

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES PROGRAMS AND
FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education

August 2011

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study would not have been possible without the employees at Student Support Services. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of the work you do.

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ABSTRACT

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August 2011

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There is overwhelming research that first generation college students are at a greater risk to perform poorly while at colleges and universities or to leave without a degree than students who have a parent with a four-year degree (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). This study examines the experiences of first generation college students affiliated with Student Support Services, a federal TRIO program. The goal of this study is to determine which types of services are most beneficial to first generation college students.

The study relies on qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews with students addressed services they utilized to determine which ones were useful. This study focuses on Student Support Services to determine the program's effectiveness in helping first generation college students succeed in college. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes. As a measure of triangulation, participant observation was also incorporated into the study methodology.

Students in the study described the relationships they formed with program staff as the most beneficial aspect of their involvement with Student Support Services. In addition, the students benefitted from priority registration, financial workshops, and presentations related to providing practical assistance.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to every person who has ever known me. I am your summation. Only through observation of, experiences with, and support, advice, and guidance from acquaintances, colleagues, teachers, coaches, family members, and, very especially, friends, have I made it to this point in my life. I do not know where I would be without every one of you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When I was in middle school, teachers and guidance counselors made it well-known that without a high school diploma, the prospects of a respectable career looked very bleak. Today, it seems that a similar message is being pushed but with postsecondary education being the necessary key to decent job opportunities. A widely used analogous model of the process by which a student grows and obtains these goals is the educational pipeline (Green, 2006). This model paints a simple visualization of the cumulative education a student will receive as they progress first through grade school, then on to high school, then to college, and finally into the work force.

While useful for a conceptualization, the pipeline model does not allow for adaptation of students with special needs. Research shows that two of the most significant indicators of a student actually attending college are parental encouragement and level of parental educational attainment (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2008). Despite those indicators, there are many students attending institutions of higher education today who have parents without college degrees. These first generation college students (FGCSs) have been shown by virtually every measure to have significantly lower completion rates than students whose parents have postsecondary college experience (Chen, 2005; Glenn, 2008; Thayer, 2000). In other words, FGCSs are at a very high risk to leak out of the educational pipeline.

Colleges and universities today are recruiting more diverse student populations. Mainstream talk of this diversification revolves around students from different ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. However, we are also seeing a diversification that involves the number of FGCSs who are able to attend college. Dr. James P. Clements (2010), the

current President of West Virginia University, notes that his colleagues in higher education “consider educating first-generation students a great responsibility because these are often the students with the largest financial and cultural barriers.” Estimates indicate approximately one third of the college population have parents without postsecondary degrees (Nuñez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998).

While many programs exist to help first generation college students assimilate, it is not clear which types of outreach have the greatest impact on student success. One of the Federal TRIO Programs, Student Support Services (SSS), is specifically geared toward retention of low-income, first generation college students, as well as students with disabilities. Institutions apply for grant money that can be spent in a multitude of ways to help retain students. Recipient institutions are mandated to offer tutoring, academic counseling, and financial aid counseling, but often provide a host of additional services (“Student Support Services Program”, 2010). While this program and others like it are crucial to student success, achieving a better understanding of the difficulties first-generation college students face and specific types of services that they find useful is paramount to improving retention and performance of FGCSs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine FGCSs’ experiences with the transition to a university setting, as well as their perceptions of services geared toward their success at college through SSS, a federal TRIO program. The study considers student perspectives to make meaning of current statistics that show FGCSs’ underperformance in postsecondary education. It also attempts to discover which services these students find beneficial and why.

It is not difficult to track student performance throughout college or their participation in programs and services. However, reasons for underperformance or success and absence or

involvement in programs are not as obvious. By aligning what university staff members view as useful measures for helping FGCSs with what FGCSs perceive as useful, staff members can do more to ensure that programs carry out their intended mission.

Research Design and Methods

There is overwhelming data that FGCSs are at a disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary performance and completion. The literature on FGCSs is largely quantitative. However, with a qualitative study it is possible to move beyond numerical analysis and gain a fuller understanding of challenges FGCSs face and campus resources of which they take advantage (Green, 2006). Qualitative interviews allowing students to describe their experiences at college were the main source of data for the study.

Four main research questions guided the study: (a) How do different SSS services impact first-generation students at college; (b) What types of outreach or support do FGCSs use; (c) What issues persist among FGCSs involved in SSS; and (d) How do FGCSs become involved in SSS, and why do they persist in the program? To address these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 FGCSs affiliated with SSS. I also utilized participant observation of SSS workshops and events to allow for multiple data sources. I kept a journal for field notes and my thoughts and reactions to each interview and observation.

Definitions

In the literature, there are several definitions for the term “first generation college student.” A common definition is a student whose parents have no postsecondary educational experience. For the purposes of this study, I used another common definition of FGCS given in the 1998 amendments to the Higher Education Act, and also that which the US Department of Education employs: a student whose parents have not completed a baccalaureate degree, and in

the case of a student from a single parent household, that parent having not completed a baccalaureate degree (“Legislation”, 2010). This is the definition that SSS programs use as well. By contrast, a “non-FGCS” would be a student who has a parent or guardian who completed a baccalaureate degree.

Structure

The next chapter presents a review of relevant literature used to situate the study. Chapter Three gives an overview of the research design and methodology. Chapter Four outlines the findings of the study, and Chapter Five discusses conclusions and recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a fairly large body of literature on first generation college students. While there are several qualitative studies, most of the research is quantitative by design. Relevant literature generally deals with one or more of four areas. The first area of research considers the academic performance and persistence of FGCSs. Nearly all of these studies are quantitative and involve researchers examining national survey or transcript data. The second area describes issues FGCSs face which are not performance-related. These issues are related to social and academic integration on campus and FGCSs being unprepared for the transition to college. The third area of research analyzes characteristics that FGCSs have in common. These characteristics deal mostly with demographics and choices that FGCSs make. The fourth area includes research on strategies and services that may be useful for helping FGCSs perform on par with other students. This literature review is organized according to the preceding areas: (a) academic performance and persistence; (b) issues FGCSs face; (c) common traits and risk factors; and (d) helpful strategies.

Academic Performance and Persistence

The academic performance and persistence of first generation college students is well-researched. Most of the quantitative studies I came across in the literature examine academic performance and persistence in some fashion, including research cited later by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996), Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004), and Pike and Kuh (2005). By nearly all indications, the research shows that FGCSs do not perform as well as non-FGCSs at college and are less likely to persist through completion of

a baccalaureate degree. Studies by Chen (2005) and Ishitani (2006) address attrition and persistence almost exclusively.

