



Parent conversations about college matter for first-generation college students' academic self-concepts and grades

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1. Introduction

In colleges and universities nationwide, there are a number of reasons why first-generation college students—those whose parents have not graduated from a four-year institution—experience more challenges, receive lower grades, and demonstrate higher attrition than continuing-generation peers—those with at least one college-educated parent (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In examining this gap, the current research considers the role of academic self-concepts—or the confidence in or attitudes about one's academic ability as compared to one's academic peers (Reynolds, 1988). There is a robust link between academic self-concepts and achievement for a variety of

college samples, yet there is a dearth of research examining the link for first-generation college students. DeFreitas and Rinn (2013) found a positive link between verbal and math self-concepts—confidence in verbal and math ability—and self-reported GPA for first-generation students. Mendez (2005) found that academic self-concepts were positively related to official grades (i.e., GPAs) for Latino/a first- and continuing-generation students. Yet, they did not report any differences in academic self-concepts among first- and continuing-generation students.

We examine these differences and how conversations about college with parents might link to these differences. We focus on parents because they play an influential role in shaping students' self-perceptions by acting as “socializers,” agents that help students make sense of their daily realities (Frome & Eccles, 1998). This influence is particularly important when navigating academic spaces with culture-specific norms, expectations, and “rules of the game.” According to Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital includes the knowledge, practices, and behaviors that one accumulates from having participated in particular cultural settings that help one to learn these specific “rules of the game.” For example, relative to first-generation students, continuing-generation students are advantaged because they participate in family contexts whose norms match those of the university

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context (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2014). Stephens et al. (2012) found that, at the beginning of the first year of college, continuing-generation students were more likely than first-generation students to endorse independent motives for attending college (e.g., to explore individual interests, to become an independent thinker) and that these motives predicted performance two years later. This suggests that even though these independent motivations may have been informed by parents, continuing-generation students are personally endorsing these motives. Similarly, Collier and Morgan (2008), using focus groups interviews, found that continuing-generation students knew how to communicate with professors. Because these students possess the knowledge of their families' past experiences, they become "role experts" when navigating the university. In contrast, first-generation students could not rely on their parents to help them understand the university's expectations.

To date, no work has directly tested how conversations with parents about college are linked to first-generation students' academic self-concepts. Palbusa and Gauvin (2017), however, examined the link between quality of parent-student communication about college to first-year grades for first- and continuing-generation students. Using surveys, they found continuing-generation students reported higher quality of college communication than first-generation students, and a positive link to grades for this group. These conversations helped continuing-generation students develop stronger networks with faculty and provided specific advice on navigating the first year of college. For first-generation students, quality of communication was unrelated to grades, perhaps because these conversations largely centered on emotional support, such as words of encouragement (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Extending this work, we examined the link between academic self-concepts and grades (Studies 1-2), and how parent-student conversations about college related to this link (Study 2).

2. Study Samples

Participants. Studies 1 and 2 included data from two online surveys with University of Delaware students. At the time of the studies, the demographic breakdown of the undergraduate population was: 57.8% female, 76% White, 4.7% Black, 6.9% Hispanic, 4.2% Asian, 0.1% Native American, 4.3% International, and 3.8% Two or More Races or Unknown. For the purposes of this study, Black, Hispanic and Native students are considered underrepresented racial minorities (URM) and White and Asian students are considered non-URM students. Because they constituted a small number of the student body, we oversampled for URM (11.7%) and first-generation (10.1%) students. The Institutional Research Office provided contact information for all first-generation students (N=338) and a randomly generated sample of continuing-generation students.

Table 1 includes demographic information for the samples from Study 1 (N=102) and Study 2 (N=169) and the larger recruitment sample of students for Study 1 (N=738) and Study 2 (N=973). The study and recruitment samples were substantially similar, with the exception of somewhat greater representation of women in both Studies 1 and 2 than in the recruitment samples.

