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“Dropping Out is Not an Option”: How Educationally Resilient First-Generation Students See the Future

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Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCS) often have different cultural values, practices, and goals from those of students from college-going families. As they navigate college, FGCS coordinate these values, practices, and goals with those of their families, noncollege-going friends, and communities. We draw on longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of FGCS attending a public university in California to address three research questions: (1) What challenges do FGCS face in their transition to and through college?; (2) What resources do they use to surmount these challenges?; and (3) What is the association between FGCS' resources and challenges and their academic persistence and career goals? Results showed that FGCS who surmounted challenges and persisted toward graduation had emotional support from family and friends from home; developed supportive relationships with university peers, staff, and faculty; and believed that college would allow them to attain their future life and career goals. © 2018 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

I wanted to go to college because I didn't want to be left behind . . . I didn't want to be one of those people who's stuck at home and working at Starbucks. So, that's why I went I didn't know what college was and what it meant and what you did when you went to college, and what the point of it was. So I went because I didn't have anything else to do, and I was wasting my time if I wasn't . . . going for something more important than retail (Rose,¹ age 21)

This narrative by a white first-generation college student (FGCS) illustrates how a college degree has become essential for upward mobility in the United States (Amato, Booth, McHale, & Van Hook, 2016; Markus, Curhan, Ryff, & Palmersheim, 2004). Upward mobility increases FGCS' occupational and housing opportunities, improves access to health care for them and their families, and breaks the intergenerational cycle of poverty (Gills, Schmukler, Azmitia, & Crosby, 2008; Hochschild, 2016). However, in the United States, only 36% of low-income youth enroll in college (Bailemian & Feng, 2013), with rates lower among low-income Latinx, Black, and Native American youth (Choy, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). FGCS are also four times more likely than non-FGCS to drop out after their first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sirin, 2005) and 50% less likely to finish college (U.S. Census, 2010).

For many FGCS, the complexities of attending college begin when they forego prestigious universities' offer of full scholarships to enroll in local community colleges or universities close to their families and communities (Perez & McDonough, 2008). By staying nearby, FGCS can continue to support their families while attending college (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc, & Azmitia, 2017). However, relative to FGCS who begin at 4-year institutions, FGCS at community colleges have lower chances of transferring and completing 4-year degrees (Cooper, 2011).

When FGCS do leave home to attend college, they can feel ambivalent because their families and home-community friends may not understand the decision to leave (London, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1994; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015). Moreover, research shows that some FGCS who leave to attend college feel like anomalies at home and college (Lubrano, 2004), are sometimes overwhelmed by their college and home responsibilities, and feel lonely and homesick (Stebbleton & Roria, 2005; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Consequently, they consider dropping out (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Massey & Owens, 2014; Steele, 2010). Those who drop out often report feeling unwelcomed on campus or by peers and facing other challenges including financial difficulties, discrimination, being academically unprepared, or guilt about leaving families behind and unfulfilling family obligations (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Steele, 2010). Still, many FGCS persist, graduate, and become role models for siblings and youth in their communities (Azmitia et al., 2013; Cooper, 2011).

In this paper, we examine FGCS' challenges and resources as they navigate college and assess the role of educational [academic] resilience—the belief one can surmount the challenges of going to college, access available resources, and pursue professional careers—in their persistence toward graduation and future goals. This interdisciplinary concept, proposed by Wang and Gordon (1994), has fueled a large body of theory, research, and practice aimed at understanding how marginalized students successfully navigate their educational and career pathways (Cooper, 2011; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997).

Our asset-oriented perspective of educational resilience draws on Erikson's (1968) lifespan theory of identity development. Erikson (1968) proposed that adolescence and young adulthood are critical transitions in identity development, times for envisioning one's future education, career, and goals in the contexts of family, friendships, and romantic relationships, and this is shaped by culture, race/ethnicity, social class, society, and historical contexts. We also draw on theory and research in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) to investigate how FGCS' social identities—group memberships based on gender, ethnicity/race, social class, sexual orientation, and immigration—shape their belonging experiences on campus. We investigate how FGCS' social identities fit into academic hierarchies, and how this relates to their college persistence (see also Cooper, 2011; Crul, Schneider, Keskiner, & Lelie, 2017; Seginer & Lens, 2015). Specifically, we address three questions. First, what challenges do FGCS face in their transition to college and their persistence toward graduation? Second, what resources do they use to face these challenges? Third, what is the link between educational resilience, resources, and challenges and FGCS' academic persistence and career goals?