Chen's (2005) analysis of transcript information from a nationally representative sample of students uncovered staggering differences between the performance of FGCSs and non-FGCSs. The study indicated that FGCSs did not perform as well as non-FGCSs by several measures. FGCSs in the study declared a major later, exhibited lower standardized test scores, had lower entrance exam scores, required more remedial courses, repeated more courses, had lower GPAs, and completed far less credits in their first year and overall than non-FGCSs. Regarding persistence, Chen found that FGCSs were more likely to leave college without a degree and less likely to complete a bachelor's degree within 8 years of college graduation than non-FGCSs, even when controlling for demographics and academic preparation.

Comparatively lower rates of FGCS persistence were also found in a study focused specifically on rates of completion. Ishitani (2006), not only confirmed that FGCSs were more likely to depart, but found that they were less likely to complete their education within four years and within five years than non-FGCSs. When those students were also members of ethnic minorities or came from families with low-incomes, they were even less likely to graduate in those time frames. This is interesting, as FGCSs in the sample used in both of the previous studies were more likely to be members of ethnic minorities and from low-income families than non-FGCSs (Chen, 2005). As stated previously, while demographics among FGCSs may give indications of their performance, FGCSs underperformance remained apparent when controlling for demographics.

That FGCSs take fewer credits and obtain lower grades is consistent with other quantitative research using different data sets (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Researchers have also found that FGCSs make less progress in their intellectual development and are less academically engaged than non-FGCSs (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996).

The literature on academic performance and persistence clearly shows that compared to non-FGCSs, FGCSs underperform by nearly every measure used by colleges and universities. However, that there are differences in achievement between FGCSs and non-FGCSs is only one aspect of how the two groups differ. There are many other issues FGCSs have at college, explained in the next section.

Issues FGCSs Face

In addition to lower levels of academic performance and persistence, research has uncovered many other issues FGCSs deal with while at college. Quantitative studies utilizing survey responses and academic assessment highlight significant trends in representative samples of students. Many of those findings have been reinforced by qualitative or mixed methods studies.

Several quantitative studies show extracurricular involvement and academic activities to have greater positive effects on FGCSs than on non-FGCSs (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). These forms of involvement and relationships are often referred to as social and academic integration. Activities such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and students, participating in extracurriculars, and using university support services are forms of academic and social integration that are proven to be beneficial for students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Despite the fact that FGCSs can derive greater benefits from many forms of involvement than non-FGCSs, FGCSs are both less likely to pursue activities that are beneficial for students and more likely to pursue activities that are not beneficial for students (Pascarella et al., 2004;

Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). As it relates to social integration, FGCSs are less likely to spend time socializing with peers than non-FGCSs (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). Also, although FGCSs are more likely to have a full- or part-time job while attending college, this form of involvement while attending classes is shown to have negative effects on cognitive development for college students, with a greater negative effect for FGCSs (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). The exception with work is when students utilize work study programs. Work study recipients are more likely to graduate within four years than non-work study recipients, likely because it alleviates financial strains (Ishitani, 2006).

Studies also show that FGCSs view the college campus, especially faculty members, as less supportive than do non-FGCSs (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). That they perceive campus as less supportive may be related to their lower levels of integration at college.

Researchers have also attempted to discover and examine issues through qualitative means by asking FGCSs about their experiences with the transition to college in interviews and focus groups. A recent study on academic integration by Collier and Morgan (2008) utilized focus groups to compare faculty expectations with student expectations. There were three sets of focus groups: one set with faculty members, another set with non-FGCSs, and the last set with FGCSs. The study identified key differences between the ways FGCSs and non-FGCSs perceive faculty expectations. While faculty maintained that they were very clear with expectations, FGCSs wanted faculty expectations to be more detailed than non-FGCSs, who would rather have expectations be concise. With the amount of time needed for schoolwork, FGCSs had more difficulty making schoolwork a priority along with other commitments than non FGCSs. The

students also said they often over-committed outside of class, even though many said they received advice from staff on proper time management (Collier & Morgan, 2008). This issue is especially interesting, since students are likely being pushed by advisors and other staff who are familiar with the research to get involved in extracurricular activities.

How students utilized office hours was another difference between FGCSs and their counterparts. Faculty informed students that office hour visits were key to success, and non-FGCSs in general saw this as important for building a relationship (Collier & Morgan, 2008). However, FGCSs in the study said that the use of excessive jargon and high levels of vocabulary made them less likely to visit faculty members. The FGCSs felt that because faculty were speaking in terms they did not understand in class, meeting with them in person would similarly not be very beneficial.

The inability to relate to faculty may be a reason why FGCSs view them as less concerned with students and teaching than non-FGCSs (Terenzini et al., 1996). A study utilizing focus groups of FGCSs who were graduates of Talent Search and/or Upward Bound, federal pre-college TRIO programs, found similar results (Engle et al., 2006). Students in the study said they often wanted support but did not find faculty and advisors helpful. As a result, they contacted pre-college program staff to get advice.

Engle et al. also gave explanation on why, as Terenzini et al. (1996) and Pascarella et al. (2004) found, FGCSs are more likely to work while also attending classes. Upon arriving at college, FGCSs often found that financial aid was not enough to cover expenses they did not anticipate, such as textbooks, transportation, and tuition increases (Engle et al., 2006). Most students chose to work rather than take out additional loans, even though they said it decreased their ability to focus on academics. The students in the study also said they were less prepared

for the academic rigor, which is in line with Chen's previous findings regarding FGCSs' low pre-college exam scores (Chen, 2005; Engle et al., 2006).

Richardson and Skinner (1992) conducted a study in which they interviewed first-generation and non-first-generation minority students who had recently graduated college. In the study, FGCSs expressed a general disdain for large class sizes with only one professor for several hundred students. The researchers note that most students, not just FGCSs, were critical of these characteristics, but they impacted FGCSs to a greater degree because they were not as prepared for them. This could be another reason FGCSs view faculty and college as less supportive than non-FGCSs.

Another issue Richardson and Skinner discuss is the cultural adaptations that FGCSs must make at college. "First-generation students frequently described their first exposure to the campus as a shock that took them years to overcome" (Richardson & Skinner, 1992, p. 33). Similarly, Aries (2008) found that minority students in general experience a culture shock when they arrive on campus. However, Richardson and Skinner (1992) found the culture shock to affect FGCSs more profoundly; minority non-FGCSs in the study were less likely to experience the culture shock to as large a degree because their parents continually prepared them for the transition. The need to culturally adapt is noted by several other researchers who describe FGCSs' difficulties as catering to two very different cultures and trying to maintain relationships in both, all while feeling that they do not truly fit into either one (Aries, 2008; Engle et al., 2006; Engle 2007; London, 1989; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

The role parents of FGCSs play in their son or daughter's transition to college presents another issue. By definition, FGCSs' parents have not completed a college degree and thus are not likely familiar with how college campuses function. Non-FGCSs have an advantage over

FGCSs because their parents are accustomed to college and can help them be prepared for the culture of higher education (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Wartman and Savage (2008) also note that FGCSs feel that their parents are not involved enough in helping them choose activities and courses at college. In general, FGCSs receive less financial and emotional support from their parents in their academic pursuits than non-FGCSs.

