need that could be beneficial to your thriving?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me this week?

Week Three:

Prompt 1: Thriving means “getting the maximum benefit from being in college both inside and outside the classroom”. Tell me how you are thriving in college and what or who helped you get to that point.

Prompt 2: In your opinion, what are some of the barriers or obstacles that prevent first-generation college students from thriving?

Prompt 3: Is college what you envisioned before arriving? In what ways is it different?

Prompt 4: Tell me about the spaces and experiences on campus that make you feel comfortable and those that do not. Please explain.

Is there anything else you would like to share with me this week?

Prompt 5: Please list any organizations or programs you are involved in on campus.

Week Four:

Prompt 1: Do you work? If yes, where? About how many hours per week? Why do you work?

Prompt 2: Tell me about what earning this degree means to you and your future.

Prompt 3: What can colleges do to better support and enhance the experience of first-generation college students?

Prompt 4: From your point of view, what can colleges do to help build a college going culture in the local community that you come from?

Prompt 5: If all boundaries and challenges were removed, what would you want to do with your time in college?

Prompt 6: What do you want your legacy to be to represent your time in college?

Prompt 7: Summarize your experience as a first-generation college student. Tell me all you think I should know, consider, or understand.

Is there anything else you would like to share with me this week?

Appendix C

Thriving Quotient Approved IRB



Azusa Pacific University

Institutional Review Board

Office of the Vice Provost/Grad
PO Box 7000
Azusa, CA 91702

Tel: 626.815.2036

Fax: 626.815.3807

DATE: February 3, 2012

TO: Laurie Schreiner

FROM: Joanie Stude, Institutional Review Board Coordinator

IRB ID NUMBER: #03-12

PROJECT TITLE: Assessing "Thriving" in College Students

Based on the information you have submitted, the project referenced above has been reviewed and declared Exempt from the requirements of the human subject protection regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b).

The determination of Exempt status means that:

- Further review in the form of filing an annual Renewal form or a Closure report form is not necessary.
- Research must be carried out exactly as described in the application. Additional review is required for *any* modifications to the research procedures.
- All protocol deviations, unanticipated or serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB within one week. See the IRB handbook for instructions.

For assistance please contact the Institutional Review Board Coordinator at jstude@apu.edu or 626.815.2036.

Appendix D

Descriptor and Code List

Descriptors

- Race/Ethnicity
- Gender
- Classification
- Level of Support
- Economic Class
- Job Status
- Residence
- State of Origin
- Data Collection
 - Focus Group
 - Virtual Interview

Codes

- Academic Determination
 - Grades and Academic Performance
- Affirmation
- Deconstruct
- Diverse Citizenship
- Engaged Learning
 - Intentions
- External Environment
- Identity
 - Student's Background
- Impact of Personal Experiences
- Impact of System
- Institutional Integrity
 - Bureaucratic Factors
- Money and Finance
- Positive Perspective
 - Psychological and Attitudinal Factors
- Psychological Sense of Community
 - Institutional Fit and Commitment
- Social Connectedness
 - Social Factors