We answer these questions with findings from a 6-year longitudinal study and a cross-sectional study on the transition to and through college of FGCS at a public state university in northern California, where 42% of students are FGCS (for more details about the studies, see Azmitia et al., 2013; Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, & Cheong, 2016). Many of these FGCS attended under-resourced high schools in economically blighted urban areas or small farming towns. The longitudinal study included a diverse sample of 214 students (79 FGCS; 30% poor or working class; 67% female; 35% European American, 21% Latinx, 17% Asian/Pacific Islander, 20% Black, and 4% Native American/other). Data were collected with individual interviews and surveys during students' first, second, and senior years and, for some, 2 years after college. We included students who dropped out of college, transferred to another college, and graduated from the university. The cross-sectional study included 361 FGCS (60% female; 56% poor or working class; 48% Latinx, 19% Asian, 15% European American, 10% Pacific Islander, 5% Mixed, and 3% Other). The participants in this cross-sectional study completed an online survey that included open- and close-ended questions about their experiences, challenges, resources, and

future plans and goals. In other publications from this work, we have presented the quantitative results; in this chapter, we focus primarily on the qualitative data detailing FGCS' narratives about their college pathways.

Challenges in the College Transition: FGCS' Sense of Belonging

In the United States, 30–50% of all FGCS leave after their first year. Students who drop out often state not feeling welcomed or fitting with the campus “ethos” (Keefe, 2013). In the longitudinal study, 68% of FGC first-year students reported that this was the case (Azmitia et al., 2016). Finding peers who shared their background and made them feel accepted was the challenge mentioned most often by FGCS and the best predictor of whether FGCS would drop out before or after their first year of university (see Azmitia et al., 2013).

White FGCS reported distinctive challenges of sense of belonging. For example, Carla, a 19-year-old white, low-income FGCS biology major in the longitudinal study (Azmitia et al., 2013; Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008), narrated how a staff member of an academic-support program for FGCS in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) directed her to other programs, explaining that this program was intended for students of color. During her sophomore interview, Carla reported feeling invisible on campus because all the academic-support programs were for ethnic/racial-minority students. Carla's poverty was invisible to peers, staff, and faculty who did not understand why she did not own a computer and could not afford textbooks. Rita, an 18-year-old white FGCS from a rural area, also envied FGCS of color for getting support from ethnic student organizations on campus. Other scholars (Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2017; Stuber, 2011) have described the assets and liabilities of race and class for low-income white students. On the one hand, they blend easily with their more affluent peers, but on the other hand, they experience class-based microaggressions from peers, professors, and staff.

Challenges in sense of belonging also included feeling disconnected from home. As Mario, age twenty, a Latinx senior male remarked:

When I get on the bus to go home, I have four hours to change out of my college skin. Even if I wanted to tell [family and friends from home] about things I'm learning, they'd think I'm acting superior. And then I have to change back again on the bus ride back [to the university]. I feel like I am always acting a part to try to fit in somewhere.

Changing out of his “college skin” as he returned to California's central valley and his family of field workers involved putting on field clothes, avoiding “big words” in English, and making sure he spoke in unaccented Spanish. Throughout his interviews, Mario mentioned dropping out of the university. In his first year, he contemplated transferring to a more

affordable community college back home. During his sophomore interview, he considered going home to work full time, but his commitment to ensure that his two younger sisters went to college kept him from dropping out. Also, by majoring in accounting, Mario wanted to help his family attain their dream of opening a *panadería* (bakery). By his senior year interview, Mario was proud of his accomplishments but worried about telling his parents that he was offered a job at an accounting firm in a nearby city and would not return to his community after graduation. When Mario found the courage to tell them, he was relieved at their positive reactions. His entire family attended his graduation, raising banners with his name when he received his diploma.

For some students, sense of belonging was not their primary challenge. Other challenges included: paying for tuition and living expenses (47%), lacking competitive sports teams and school spirit (44%), and struggling academically (21%). FGCS from large cities noted the stark contrast between the diversity of the people and activities in their home communities and the small coastal city surrounding the university. Foreshadowing the contemporary politically charged institutional and U.S. context, participants in both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies also detailed narratives of prejudice or discrimination from staff, faculty, peers, and friends (cf., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Vickerman, 2016). For FGCS of color, these experiences included peers confusing them with the janitorial staff, assuming they were poor immigrants, or “uncultured hicks.” One 20-year-old, upper class Latina, Genesis, told us how surprised residential peers were when she shared she had lived in Europe for several years because her father was a U.S. diplomat.

African American students, one of the smaller racial-ethnic groups on campus, were especially vocal about between- and within-ethnic group racism by campus peers. During her sophomore interview, Grace, a 19-year-old African American female FGCS, described how during a class project she tried to join a group of Latinx and Black students, but they rejected her because she was “not Black enough.” By her own admission, she could “pass” as white. Grace had experienced such insults in middle and high school, but never thought she would experience them in a university that views itself as supporting diversity, social justice, and equity. Grace said she did not report the incident because she was tired of confronting these issues.