Overall, the literature indicates that FGCSs are more likely than non-FGCSs to have a variety of issues that may contribute to their underachievement. Research indicates that FGCSs are less integrated on campus, need additional financial support, view campus as less supportive, and are less prepared for college than non-FGCSs. In addition to analyzing FGCS issues, researchers have examined traits that they share. Some of the research exploring these common traits is explained in the next section.

Common Traits and Risk Factors

In trying to understand why FGCSs experience postsecondary education differently than other students, researchers have tried to determine characteristics that most FGCSs have in common. Research agrees that demographically, FGCSs are more likely to be members of an ethnic minority and from low-income families (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Engle and Tinto (2008) conducted a quantitative study on FGCSs from low-income families, comparing them to students who are non-FGCSs and not from low-income families. They found that low-income FGCSs are more likely to come from minority backgrounds, live off-campus, and leave school without a degree than non-FGCSs not from low-income families. This is consistent with other research (Chen, 2005; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

In their study, Engle and Tinto (2008) also found that low-income FGCSs are more likely to have a disability. In addition, their research indicated that low-income FGCSs are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, have dependent children and be single parents, have earned a GED, be financially independent from their parents, attend college part-time, and work full-time while enrolled, all of which are known risk factors for attrition of college students in general.

Two final risk factors in the research are FGCSs' relatively lower educational aspirations and higher tendency to live off-campus than non-FGCSs (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students who plan to pursue education beyond a bachelor's degree are often more engaged in academic activities at college. Living on campus helps students build social networks. Since FGCSs tend to have lower post-baccalaureate aspirations and live off campus, both factors may cause FGCSs to be less socially and academically engaged while at college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

To summarize, while FGCSs by definition share the fact that they do not have a parent who has completed a college degree, they are also likely to share other characteristics. Demographically, they are likely to be members of an ethnic minority and be from low-income families. In addition, FGCSs are more likely to live off campus, have lower educational aspirations, and exhibit known risk factors for college student attrition than non-FGCSs. Strategies that may be beneficial for FGCSs are discussed in the next section.

Helpful Strategies

There are a plethora of resources and programs available for the many different types of students on university campuses. For nearly every aspect of a student's identity and nearly every type of problem students might have, there is a corresponding student service on campus to assist

them. There are services to help students with medical, emotional, and psychological problems, multicultural services for different ethnicities, religious services for different religions, gender identity resource centers for different sexual orientations and expressions, financial counselors for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, intercollegiate athletics and intramurals for student-athletes, and the list goes on. These services help a student assimilate to college, develop as individuals, and succeed on campus (King, 1994).

Although there are many services for students on campus, researchers suggest that the most effective opportunity for increasing FGCS performance and persistence takes place far before students get to campus. These researchers point to intervening and preparing FGCSs for college during middle school as being the most effective way to improve performance (Engle et al., 2006; MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2008). Regarding how to help FGCSs succeed once they are on campus, there are few proven methods. Quantitative researchers recommend increasing FGCS success by increasing involvement in academic and extracurricular activities in order to foster integration (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This advice should come with education for FGCSs on appropriate time management and prioritization strategies, or it could result in over-commitment, an issue many FGCSs say causes academic performance to decrease (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Working while taking classes, something many FGCSs choose to do in order to cover expenses, is another reason for over-commitment. To help FGCSs maintain balance with work involvement, researchers recommend providing them with more financial aid, if possible, and advice on when they should incur debt and when they should find jobs to provide extra money (Engle et al., 2006).

Richardson and Skinner (1992) interviewed both FGCSs and non-FGCSs and discovered a common theme among the FGCSs. The FGCSs said that “scaling down” the campus to find

core groups and places to get what they needed, including peer interaction, academic and nonacademic support, and resources was a useful success strategy. Institutional support services designated for minorities or disadvantaged students are able to help scale down the campus for many of the students by providing interaction, support, and resources all in one location. As the population of students attending postsecondary institutions diversifies, more institutional support services are being established to manage multiculturalism and diversity (Lau, 2003).

Student Support Services (SSS) is a federal student support program that may assist in this “scaling down.” It is specifically geared toward helping FGCSs, as well as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with documented disabilities, succeed in college (“Student Support Services Program”, 2010). All SSS programs are required to provide tutoring, academic and financial advising, and assistance with completing financial aid programs, although they may provide mentoring, career counseling, personal counseling, and any number of other services.

Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, and Goodwin (1998) conducted a quantitative study assessing efficacy of SSS programs. They found that students who take advantage of SSS services are more likely to be retained, both from first to second year and second to third year, than other students. The researchers in this study could not determine causality for this retention, as it was unclear if students were retained because they took advantage of SSS services or if they took advantage of SSS services because they were retained. Regardless, the researchers assert that SSS programs are beneficial for students. Of special note to FGCSs, these programs provide a variety of academic resources to assist with academic integration at college. The researchers also found that SSS programs aided with social integration, as students had various opportunities to connect with students similar to themselves. Through instructional classes and workshops,

“the social factor of grouping SSS students together appeared to be helpful” (Chaney et al., 1998, p 212).

In another study, students who were SSS participants said they benefitted most from early registration, academic advising, career counseling, financial aid counseling and monetary assistance (Engle et al., 2006). Researchers who have studied SSS programs assert that successful ones provide structured freshman year experiences, emphasize support for freshman courses, have targeted participant recruitment, and are part of a larger support network at the institution (Chaney et al., 1998; Muraskin, 1997; Thayer, 2000). From an assessment lens, these traits are ones which successful programs have in common, not necessarily traits shown to promote student success.

While there are multiple studies that suggest effective strategies for helping FGCSs far before they get to college, few deal with how to help FGCSs after their arrival on campus. Although SSS seems like an effective way to promote success among FGCSs, I could not find any studies that address FGCSs enrolled in SSS programs specifically; in the literature, researchers generally study SSS participants as an aggregate. Also, while research indicates that FGCSs do not feel supported at times, I did not find studies where researchers uncovered why they did not feel supported or which issues they had difficulties with despite involvement in support programs (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). I was also unable to find any studies that addressed why FGCSs choose to persist in various support programs, which may further indicate which services are most useful.

