Examining the Navigation of Higher Education as First-Generation, Low-Income College Students

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Abstract

This research explores the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood for first-generation, low-income college students, focusing on how they navigate identity and belonging while pursuing higher education. Many of these students face unique challenges, including limited access to resources, financial insecurity, and the pressure to succeed without familial guidance. This study examines the gap between societal expectations and the lived realities of these students, with particular attention to personal growth, identity formation, and institutional support. Using a qualitative research approach, I will conduct in-depth interviews with first-generation, low-income students to gain insight into their experiences. By analyzing their narratives, this research aims to identify common barriers they encounter, as well as the support systems that contribute to their success. Findings from this study could inform institutional policies, improve campus resources, and foster an environment where underrepresented students can thrive academically and personally. This project contributes to the broader discussion on educational equity by highlighting the often-overlooked struggles of first-generation students. By amplifying their voices, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of their journey and advocate for systemic changes that promote a more inclusive higher education experience. Ultimately, this research is driven by both scholarly inquiry and personal experience, with the goal of making a meaningful impact on students in similar situations.

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Research Problem

The transition to adulthood is a critical developmental phase marked by increased academic, financial, and social responsibilities. For first-generation, low-income college students, this transition is complicated by systemic barriers, limited resources, and the absence of inherited cultural or financial capital. These students navigate not only explicit academic demands but also an implicit, hidden curriculum of institutional norms and expectations. Additionally, societal ideals emphasizing autonomy and stability often conflict with their lived experiences. This study seeks to explore these complexities, focusing on societal expectations, resource accessibility, and family dynamics, to uncover strategies that promote equity and effective support systems in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine how first-generation, low-income students experience the transition to adulthood within higher education, emphasizing the interplay of societal expectations, institutional resources, and family dynamics. By uncovering both challenges and effective coping strategies, this study aims to inform policies and institutional practices designed to support these students' academic success and personal well-being.

Research Questions The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do first-generation, low-income college students navigate emerging adulthood while pursuing higher education?

2. What institutional support systems do FGLI students rely on for academic and personal success, and how effective are these resources?

3. How do FGLI students perceive the role of their campus community (faculty, peers, student organizations) in fostering a sense of belonging and support?

4. What systemic changes are necessary to create a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment for FGLI students?

Significance of the Study

This research addresses crucial personal and community issues by exploring the lived experiences of underrepresented students navigating adulthood through higher education. By shedding light on systemic inequalities, the study aims to inform meaningful changes in educational policies and practices. The findings have the potential to enhance institutional support structures, improving the academic and personal experiences of first-generation, low-income students. Ultimately, this research contributes to creating a more inclusive, equitable educational landscape, benefiting both current and future generations.

Literature Review

Introduction: Reframing the FGLI Student Experience

For first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students, the path to higher education is inherently complicated. While much of the literature has focused on academic challenges such as financial stress, lack of family experience, and educational readiness, less attention has been paid to how these students navigate college life. This review shifts the focus from typical academic problems to the ways in which FGLI students build a sense of self and belonging during their time in college. The following themes explore how social capital, cultural mismatch, intersectionality, and institutional responses affect the social integration and identity development of FGLI students.

Social Capital and the Construction of Belonging

Social capital plays a critical role in the sense of belonging that FGLI students develop in college. The idea of social capital, as proposed by Bourdieu, highlights how academic achievement may be improved through access to networks, connections, and community resources. FGLI students, lacking strong pre-existing networks and familial guidance, often experience isolation and difficulty navigating the social landscape of higher education (Jack, 2019). Without the same level of inherited social capital, these students frequently feel disconnected from peers who possess greater cultural and institutional familiarity (McDonough, 1997).

This lack of social capital forces FGLI students to simultaneously build social networks while mastering academic content. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and imposter syndrome are common among those who lack this support (Stephens et al., 2012). Research suggests that connections with peers who share similar backgrounds can improve mental health and reinforce students' sense of belonging. Programs such as first-generation student organizations or peer mentorship initiatives have been shown to enhance social capital and promote persistence in higher education (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Cultural Mismatch and Identity Conflict

FGLI students often experience a cultural mismatch between their home environments and the values emphasized in higher education institutions. While many U.S. colleges emphasize individualism and competition, FGLI students may come from cultures that value collectivism, interdependence, and community-based success (Chavez & O'Donnell, 2014). This cultural dissonance creates identity conflicts, where students feel torn between institutional expectations and familial responsibilities (Yee, 2016).