In fact, several ethnic-minority students described feeling *racial battle fatigue* in advocating for themselves (cf., Martin, 2015) or that their advocacy had not resolved the problem of discrimination. For example, Zoe, a 19-year-old Vietnamese FGCS majoring in biology from the cross-sectional study, was frustrated when a professor frequently asked her to move to the front of the classroom during exams. She was the only student asked to move, and this practice made her anxious and impacted her test performance. When Zoe addressed this during office hours, the professor responded that she was short and might not see the blackboard. When

Zoe pointed out that he seldom wrote on the blackboard during exams, he insisted that having the option may benefit her. Unsatisfied with this answer, Zoe suggested that her short white classmates might also need this option. The professor then told Zoe that she was being rude and deducted participation points from her grade. This finding is consistent with previous research (Smith, Mustafa, Jones, Curry, & Allen, 2016; Tachine, Bird, & Cabrera, 2016). For example, after interviewing African American students in a primarily white campus, Smith et al. reported their participants' exhaustion from fighting stereotypes and feeling under constant surveillance from their white peers. Taken together, these students' narratives underscore the importance of universities responding effectively to reports of discrimination to improve students' campus belonging (Nuñez, Hurtado, & Galdeano, 2015).

Utilizing Resources to Confront Challenges

Despite challenges in belonging, students cited many resources or moments that made them feel welcomed and kept them from leaving the university. At the target university, several social- and academic-support programs are designed to help all students succeed and graduate. For FGCS, in particular, federally funded programs are designed to involve them in collaborative research opportunities and connect them to supportive networks. Several of these campus groups provide tutoring and access to free printing and healthy food (see also Azmitia et al., 2008; 2013). In both studies, FGCS cited their most common sources of belonging to be: peer groups, residential colleges, academic departments, ethnic student organizations, sports' teams, off-campus volunteer groups, and student government. FGCS explicitly linked these groups to their values and beliefs, and many considered these groups their "families." The Campus Connection was mentioned as an especially important on-campus volunteer organization. This organization provides free transportation to student volunteers in K-12 classrooms in low-income schools, especially those serving schools with high migrant-student populations. Participants mentioned that helping at these schools made them feel like they were giving back to the community by helping younger students go to college.

To illustrate how students utilized resources to confront challenges, we draw on one student's example of switching out of a STEM major, a major which her parents viewed as the only career pathway to financial stability. When Maya, a 20-year-old Chinese immigrant FGCS, told her parents about her decision to switch from Computer Science to Literature, her parents declared they would no longer support her financially. This decision was especially hurtful, said Maya, because her older brother had majored in film, yet their parents had not questioned his career choice or stopped financial support. Maya approached the director of a FGCS-support program and the director assisted her in writing grants that funded her. Maya's genetic

behavior was not unusual. Several FGCSs narrated instances in which they sought out resources to overcome challenges throughout college, such as meeting the appropriate people to discuss their needs or, in two instances, running for a student board member position to influence policy.

Educational Resilience and Future Orientation and Goals

Although the FGCS in the studies initially experienced greater marginalization and lower belonging at the university than non-FGCS, over 80% persisted and graduated. Consistent with past research showing that belonging is associated with college persistence (Walton & Cohen, 2011), in both the longitudinal ($r = 0.43, p < 0.01$) and the cross-sectional ($r = 0.37, p < 0.01$) studies, FGCS' sense of belonging scores were correlated with academic persistence and mental health, operationalized as self-esteem and depressive symptoms. To further explore these links, in the cross-sectional study, FGCS' answered three open-ended questions: (1) *What high or low points have you experienced at the university?*; (2) *Have you experienced any turning points since coming to the university?*; and (3) *What are your goals and fears about the future?* These questions provided further evidence of how FGCS' future desires and fears motivated their persistence toward graduation.

FGCS expressed both their worries and determination to persist. One FGCS wrote that finishing college was essential for his identity: *"You can't quit because life throws a challenge at you. It's better to finish late than never!"* Others expressed fears such as: *"I fear that I will not get a well-paying job and I will have to face the same struggles as my mother"* and *"If I don't finish college I am scared that I will set a bad example for my younger brother, and that he will drop out of college, too."* This same 22-year-old female Latina student, Larisa, described a turning point of her growing academic self-efficacy (ASE):

At first, I hated it 'cause I felt so alone, so different. Everyone seemed to have friends except me. But then, after I decided to major in biology and started hanging out and studying with other biology majors, things started going great. They hooked me up with an internship and helped me with applications for grad school.