With a qualitative study including interviews and participant observation, I address the usefulness of services FGCSs take advantage of while at college. This study focuses on the experiences of FGCSs involved with SSS, a program that offers a myriad of services. Examining

the experiences of FGCSs who are already affiliated with program geared toward helping them graduate will allow me to examine how those services are or are not meeting their needs. The goal of this study is to address how services impact students, which types of services students view as helpful, how students find out about these services, and reasons they persist in taking advantage of these services. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology for the present study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

While there are several programs with varied services available to assist students on college campuses, SSS is a multi-faceted program charged with helping FGCSs, students with disabilities, and students demonstrating financial need. To determine how services were beneficial for FGCSs and examine their experiences with SSS, I chose to utilize qualitative methods for the study. Qualitative research allowed me to gather very descriptive data from participants in the study that related to trends found in the literature. The purpose of this study was to explore FGCSs' experiences at college and with SSS in hopes of uncovering information to help faculty and staff make appropriate referrals and provide relevant programming for this growing population of students with unique issues.

Design

Four research questions guided my examination of FGCSs' experiences at college and with SSS. The questions are related to how SSS assisted them with the transition to the university:

1. How do different SSS services impact first-generation students at college?
2. What types of outreach or support do FGCSs use?
3. What issues persist among FGCSs involved in SSS?
4. How do FGCSs become involved in SSS, and why do they persist in the program?

To address these questions, I utilized qualitative methods including in-depth interviews and participant observation of various services offered by SSS. In each interview, I attempted to determine which services students perceived as useful and examine reasons why they are

beneficial. Through participant observation, I observed students' interaction with various SSS services in hopes of adding further meaning to interview responses.

Methods

The study relies on qualitative methodology as a means to garner understanding of the personal interactions and day-to-day relationships that develop for first generation college students participating in Student Support Services. A qualitative approach is beneficial because it provides a personal account of student experiences. The main data source of the study was interviews with first generation college students affiliated with the Student Support Services. The data also include participation observation of the SSS program. Interview and observation data was analyzed for emergent themes. To ensure accurate data, I utilize peer debriefing, data triangulation, and reflexivity.

Setting.

Green University is a land-grant, research intensive institution located in the Western United States. There are about 20,000 undergraduate students enrolled at Green. Roughly 50% of students are female, and between 16% and 18% of students come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Green reports that the ethnic profile of minorities in the student body is approximately 40% each Asian and Hispanic, 15% black, and 5% Native American.

Program.

The SSS program at Green is a federally funded TRIO program. SSS serves several hundred students. Students are eligible to participate in SSS if they meet one or more of the following guidelines: they do not have a parent who graduated from college, they demonstrate financial need, or they have a documented disability. The goal of SSS is to retain and graduate students who fall into these categories by providing assistance to them in many different ways.

SSS offers tutoring, a textbook loan service, academic and career counseling, student success workshops, and cultural enrichment events for students.

Sample.

I interviewed 12 traditionally-aged first generation college students who are affiliated with the SSS program at Green University. In recruiting, I attempted to maximize the range of respondents to gather as much rich data as possible (Weiss, 1995). To achieve this range, I took note of ethnicity, sex, and year at Green University while selecting interview participants. Although I anticipated the need to intentionally recruit based upon these variables, the recruitment methods produced a diverse sample. To recruit, I depended on referrals from program staff and students in SSS. I also recruited students at an SSS seminar.

Initially, I worked with the Retention Counselors in SSS to refer interview participants. Several of the Retention Counselors sent an email to the students they work with asking if they would be interested in participating in the study. I contacted students who indicated an interest in participating. Only four students followed through with completing an interview. I continued recruitment at an all day seminar offered by SSS. Participation in this seminar partially satisfied the requirements for students to remain active in the program. During a break in the seminar, I made an announcement about my research and asked for volunteers for the study. Seven additional participants were recruited at the seminar. At each interview, I asked participants for referrals of other students they knew through SSS. This process produced one additional participant for a total of 12 students.

The sample was fairly diverse in regard to the stated variables. Of the 12 students, there were 5 females and 7 males. With respect to ethnicity, there were 4 Caucasian students, 5 Hispanic or Latino/a students, and 3 Black or African American students. With respect to year at

Green, 6 were in their first year at, 3 were in their second, 1 was a third year student, and 2 were fourth year students. In the sample, there were 7 students who transferred to Green University from a community college, and 5 who attended directly from high school. Also, all but two of the students were from low income backgrounds.

Interviews.

To gather meaningful data on which services FGCSs perceive as beneficial, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 students. Prior to each interview, I explained the purpose of my research to respondents and completed a consent form with permission to audio record for later transcription and analysis. During the interviews, I asked respondents open ended questions about their backgrounds and experiences transitioning to Green University. I guided conversation when necessary with questions about their involvement with services and staff at SSS, their academic transition to the University, how SSS and other forms of involvement have impacted their integration on campus, issues they were having at college, their social network on campus, and overall perceptions of the university and SSS. At the end of each interview, participants were allowed to add any additional information they felt was relevant. The interview protocol for the study can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews were arranged in person or via text message or email. Most interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. Interviews took place wherever respondents were comfortable having them, including the university library, union building, or in an office on campus. Students did not receive any form of compensation for their participation in the interview.

Participant Observation.

While conducting this study, I was associated with SSS at Green University through a practicum experience. Through my involvement with office, I had the opportunity to observe and

interact with students and program staff in the office and at various events SSS presented. I observed multiple student success workshops, advising appointments with Retention Counselors, and staff meetings and retreats on a monthly basis. I kept a journal of my experiences, taking note of staff members' relationships with students and students' level of engagement while participating in services offered by SSS. This observation allowed me to have additional context when collecting and analyzing data through interviews.

Data Analysis.

There were two sources of data for the study, interviews and participant observation. To obtain the data for the interviews, I used an audio recorder and computer software to transcribe each interview verbatim. For the participant observation, I kept field notes in a journal over the course of the semester. After obtaining data, I analyzed it for emergent themes.

Upon completion of all interviews and participant observation, I began formally analyzing the data for emergent themes. In order to find relevant themes, I utilized a method for qualitative data analysis described by sociologist Weiss (1995), first coding data, then sorted, and finally integrated for greater meaning.

To code the data, I examined interview transcripts and field notes to create a code for nearly every bit of data. As I continued coding, I found that there were similar trends in different data sources and began grouping codes into categories. Information in the literature review provided an appropriate starting point for these categories. As I came across sets of codes that did not fit precisely into a previous category, I created a new category. After coding all data in this fashion, the categories produced the following six themes: (a) motivation from being a FGCS; (b) parental assistance; (c) participating in SSS; (d) Retention Counselors; (e)

transitioning to the university; and (f) the impact of ethnicity. The themes are explained in detail in Chapter 4.

After finding the themes, I integrated the data by comparing what participants said and what I observed with what the literature says about FGCSs and their experiences at college. Much of what I found was consistent with the literature.

Data Trustworthiness.