Table 1*Demographic Information for Studies 1 and 2 Samples and Recruitment Samples*

CATEGORY	STUDY 1		STUDY 2	
	Recruitment Sample N = 738	Study Sample N = 102	Recruitment Sample N = 973	Study Sample N = 169
Gender				
Male	238 (32.3%)	26 (25.5%)	466 (47.9%)	58 (34.3%)
Female	500 (67.7%)	76 (74.5%)	507 (52.1%)	111 (65.7%)
Ethnicity				
Non-Underrepresented Minority	361 (49%)	53 (52%)	502 (51.6%)	83 (49.1%)
Underrepresented Minority	377 (51%)	49 (48%)	471 (48.4%)	86 (50.9%)
College Generation Status				
First-Gen	429 (58.1%)	54 (52.9%)	333 (34.2%)	49 (29%)
Continuing-Gen	309 (41.9%)	48 (47.1%)	640 (65.8%)	120 (71%)
Year				
Freshmen	241 (32.7%)	35 (34.3%)	253 (26%)	50 (29.5%)
Sophomore	169 (22.9%)	30 (29.4%)	242 (24.9%)	29 (17.2%)
Junior	164 (22.2%)	21 (20.6%)	235 (24.2%)	37 (21.9%)
Senior	162 (22%)	15 (14.7%)	243 (25%)	53 (31.4%)
Other/Unknown	2 (.2%)	1 (1%)	--	--

3. Study 1 Method & Findings

Procedure & Materials. Participants received an email invitation to a study about “the experiences of students at the University of Delaware” from the survey program, Qualtrics. Students completed the survey on their own computers at their convenience. The survey took about 3-5 minutes to complete and only included the academic self-concept scale. Students did not receive compensation for their participation.

Academic Self-Concept. We used a 24-item condensed version of Reynolds’ (1988) Academic Self-Concept Scale. We selected items with the highest factor loadings from each of his seven dimensions. Participants rated each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Some example items included: *I am good at scheduling my study time*, *Others view me as intelligent*; and *Most of my classmates do better in school than I do* (reverse coded). All statements were recoded such that a higher score indicated a more positive academic self-concept. The items were reliable (Cronbach’s alpha was .91).

Grades. We collected cumulative grade point averages (on a 4.0 scale) for the fall 2013 semester from official university records (range from 1.88 to 4.0).

Findings. Before examining college generation status (first-generation versus continuing-generation) differences on academic self-concepts, we examined how race/ethnicity related to academic self-concepts. We found significant racial/ethnic differences such that Asian students ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .83$) reported more positive academic self-concepts than Hispanic ($M = 4.43$, $SD = .87$, $p = .05$), Black ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .86$, $p = .01$), and Multiethnic ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .79$, $p = .01$) students, but no differences compared to White students ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .82$, $p = .21$). White students reported more positive academic self-concepts compared to Black ($p = .04$) and Multiethnic ($p = .05$) students, but no differences compared to Hispanic students ($p = .22$). Hispanic, Black, and Multiethnic students did not differ on academic self-concepts. We then compared the academic self-concepts of URM and non-URM students and found that URM students reported less positive academic self-concepts ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .83$) than their non-URM counterparts ($M = 4.84$, $SD = .83$, $p < .01$), which was a moderate difference. The interaction between college generation status and race/ethnicity on academic self-concepts was not significant ($p = .71$). Given these findings, we controlled for race/ethnicity in the analyses to understand how college generation status alone predicted academic self-concepts.

Table 2 illustrates the mean scores for academic self-concept and grade point averages for both first- and continuing-generation students, controlling for race/ethnicity. As predicted, first-generation students reported significantly less positive academic self-concepts than continuing-generation students, although this was a small difference. We then examined the links between academic self-concepts and grades. We found that academic self-concepts significantly predicted grades, and that this was not moderated by college generation status nor race/ethnicity. That is, for all students, academic self-concepts were positively related to grades.

Table 2

Means for academic self-concepts and university grades for Studies 1 and 2

	Generation Status	Mean	SD	F Value	p Value
Study 1					
Academic Self-Concept	First-Generation	4.53	.86		
	Continuing-Generation	4.67	.87	4.14	<.05
	All Students	4.60	.86		
Grade Point Average	First-Generation	3.03	.52		
	Continuing-Generation	3.06	.55	.903	.34
Study 2					
Parent-Students Conversations	First-Generation	3.54	1.20		
	Continuing-Generation	4.45	1.19	19.42	<.001
	All Students	4.18	1.26		
Academic Self-Concept	First-Generation	3.61	.76		
	Continuing-Generation	3.99	.64	11.54	<.01
	All Students	3.88	.70		
Grade Point Average	First-Generation	2.88	.48		
	Continuing-Generation	2.96	.56	2.48	.12
	All Students	2.96	.54		

4. Study 2 Method & Findings

Procedure & Materials. Study 2 followed the exact same procedures as Study 1 with three small changes. First, because of time constraints, we utilized a condensed version (10 items) of the Academic Self-Concept Scale, which was reliable (Cronbach's alpha was .84). Second, we included additional measures, including items assessing parent-student conversations about college to assess how this related to the link between academic self-concepts and grades for students. With these additional measures, the study took approximately 10-12 minutes to complete. Third, we offered financial compensation for participation. Students who completed the study were entered in a drawing to win one of five \$25 gift cards to the university bookstore. We then collected cumulative grade point averages (on a 4.0 scale) for the spring 2014 semester from official university records (range = 1.33 to 3.93).