In both the longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, FGCS described high points in which others' generosity helped them overcome challenges. One student who could not afford to buy the textbook expressed gratitude that her economics professor gave his copy so she could avoid long hours in the library after work. Another FGCS who worked at the university described how her boss began bringing her lunch every day after realizing the student did not have enough money for food. For one FGCS whose father was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, a teaching assistant and a professor collaborated to give him extensions on papers and exams; this turning point helped the student realize that several people at the

university were invested in his dream to finish college (cf. Azmitia et al., 2008; Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

These students came to realize that they were capable of doing the work, otherwise known as ASE and belonged in college, leading them to persist toward graduation. In both the longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, participants completed the ASE scale (Chemers, Hu, & García, 2001), which includes the following sample items: “I know how to study and do well on tests” and “I am a very good student.” Consistently, FGCS’ ASE scores were positively related to university belonging, self-esteem ($r = 0.37, p < 0.05$), depressive symptoms ($r = -0.41, p < 0.01$), and persistence toward graduation ($r = 0.43, p < 0.01$). Interestingly, ASE was not significantly correlated with their grades ($r = 0.19, n.s.$). In-depth interviews shed light on this unexpected finding: many FGCS believed that academic success meant receiving passing grades, not feeling overwhelmed, and having time for work or recreational activities. As Julio, a 20-year-old Latinx sophomore from a poor immigrant family, said in response to being asked whether he would graduate from the university: “*Definitely because I am passing all my classes, making friends and even though [my high school counselor] said I would not do well at this university, I’m still here.*”

We also examined whether ASE predicted persistence. A hierarchical regression using belonging ($r = 0.41, p < 0.001$); ASE ($r = 0.56, p < .001$); emotional support from family, faculty, staff, or peers ($r = 0.35, p < 0.01$); and future orientation ($r = 0.27, n.s.$) showed that only sense of belonging and ASE uniquely predicted persistence,² $F(3, 161) = 8.01, p < 0.001$, explaining 9.6% of the variance in persistence. While the quantitative analyses did not yield a relationship between future orientation (i.e., career and life goals and fears) and persistence, analyses of the narratives and open-ended questions from both the longitudinal and cross-sectional studies showed a different pattern. Specifically, FGCS who articulated how a long-term career goal fits with their relationship goals (e.g., help their families or communities, mentor younger siblings) were more likely to graduate than those who were either unsure about their goals or felt conflicted about how to coordinate their careers and relationship goals. These findings suggest that effective support programs for FGCS must address a broader range of factors associated with these students’ educational resilience, well-being, and persistence toward graduation.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This paper has illustrated, with cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence from FGCS’ quantitative survey responses and qualitative narratives, how their *educational resilience*, identities, and persistence drew on their personal assets, academic and personal relationships, and future orientation. Carlos, a 22-year-old low-income Latino FGCS, who had a rough transition to the university explained that making friends and graduating with

a degree in physics made him and his family proud. We do not know if he pursued his dream of becoming a structural engineer, but in our view, Carlos was already a success and role model for his family and community. Indeed, during Carlos’ sophomore and senior year interviews, he described how he often returned home (with high densities of low-income families of color and homeless people) to encourage youth to college so together they could change their community.

Taken together, our research contributes to a growing body of work that informs theory, research, and policy on supporting FGCS’ academic and career pathways (Cooper, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Knight, Roegman, & Edstrom, 2016). Future studies should also assess opportunities and challenges in how different college majors influence students’ educational resilience, career pathways, relationships, and well-being. More work is also needed to assess the generalizability of present findings to colleges and universities in other geographical locations and with different student bodies, such as commuter schools, a higher density of low-income non-Latinx minority students, and international universities known for their commitments to diversity and social equity (Nuñez et al., 2015).

We have much to learn from FGCS’ educational resilience, sense of belonging, ASE, performance, persistence, and their identities and future goals. As Melissa, 21-year-old Pacific Islander, linguistics major said when asked about her college experiences, dreams and hopes for the future, “... I didn’t realize how unprepared I was ... I did well in high school but [at the university] I was surrounded by people from better high schools who already knew how to get help. It was hard for me to admit I needed help, but getting help made a huge difference in me finishing college ... I see myself with a job where I can get more experience in my field. I see myself with a family, a good job, and living the dream I have always wanted for myself.” These nuanced stories of the lived experiences of FGCS highlight the many ways in which they surmount challenges and pursue their dreams of a better life for themselves and for their families.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. Persistence was measured by a rating of how confident, on a 1 (not at all) to 4 (sure) scale, the student was that he or she would finish college.

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