In order to obtain accurate data, I took measures to ensure the data was trustworthy, utilizing peer debriefing, triangulation and reflexivity (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). After my observations, I peer debriefed with program staff to discuss their perceptions events and compare them with my own. I also conducted a pilot interview with and peer debriefed with a colleague who is a recently graduated FGCS. As a measure of triangulation, I chose to do both in-depth interviews and participant observation to have multiple insights into what I discovered.

I practiced reflexivity by staying aware of biases I have as a result of the multiple lenses with which I viewed the data. Most notably, I am a graduated FGCS and related with much of what participants in the study were experiencing. I also work in residence life and have my own practical theories on successful strategies for helping students transition to college. Finally, I have a practicum position in the office where I conducted research. In order to manage biases, I kept a journal of my thoughts and reactions to observation and interview experiences. I reflected frequently on how biases could have become apparent and took note of them throughout the study to achieve the most unbiased results possible.

Research ethics.

As a researcher, it is my responsibility to protect the identities of participants in the study. Each interview began with the participant being advised of the ways their identity was going to

be protected. To respect participant anonymity, references to revealing aspects of their responses at times changed or intentionally not clarified, with special attention paid to maintaining the integrity of the data. This was especially necessary given that several participants were referred by Retention Counselors or other students for participation in the study.

In summary, the study examines the experiences of FGCSs affiliated with the SSS program at Green University. The group of 12 FGCSs who participated in the study was diverse with respect to ethnicity, sex, and year at Green University. While the main source of data for the findings were transcripts of in-depth interviews with participants, I also collected participant observation data paying special attention to how students engaged with certain services SSS offered and their relationships with Retention Counselors. All data sources were coded and analyzed for themes. The themes are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

After completing interviews with the 12 FGCSs who participated in the study, I transcribed the audio recorded interviews verbatim. I also kept field notes of my participant observation of SSS events and meetings. Through analysis of the transcripts and field notes, six themes emerged from the data. While there is some overlap between these themes, they are clearly distinguishable from one another.

The first theme deals with the salience of the FGCS status to each participants' experience at college and the role that identity plays in their motivation at college. The second theme describes ways that participants' parents are able or unable to assist them at college. The third theme encompasses how students become informed of SSS, why they join, and how they view different services offered by SSS. The fourth theme refers to the participants' perceptions of their relationships with Retention Counselors at SSS. The fifth theme regards participants' transition to Green University and their adjustment to being away from home. The sixth theme involves ways that the visual diversity of SSS may affect students' perceptions of the office. This chapter is organized by these themes: (a) motivation from being a FGCS; (b) parental assistance; (c) participating in SSS; (d) Retention Counselors; (e) transitioning to the university; and (f) the impact of ethnicity. A summary of each theme follows.

Motivation from Being a FGCS

All 12 of the participants in the study were FGCSs. According to the 1998 amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965, a FGCS is:

An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one

parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (“Legislation”, 2010).

Many of the participants were aware that students who go to a university without having a parent who has completed a four year degree are said to be at a disadvantage (Chen, 2004; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). However, participants did not generally feel that they actually were at a disadvantage. In fact, many of the students described being a FGCS as a factor that motivated them in different ways. Some of this motivation was internal for participants, due to the fact that they were grateful for having the opportunity to go to college or proud of themselves and determined to succeed. Other motivation came from family members, especially parents. Research suggests that while students generally appreciate motivation from their parents to succeed at college, it may not actually be correlated to college success outcomes such as GPA, adjustment, and commitment (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

One student in her third year at Green described feeling a sense of pride in her accomplishments as a FGCS rather than this part of her identity being a determining factor for decisions she made at college:

I guess just being a first generation college student, I didn't really think about it a lot. You don't consciously think like, 'oh I'm a first generation college student so I better do this kinda thing,' you know? But it's kinda special when you think about it, you're really proud of yourself that you achieved so much even though your parents [did not go to school].

Several participants said they were proud of their accomplishments. Others in the study were motivated by the fact that they were setting the example for other family members by continuing

their educational pursuits. A fourth-year transfer participant describes being a role model for family who would not otherwise have one:

For me to be a first gen student in college...I mean it's an achievement of course, but also I'm leading by example. I have a whole bunch of little cousins...and their parents went to college but didn't finish and right now are basically doing nothing with their lives. So they're like, you know, asking me questions, 'what's college like, you're graduating?', and they're looking up to me...I feel like if they're looking up to me then I need to continue to better myself.

For another participant, completing her degree not only meant that she would be a good example for others, but also that she would be able to help them when they needed advice in the future:

[Being a first generation college student] means a lot...I wanna make sure that I can be a good example for my entire family and be like a good example for my brother and my nephew and be able to help them when they get to a place that I'm at and be like, 'Oh I know how to fill out that form,' or 'I know what you're gonna need to do to get into this program.'

In addition to serving as a role model for others, participants discussed having high expectations to succeed. These expectations came from everywhere, they said, but most notably from their parents. The high expectations were often seen as a positive aspect of being a FGCS, as one student put it:

Yeah I feel like [being the first to go to college] kinda affected me, but in a positive way. Because if my parents would have went to college, they probably wouldn't have pushed me so hard to go to college.

While it was clear that the high expectations from their family motivated students, for many of them the expectations translated into pressure that added stress to an already stressful university environment. One participant felt pressure from his parents to continue to perform as well as he did in high school in college:

I mean there's a lot of pressure that's put on to me, like, 'You're a first generation student, we're expecting so much out of you, you did good through high school so we're expecting you to do good through college.' There's that pressure of expectance but otherwise it's not...I just have the pressure of, 'you're a first generation student, don't let us down.'

Another participant from a single parent household felt pressure from his extended family along with the pressure to show his mother that the sacrifices she made in raising him were not in vain:

Being the first of the 20, 30 some odd cousins that I have, it's kinda like all my aunts and uncles know that I'm in college and I don't wanna disappoint in a way, and I don't wanna disappoint my mom at the same time...basically, I'm doing everything to make my mom proud, and showing her that her whole entire life effort wasn't a waste. So I'll always have that pressure.

All participants but one felt being a FGCS had a significant impact on their experience as a university student. The student who said she did not think it had a significant impact on her experience was a first year student who was newly involved with SSS and had not reflected a great deal on what it meant to be a FGCS.

Participants were very aware of their identity as a FGCS. For many students, this was a motivating factor for them to perform at college because they wanted to live up their parents' expectations and set a positive example for others. However, there was a fine line for participants

as to whether those expectations were beneficial or simply added more stress to their lives. Students often felt pressured to do well at college because they were FGCS. The next theme more closely explores the role of parents in participants' lives.

Parental Assistance

The students I interviewed had fairly strong relationships with their families, especially their parents. The literature indicates parents today are more involved with students lives and communicate more frequently with them than in the past (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

Participants' parents played a significant role in their college experience, offering emotional support and encouragement for students. One participant described how his father offered this encouragement on a daily basis:

So right now [my dad] just calls me up with encouragement basically every day. Yeah, he's busy, way too busy to talk, but you know he always finds the time to be like, 'hey, I'm proud of you for what you're doing, I'm proud of you for setting an example for your younger brother,' you know stuff like that. So yeah, right now he's really encouraging me.