Students may cope with this dissonance by redefining their academic identity to align with personal values. Wildhagen (2015) shows that FGLI students who integrate their cultural backgrounds into their academic goals are more likely to develop a coherent sense of self and experience greater academic satisfaction. This blending of community-focused values with academic aspirations helps them reconcile conflicting identities and build a stronger sense of belonging.

Intersectionality and Compounded Experiences

The experiences of FGLI students are shaped by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality emphasizes that identity categories do not function independently but intersect to produce unique forms of discrimination and resilience. For example, Latino/a FGLI students may face additional linguistic and cultural barriers (Delgado, 2023), while Black students at predominantly white institutions often report racial microaggressions and exclusion (Stephens et al., 2012). Female FGLI students encounter compounded gendered and racial challenges, as highlighted by Kim et al. (2021) and Sy et al. (2011) These intersectional identities shape not only students' sense of belonging but also their academic and emotional resilience. Understanding how overlapping identities influence FGLI students' experiences allows institutions to create more inclusive and responsive support systems (Oded McDossi et al., 2022).

Institutional Responses and the Need for Holistic Support

While many institutional efforts focus on improving academic outcomes for FGLI students, research emphasizes the need for holistic approaches addressing social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Valentine et al., 2011). Structured programs such as mentorship, peer support networks, and culturally inclusive advising are shown to improve students' sense of belonging and identity development (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Institutions must also address the stigma associated with help-seeking behavior. RTI International (2019) found that FGLI students are often reluctant to use support services due to

perceived stigma or lack of awareness. Providing accessible, non-stigmatized support services focused on mental health, identity, and cultural integration can make a meaningful impact on students' college experiences.

Creating environments that validate students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds enhances their engagement and success. Stephens et al. (2015) argue that promoting both independence and interdependence in campus culture supports FGLI, reinforces belonging and academic persistence.

Toward Inclusive and Identity-Responsive Higher Education

The sociological perspective on FGLI students requires a deeper understanding of how social capital, cultural identity, intersectional experiences, and institutional responses shape their college journeys. While academic challenges are significant, the development of identity and belonging is equally critical. By fostering inclusive environments that support social integration, recognize cultural values, and provide holistic support, higher education institutions can empower FGLI students to thrive both academically and personally.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to explore the unique and often underrepresented experiences of first-generation, low-income (FGLI) college students. While FGLI students are often studied in terms of academic outcomes, this study shifts the focus toward how they develop a sense of identity and belonging within institutional environments that were not historically built with them in mind.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how FGLI students navigate their place within the social landscape of college. According to this theory, individuals form their sense of self based on group membership and the value that society places on those groups. For FGLI students who often do not see their identities reflected in dominant campus culture this can lead to feelings of exclusion or marginalization. This theory provides a foundation for analyzing how FGLI students attempt to reconcile their academic roles with their social and cultural identities, particularly as they strive to find spaces of validation and community. It also informs our understanding of how institutional systems either reinforce or challenge students' ability to feel they belong.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) offers a critical lens for examining how FGLI students experience higher education through the convergence of multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, and generational status. Rather than treating students as a monolithic group, this theory acknowledges that these identities overlap in ways that create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. For example, a Latina first-generation student from a low-income background will likely face different challenges than a white, first-generation male student. Intersectionality allows this study to explore not just what barriers exist, but how those barriers manifest differently across student identities, making it essential for analyzing systemic inequities in institutional structures.

Key Concepts

Institutional Support and Barriers

Institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the FGLI student experience. Supportive policies, resources, and culturally responsive programs can foster a sense of inclusion, while the absence of these systems reinforces marginalization. This concept draws from both Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality by examining how institutional structures contribute to students' social positioning and how that, in turn, shape's identity development and access.

Transition to Adulthood

FGLI students often take on adult responsibilities earlier than their peers, including financial independence, supporting family, and navigating college with minimal guidance. These experiences challenge traditional notions of a linear college-to-adulthood path. Both theoretical

frameworks support the idea that identity development during this transition is shaped by group-based roles (Social Identity Theory) and compounded structural challenges (Intersectionality).

Sense of Belonging

A central concept in this study, belonging reflects the extent to which FGLI students feel included, supported, and valued on campus. Social Identity Theory informs this by exploring how students align or disassociate with dominant campus groups, while Intersectionality Theory emphasizes how overlapping marginalized identities may impact their ability to feel at home in academic spaces. Belonging is not just emotional—it influences persistence, motivation, and self-concept.

Purpose of Theoretical Integration

By weaving together Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality Theory, this study moves beyond surface-level narratives of student achievement to ask deeper questions about how FGLI students construct identity, navigate exclusion, and seek belonging in systems not designed with them in mind. The framework allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of how institutions can better serve FGLI students—not only by improving academic support, but by reshaping the cultural and structural conditions that impact their personal and educational development.