Parent-student Conversations about College. We measured students' conversations about college with 6 items adapted from Shim et al. (2009). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which their parents engaged in the following conversations with them on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Example items included *Explained how to apply to college* and *taught me what to expect in college*. The items were reliable (Cronbach's alpha was .90).

Findings. Similar to Study 1, we first examined how race/ethnicity related to our key variables. We found no racial/ethnic differences in conversations about college with parents ($p = .25$) nor in academic self-concepts ($p = .34$). We did find racial/ethnic differences in grades, such that URM students had lower grades ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .55$) than non-URM students ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .50$, $p < .01$). Given these findings, we controlled for this variable in the main analyses.

Similar to Study 1, first-generation students reported less confidence in their academic abilities (although, this was a larger difference than the small effect found in Study 1) and no differences in grades compared to continuing-generation students. First-generation students also reported having significantly less conversations about college with their parents than continuing-generation students, which was a large difference. We then examined the links between parent-student conversations, academic self-concepts, and grades.

Table 3 illustrates correlations for the entire sample and the first- and continuing-generation samples. Consistent with Study 1, we found that, for all students, the more confident students felt about their academic abilities the better their grades. Yet, college generation status differences emerged among the links between parent-student conversations, academic self-concepts and grades. For continuing-generation students, conversations about college with parents were not related to their confidence in academic abilities nor to their grades. For first-generation students, however, having more conversations about college with their parents was related to more confidence in their academic abilities and to better grades. To further explore these links, we conducted mediation analyses for first-generation students only. We found that, as predicted, first-generation students who reported having more conversations about college with their parents also reported more confidence in their academic abilities, which predicted better grades.

Table 3

*Study 2 correlations, means, and standard deviations between variables, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$*

Measure	1	2	3
<i>All Students</i>			
1. Parent-Student Conversations	—		
2. Academic Self-Concept	.224**	—	
3. Grades	.187*	.449**	—
<i>First-Generation Students</i>			
1. Parent-Student Conversations	—		
2. Academic Self-Concept	.301*	—	
3. Grades	.370**	.549**	—
<i>Continuing-Generation Students</i>			
1. Parent-Student Conversations	—		
2. Academic Self-Concept	.088	—	
3. Grades	.095	.403**	—

4. Follow-up Interviews

Method. To deepen our understanding of students' views of their academic abilities and their conversations about college with parents, we conducted structured interviews with 7 first-generation (7 females, 4 first-year) and 7 continuing-generation (6 females, 3 first-year) students. Some relevant examples of the interview questions included: *Do you receive support from your family for attending college? If so, what kind? How does this type of support impact your life in college?* The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and ranged from 30 to 75 minutes in length. After the interviews, students received a \$15 gift card to the university bookstore. Two of the authors independently read and coded the interviews for prevalent themes. The coders were reliable as the Kappa's ranged from .70 to 1.0 (M Kappa = .87).

Summary of Findings. In general, conversations about college with parents were similar for both first- and continuing-generation students in that they both focused on the emotional support offered by parents and family members. This ranged from listening to students when they felt stressed out to offering words of encouragement or key words of advice during challenging times. For example, one female first-generation student discussed that although her mother has not been to college, she tries to be supportive, "Although she doesn't have some of the same experiences, she still tries to talk to me about it so that I'm not just making all these decisions on my own." This type of support related to her level of confidence, "My family is the only reason I'm here. If I didn't have family, I'd probably be...pregnant. [My parents] ... made it a huge deal. And that kind of support made me feel so confident."

We did find variation in conversations with parents related to academic topics. For continuing-generation students, these conversations included concrete help on editing assignments, making choices about what classes to take, or discussing what resources were needed to do well, such as hiring a tutor. For example, one continuing-generation student shared an example of this kind of support, "...when I took English, I would write something and then I would send it to my mom and be like ok revise this and send it back to me... And she would read it and change things." First-generation students, on the other hand, spoke about the absence of this support. Sandra, for example, said, "My whole family wants to give me that academic support, but they don't have that experience. I don't think I've ever gotten information from my family as far as 'can you help me with this statistics or chemistry homework.'"