Another student said that her parents were "kinda like good cheerleaders." Almost all of the participants said they were very appreciative of their parents' efforts to encourage and support them. Only one participant said he had a parent who was unsupportive of his academic endeavors. This lack of a support system from home made the decision to attend and transition to college difficult, but he was able to find support from his significant other.

Data released by the Higher Education Research Institute indicates that students in colleges today are satisfied with the level to which their parents are involved in their lives (Wartman & Savage, 2008). However, parents who have not graduated from college generally

are not able to offer the same types of advice about how to navigate higher education as parents who have a degree. This left participants sometimes feeling dissatisfied with how their parents were involved.

Several students I interviewed, although speaking highly of their relationships with their parents, described their parents' inability to assist in certain ways. The literature shows that parents who have completed college are able to prepare their students for what to expect once they get to school (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). One student talked about how his parents may have been able to do more than encourage him had they gone to college:

I feel like if my parents went to college they would have prepped me for what I was going to expect coming to a four-year university. They would have known some things to do, they would have helped me with the transition versus just encouraging. Yeah, encouraging me is helpful, but I feel like if they would have experienced college themselves they would've known like the pressure that you get, they would've known how you have to meet deadlines and how you have to prepare, or study for exams and you know or pull all nighters sometimes. They would have prepped me for that they would have helped me probably with like time management, you know stuff like that.

Another participant shared similar sentiments. Her basic expectations of college were that it would be more difficult than high school, but she said she would have appreciated more guidance once she was at college:

Since [my mom] didn't go to a university, I feel like she couldn't give me any advice about what it was going to be like and it was kinda like I didn't know what to expect. Like I knew college was gonna be hard, because that's something that everybody tells you, like your teachers in high school tell you and it's kinda the general image that the

media puts out is that college is difficult. But I didn't have anyone there to tell me like, 'oh it might be like this and this and make sure if you're struggling in your classes to do these kinds of things.'

Although parents were not able to help in all the ways students wanted them to, participants said their parents tried to help in any way they could. Multiple participants' parents were able to offer some financial assistance for the costs of college. One student said her parents tried to help her find solutions for her problems, but that it could sometimes make things difficult:

If [my parents] don't have the answers they always try to help me find them or try to guide me in the direction to look for them, but most of the time they don't know. So it's...me and them trying to hunt down someone to talk to. Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it's frustrating.

One student said her parents would try to assist by helping her think of other solutions and resources she may not have considered:

Sometimes I'd tell my mom oh this class is really hard and I wish I could get more help for it and things like that and she'd say...she wouldn't say 'oh do you think maybe you could try these specific things,' she would say 'Oh is there anything that you think that you could be doing that you're not?' It's just like a general question that she would ask me to try to get me to think about if there was other things I could be doing.

Aside from parents not being able to help, some students expressed that their parents simply do not understand what they are experiencing at college. This is consistent with other research on FGCSs' living and catering to two different cultures, their life at home and their life at the university, at the same time (Aries, 2008; Engle et al., 2006; Engle 2007; London, 1989;

Richardson & Skinner, 1992). One student said her parents did not understand why she wanted to participate in certain activities at college:

Well I guess [first generation college students] have support from our parents, but they don't really understand. Like if they come to campus, they don't understand why we do the things we do, like why are we involved. Why would you want to be in a sorority? Why do we do all this stuff, they don't understand.

While participants were very satisfied and appreciative of the support and encouragement they received from parents, they also would have appreciated more practical advice from their parents. Some students' parents were vaguely familiar with services offered on campus or tried to research them, but overall their parents were not able to help them navigate the culture of higher education. The next section covers students' involvement in SSS, a resource where many were able to find assistance navigating campus.

Participation in SSS

SSS provides a number of services for students who participate in their program. This theme provides insight into how students find out about SSS, why they participate, and how they perceive different services offered by SSS. In order to become and remain active in SSS, students must meet with their Retention Counselor a specified number of times each month, depending on how long they have been active in the program, and attend three workshops each semester. Other services are optional, but many serve as an incentive for students to join and remain active in the program. Individualized tutoring, the prospect of receiving priority registration, and the ability to utilize a textbook loan system are three of the most attractive services to students.

Since all services are free of charge to students, those who are informed about the program generally want to become active members if they meet admission requirements. To inform students about the program, Retention Counselors facilitate outreaches to various groups of students. I was able to attend several of these outreaches as a participant observer. Outreaches took place during select freshman experience courses and at other events where there may be large numbers of eligible students, such as high school visit days. At the outreach, a Retention Counselor provides an overview of the history of SSS and the services they offer.

Although this outreach may be effective in making SSS known to students, participants in the study were all referred by a friend or advisor. In addition, students were grateful to have found out about SSS because of the assistance they have received through the program. One transfer participant talked about seeking out help when she was having academic difficulties. After seeking out resources on the Green University web site, she set up an appointment with an administrator:

I met with [a university administrator] and I just kinda told her, ‘Look, I’m struggling this semester, I don’t wanna struggle anymore, what do you recommend, et cetera, et cetera.’

So she recommended me to do SSS...and I see now why.

Another participant was referred by a university staff member when going through his academic deficiency meeting after having an especially poor first semester at Green:

Going through my academic deficiency meetings with [university staff], they talked to me about the different services that were here. They told me if I’m a first year student...and I don’t really have any family who’s gone to college and gotten a four year degree, they’re like ‘here’s a program that could probably help,’ and they steered me towards SSS. They said that they could help with books or tutoring or anything like that.

Other students heard about SSS from friends or significant others. Participants generally thought that joining SSS was a logical and attractive step, given the services they provide to get students involved. One participant described hearing about the program from her boyfriend:

Actually my boyfriend told me about [SSS], so I signed up...I was like this is gonna help me out, priority registration, lend me books, I thought it was a sweet deal! I mean you can't go wrong, you don't even pay for it, it's there to help you.

Priority registration, the textbook loan program, and tutoring are also viewed by Retention Counselors and staff as incentives for students to join. At the outreaches I observed, Retention Counselors seemed to promote these services with extra enthusiasm, knowing that students would likely also benefit from the other services offered by SSS.

The workshops, a requirement for members of SSS, were rarely viewed by participants as a benefit for those in the program. It seemed that in general students viewed having to attend workshops as a burden to their schedule at school. Almost all of the students I interviewed said they selected which workshops they would attend based on times they had available in their schedule. One student even went to a workshop covering a topic that he did not think he would benefit from, simply because he had a conflicting schedule:

The workshops I went to last semester weren't really that helpful...I mean they kinda were but they kinda weren't...because one of them was about drinking, but I don't drink, so that's kind of not related to me...since I don't drink it was just kinda like ok I just have to go to this because I have to be here and this is one of the only times that I can come.