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative approach to examine how first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students develop a sense of self and belonging within higher education. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring identity and lived experience because they center personal narratives, emotional depth, and cultural context. Semi-structured interviews will be used to allow participants to reflect openly on their individual journeys, while also ensuring consistency across key themes related to institutional support, identity, and campus climate.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through 8 to 15 one-on-one semi-structured interviews around 50 minutes long with undergraduate students who identify as both first-generation and low-income. In addition to the interviewed student's personal narratives, institutional documents and educational policies relevant to student support will be reviewed to understand the broader context in which these experiences occur. Participants will be recruited from Washington State University (WSU) through direct outreach and partnerships with campus programs that support FGLI students, including the First-Gen Center, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS), Passport Cougs, and the McNair Scholars Program.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy will be used to recruit participants who meet the study's criteria: undergraduate students at WSU, between the ages of 18 and 25, who identify as both first-generation and low-income. The sample will include 10–15 participants, which allows for deep exploration of individual stories and the identification of thematic patterns across experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to interpret interview data, following Braun and Clarke's framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process includes coding transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and organizing data into overarching themes that align with the study's theoretical framework. Key areas of focus will include perceptions of institutional support and barriers, experiences of social belonging, and the impact of intersecting identities on students' self-concept and academic journey.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures will be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical research standards. Informed consent will be obtained from each participant, and all identifying information will be kept confidential. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms, and interviews will be securely recorded and transcribed. Participation will be entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. To recognize the time and emotional labor involved, participants may also be offered a small incentive such as a gift card.

Discussion and Implications

This study seeks to understand how first-generation, low-income (FGLI) college students navigate higher education while developing a sense of self and belonging. Rather than centering solely on academic outcomes, the research explores how institutional systems, cultural frameworks, and intersecting identities shape their lived experiences. The findings are expected to reveal recurring themes such as institutional support and exclusion, social and cultural disconnect, identity negotiation, and the impact of early adult responsibilities offering deeper insight into how FGLI students experience college beyond the classroom.

The implications of this research are significant for both higher education policy and campus practice. By examining how students construct identity and find (or fail to find) belonging, this study may inform the development of more inclusive, equity-centered programs. These could include identity-affirming mentorship, holistic advising, and culturally responsive campus spaces that recognize the unique needs of FGLI students as both scholars and individuals. Additionally, the findings can help universities reflect on how current policies and resources either reinforce systemic inequities or work to dismantle them.

This research may also contribute to future scholarship on student belonging, particularly within the context of Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality. It can support broader conversations about how intersecting factors such as race, gender, and class shape access to opportunity, well-being, and community within academic spaces.

Some limitations of the study include its focus on a single institution, Washington State University, which may not capture the full diversity of FGLI student experiences nationwide. Additionally, because data is self-reported, responses may be influenced by personal reflection, memory, or social desirability bias.

In conclusion, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the understanding of how FGLI students navigate identity, belonging, and institutional systems in higher education. Its insights can guide more compassionate, effective support for FGLI populations and inform strategies to create educational environments where all students can thrive not just academically, but as whole people.

Reflection on Progress

Engaging in this research process has been both challenging and rewarding, especially as I explore complex themes like identity, institutional barriers, and belonging among first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students. Reflecting on my progress, I've recognized my strength in staying grounded in the research purpose and maintaining a consistent focus on the voices and experiences of FGLI students. I've been intentional in connecting the theoretical framework to the real-world impact this study hopes to make, which has helped keep my writing centered and purposeful.

One area I continue to work on is synthesizing scholarly sources in a way that strengthens my argument while maintaining the authenticity of student narratives. As I move forward, I aim to devote more time to drawing clearer, more intentional links between literature and my emerging

findings. I've also learned that outlining early, working in focused sections, and revisiting my theoretical grounding are strategies that help me write with clarity and confidence.

This research experience has deepened my appreciation for qualitative inquiry and reminded me of the power of storytelling in advancing educational equity. It has also shown me the importance of revision not just at the sentence level, but in refining how each section contributes to the study's overall purpose. As I continue refining my methodology and preparing for data collection, I plan to seek feedback regularly and allocate more time for thoughtful revisions that ensure alignment between theory, data, and interpretation.

Ultimately, this process has strengthened not only my research skills but my sense of responsibility to the communities my work represents. Moving forward, I hope to continue growing as a researcher who brings both academic rigor and personal investment into work that centers underrepresented voices in higher education.

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