In general, conversations about college with parents were helpful for both first- and continuing-generation students in that they facilitated emotional support necessary for dealing with challenges in college. Yet, relative to first-generation students, continuing-generation students also benefited from concrete academic advice about how to navigate particular processes of the university system. These discrepancies in academic conversations not only corroborate Study 2 findings, but also suggests an important area in which institutions can support given the link these conversations have to students' confidence in their academic abilities and performance in college.

5. Future Research & Implications for Institutional Practice

The current studies examined differences in academic self-concepts and grades for first- and continuing-generation students, and the link to parent-student conversations about college. For continuing- and first-generation students in Studies 1 and 2, the more confidence in academic abilities, the better the grades. However, first-generation students in both studies reported less positive self-concepts than continuing-generation students. This difference in self-concept is possibly explained by first-generation students' reports of fewer college-going conversations with parents than continuing-generation students—this is consistent with past literature (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Yet, when these conversations were available to first-generation students, they related to their confidence in academic abilities and grades. This suggests conversations about college are more consequential for families in which college-going is a novel experience and less consequential for students who have presumably been exposed to messaging around college from an early age. Additionally, although not tested in the current work, these conversations may help alleviate feelings of guilt for "leaving family members behind at home" to pursue college for first-generation students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015) by allowing them to sustain a connection with family members at home.

There key areas for future research. Future work should examine how the intersectionality of income status and college generation status, among other intersectional identities (e.g., gender), influences the type of support students receive and how they construct their self-concepts. Coming from a high-income family may afford first-generation students access to college resources (e.g., private tutors, college preparatory high schools) that facilitate more pointed discussions on college preparation. Second, our main focus was parent-student conversations on academic support, yet recent work, including the findings reported here, highlights the importance of emotional support for first-generation students (Nichols & Islas, 2015). Future work should examine how parent emotional support links to the self-concepts of first- and continuing-generation students. Similarly, research could also examine how conversations about college with others who are informed about

the process (e.g., academic advisors, faculty, peers, mentors) can help supplement parent conversations and further provide support for students as they navigate the college environment.

Being unfamiliar with the cultural expectations and rigor of the college environment has potential consequences for how first-generation students construe their own abilities, especially when encountering academic challenges. When first-generation students with successful high school records struggle in college, they might interpret these struggles as a result of having low ability (see Dweck, 1999 for review of theories of ability and intelligence) rather than differential academic support. Students may also become more aware that classmates attended different resourced high schools or had different preparation opportunities (e.g., AP courses), which may provide additional explanations for their struggles in college.

To help mitigate these deficit interpretations and to better prepare first-generation students for the academic challenges of the university, it is helpful to institutionalize practices and policies of support. For example, summer bridge programs, early outreach programs, and TRIO support and retention services play a critical role in shaping the way students experience and interact with the institution. *We offer at least three recommendations for how to build on these services.*

1. Institutions should directly engage in conversations around college that may be missing from the home environment for first-generation students; that is, they can demystify the academic expectations and common challenges of the university. Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014), for example, found that hosting a one-hour student panel on the challenges that students from diverse backgrounds experience and how students resolved these challenges improved actual grades for first-generation students one year later. Such panels—which offer pathways for overcoming common obstacles—can be implemented easily within existing program structures at the university.
2. Institutions should respond to the cultural strengths that first-generation students bring with them to the institution: close connection with parents. These efforts tap into the interdependent values endorsed and practiced by many families of first-generation students (see Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012). Even modest efforts produce benefits. For example, Stephens et al. (2012) found that welcome messages from the university framed to be inclusive of one's family improved performance for first-generation students compared to a message that did not highlight the role of family.
3. In addition to highlighting the role of family in the college process, institutions should work to provide better support to parents and families to facilitate as they work to encourage students through college. Colleges and universities nationwide have begun to create parent programs and family-based conferences geared toward first-generation students that emphasize college as a family journey. Within these structures, institutions can implement orientations for parents on their critical role in facilitating the success of their children, including how to maintain meaningful conversations about the college experience. Covarrubias developed a one-page Family Advising Guide at UCSC [see it [here](#)] to inform parents on how to best support their students, and tailored it specifically to FirstGen students and their families.

By highlighting and affirming the role of the family in the college process, institutions can nurture the confidence of first-generation students and, ultimately, improve performance.

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