The finding that participants went to workshops mostly because they were required to go is consistent with what I found in my observation as well. As proof of attendance at workshops,

students are required to obtain the presenter's signature on a slip of paper. At one workshop I attended in the evening, students showed up late and seemed disinterested in the material being presented. Several of the students held their slips in hand throughout the duration of the workshop rather than taking notes, and were prompt to rush toward the presenter for a signature at the conclusion of their presentation. Only two students said they specifically targeted workshops because of the topic of the presentation. These students said they tried to attend workshops that would help them find jobs and become more financially literate.

SSS currently offers one-time workshops and all-day seminars that combine a set of three workshops on various topics. Several of the students who had attended one-time workshops felt that many times the content was not very helpful. Students who attended an all-day seminar said they appreciated being able to fulfill their workshop requirement completely, and also found at least one of the three presentations to be helpful. One student reflected on his experience at one of the all-day seminars, where he did not find all of the presentations beneficial but still spoke positively of the experience:

The internship [workshop at the seminar], not so [helpful], I just went to it because I knew I needed to go to three and I really didn't have any other time with work and everything...but the scholarship one was really helpful, [it] helped me find some scholarships I applied for and then helped me learn how to find more scholarships...and then the last one on financial planning helped, I am a rough financial planner.

By far, students felt the most useful topic of presentation was financial literacy, which is consistent with the literature (Engle et al., 2006).

In regards to continued participation in SSS, students who had been in the program for several years tended to attend less workshops and view them as less helpful than other students.

One student who had been in the program for over three years felt like she had already acquired the skills that would be covered in the workshops in workshops she attended previously:

I mean, [workshops] are helpful, but I think I just did them more to get them over with than because I think they're helpful. I mean I've been doing them since freshman, sophomore year, like I already know all the skills I need to study or what I need to do to pass my exams or all that stuff, like I already know... I usually do them at the end of the semester so just whatever one's available, so I just do it to get it over with, just to meet the requirements.

Another student with several years of experience in the program stopped going to workshops altogether. While he found the workshops useful his first year in the program, he felt like he already had a good sense of what would be covered in the presentations:

I don't really feel the need to [attend workshops] at this point [in my senior year]. I know what works for me, I've kinda figured out myself and what I have to do to get to where I wanna be as opposed to just coming in, just kinda didn't know what to expect, I guess.

Although SSS staff members facilitate outreaches to inform students of what the program is, study participants found out about SSS through referrals from friends and Green University staff and faculty. They joined the program largely due to incentives granted to active members, such as priority registration, textbook loans, and tutoring. Participants viewed workshops, a requirement for active members, as something they had to complete rather than a resource for helping them succeed. Students with more experience in SSS tended not to view workshops as helpful, and some did not go to workshops at all. However, all students I interviewed, whether freshman or seniors, spoke very highly of their relationships with Retention Counselors at SSS. The next section examines these relationships more closely.

Retention Counselors

Retention counselors are full-time professionals or half-time graduate assistants who work with students to ensure their academic progression towards graduation. They are also certified university advisors. Students are required to meet with their Retention Counselor at least once a month, but they can meet more than that if they so choose. At least one Retention Counselor also attends every event hosted by SSS, including workshops. Overwhelmingly, the students I interviewed said that Retention Counselors at SSS were the most beneficial part of the program. More than half of the students interviewed even said it has positively impacted their success as a university student more than anything else.

Students appreciated that their Retention Counselors were willing to help them with any sort of problem they were having. The issues mentioned most commonly included assistance with academics, planning for life post graduation, and personal issues. Several students also mentioned that Retention Counselors helped them locate scholarships and other financial assistance and assisted them in the application process. While students are assigned academic advisors at Green University, some students felt that their Retention Counselors provided more assistance with academics than their advisors were able to. One student was surprised that his Retention Counselor was more effective than his academic advisor:

I can come to my [Retention Counselor] with a question about any department and she'll help me find out the answer to it and help me get into contact with the person I need to talk to...And going through and understanding your [degree audit] report. I'm kinda surprised my [academic] advisor didn't do that more, and that [my Retention Counselor] did that more.

A student who was about to graduate and had been looking for jobs described how his Retention Counselor assisted with this process:

The [Retention] Counselors [at SSS], they're really resourceful...like when I was interviewing, in the process of interviewing for jobs [my Retention Counselor] sat there, went over questions that I could ask, she prepped me, she referred me to the career, academic career center or something like that...she went over my class, last year she helped me with setting up my classes. She gave me a lot of advice for tutoring, grad school, she's really helpful.

In addition to academic advice, participants appreciated being able to open up to their Retention Counselor about any sort of issue they were having. One student explained this relationship:

I don't know, [Retention Counselors] just understand, I mean an academic advisor, they just advise us about classes, tutoring, I don't know. And with our [Retention Counselor], it's more like...it's academics as well, but it's part academics, part "counselor" counselor, so if we have anything troubling us we can tell them and they can help us.

By helping students with an array of issues, Retention Counselors are someone FGCSs can go to for help "scaling down" campus, a success strategy suggested by Richardson & Skinner (1992). Participants said that the Retention Counselors were excellent referral agents on campus. As one student put it, "If I ever had a question that my counselor didn't know the answer to, he would be like I'll figure it out, we can figure it out together."

That Retention Counselors were willing to help students with many different types of issues they were having is consistent with what I observed of Retention Counselor relationships with their students. While gathering details about students' academic performance during one-on-one meetings, Retention Counselors were open to hearing any and all problems and successes

students would share with them, and would give advice and offer a multitude of resources. One participant even described how a Retention Counselor helped refer him to a job after a workshop he attended.

Although students certainly appreciated the help they received from Retention Counselors with issues they were having, several students said they most appreciate knowing that their Retention Counselor cares about their success at college. For these students, the fact that Retention Counselors regularly inquire about their academic and personal wellbeing was a source of comfort and support that they had generally only felt from parents. As one student put it:

The most helpful for me has been meeting with [my Retention Counselor]. It's just nice to meet with her and have her encourage me, not having my parents' support here and having her support is helpful. Not the same, but helpful.

Students recognized that the Retention Counselors were able to give them advice and support having had firsthand experience with college. One student expressed that her Retention Counselor was able to provide her with this guidance, while her parents were not:

I really like [seeing my Retention Counselor], he seems really helpful and I just like...since my parents really don't know much about college and where to go I feel like I can go to [him] and ask questions and he'll guide me in the right direction. I feel like it's a really good support system for people who don't really have that college background.

Retention Counselors also served as positive role models for students in their pursuit of higher education, something many of the students did not have previously. One student who transferred to Green explained how Retention Counselors set this example:

That [Retention Counselors are] going to grad school, everybody [who works at SSS] is looking for a higher thing than undergrad, so it's kinda like 'oh he's got his Masters, I wanna do that. He did it, why can't I do it?' The people you surround yourself with in [SSS] I guess, they're always looking for a way to improve their education or higher their education and I guess that gets stuck on you.

Although SSS offers many different services for students, participants said the relationship they form with their Retention Counselors is the most beneficial aspect of being involved in SSS. Retention Counselors provide advice to students for both academic and personal issues, are also able to refer students to different resources on campus, and serve as positive role models for students in their academic endeavors. In addition to the advice, students appreciate simply knowing that Retention Counselors are invested in their success. The next theme explores students' experiences with the transition to the Green University campus.

Transitioning to the University

The transition to college life is something that all students experience. However, FGCSs have more difficulty with this transition than non-FGCSs due to differences in their expectations of the college experience (Engle, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Students I interviewed had a difficult time with several aspects of the transition process.

As previously stated, nearly all of the participants maintained close relationships with their families. Leaving these family relationships going to college was a large adjustment for students. Two of the students described being dropped off at college by their parents and feeling truly alone for the first time. One participant who attended Green directly after high school said that not having family support was a shocking experience:

[The transition to college] was kind of a shocker. When we first got here, my grandparents and my dad dropped me off and then they just left and I was like whoa, I'm here all alone. But at first, my first semester was a little rocky because I didn't really know where to go and stuff.

One student who had transferred to Green from a community college close to home also felt more alone:

Yeah, just being away [at the university], kinda like being away from my mom and that support system and it's like now I'm on my own and I have to strive on my own and do what I need to do to get everything done.

For several of the students who transferred to Green, the comfort of their relationships with family was a reason why they chose to attend a community college close to home. One student explained how her community college experience was different from the university experience in that regard:

[The transition to Green] was really hard. I was on and off about [going to Green] and staying at home [for community college], because it's a scary situation for me to ask my parents and them not know anything or even be close to [being able to explain to them] how it feels to be away from home and going to school. So my first two years, I stayed home [for community college], for the same reason, because I was scared of coming into a university all by myself and being responsible, on my own... So [coming to Green] is a big change for me especially because at home I have my family at hand and I'm really close to them.

Another aspect of attending the university participants found to be difficult was navigating the large campus. Whether they transferred to Green or attended directly after high

school, learning how to navigate the physical space as well as the systems in place at the university was particularly difficult for these FGCSs. One student told me that although he was acclimated to his community college, navigating Green University was intimidating:

The size of the place was very intimidating, I mean [at community college] we got these little tiny buildings here or there, it's almost like a high school...like I was talking about the library and where are these different offices I need to go turn things in at, and where can I even find tutoring?

Another student who attended Green directly after high school said she was overwhelmed by trying to navigate campus:

But I was kinda lost [at the university] because I just didn't know what was going on, I didn't know my way around, how to get anywhere, I didn't have a car and so it was a little bit overwhelming I guess is the best word to describe it.

One student who attended Green directly after high school told me he wished he would have had somebody on campus to show him how to find certain things:

[I wish there was] somebody showing you the ropes early on. I mean...maybe somebody who could just show you oh this is a good place to go shopping, this is a good restaurant for this, stuff like that, this is where you wanna go when you wanna get books, just maybe on that level.

There were a few students who had older siblings or family members who had completed a four-year degree. Those students received some degree of guidance with navigating campus from those family members, but did not seem to rely on them for advice.

With the large university campus, students also described having to adjust to the multitude of activities that were happening all around them. Some students said that at times, this

impacted their ability to stay focused on the academic goals of attending college. As one transfer student put it:

Just the whole school in general is bigger, there's a lot more to do out here, so there's a lot more opportunities to get in trouble. I hate to say that, but that's just a fact. It's just like, you gotta realize that everyone's here for the same reason, to get a college degree, so you just gotta come here and be focused, no matter how big the school is or what not.

The literature also suggests that FGCSs may have more difficulty than other students in balancing social activities and involvement with academic goals (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Regarding academics, whether students came from community college or high school, the university was a much different experience. In fact, the students who transferred to the university generally felt that their experience at the community college was very similar to high school. Consistent with the literature, reasons participants found the transition to Green to be difficult were a lack of daily and weekly structure, more difficult material covered at a faster pace, and larger class sizes (Engle, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). However, adjusting to large class sizes seemed to be the most difficult part of the adjustment for students. One student who transferred from community college described his first experience with large classes:

Bigger classes [at Green] threw me off first semester. Huge auditoriums. It was like how am I gonna learn, there's like 600 other people here, in this same classroom?"

A student who attended Green directly after high school said that large class sizes made her reluctant to participate in class:

Well in high school it was different because, well the classrooms were pretty big still, like I thought 32 people was big, you know? But you could still ask your teacher a

question and it'd be fine. And then here [at Green], like enormous amount of people, like maybe two, three hundred people in one little lecture hall and [the professor] just wants to get through and go through his points and it's kinda weird raising your hand and asking a question in front of all these people and stopping him, but sometimes you just have to do it. After you get over it the first few times, it gets a little better, but I prefer to email him or talk to him after class.

While students felt less engaged in large classes, they also said it affected their ability to form a relationship with the professor, which was different than what they had experienced in high school or community college. One transfer student felt like his professors did not know him at all:

The transition [to Green]...the large classes compared to smaller classes, you know I had a more intimate relationship with my professors at the community college level, but here at Green, I don't even know if one of my professors knows my name.

Students I interviewed generally found the transition to Green to be a difficult one. It did not appear to make a difference whether the students had attended community college as an intermediate step or whether they came directly from high school. Participants expressed having difficulties being away from family, adjusting to the large size of campus and classrooms, learning more difficult material at a faster pace, and not having closer relationships with faculty members. The next theme explores the role visual diversity played for participants in their participation with SSS.

The Impact of Ethnicity

In recruiting for the study, I was intentional to have a demographically diverse sample. The group of 12 FGCSs who participated in the study varied with respect to sex, year in school,

and ethnicity but the only factor that seemed to impact the student experience was ethnicity. Without being prompted, five of the 12 students who participated in the study brought up ethnicity as it related to their comfort with joining or being involved with SSS at Green. Of those five students, three identified as Black or African American, one identified as Latino/a, and one identified as Caucasian.

All five of these students told me that the predominant ethnicity of students served by SSS seems to be Latino/a. Although this is consistent with what I observed in my weekly participant observation at SSS, SSS program staff indicated that the majority of students served by SSS are Caucasian, with Latino/a students being the second largest ethnic group. Several of the student employees and two of five Retention Counselors who work at SSS are Latino/a. In discussing the trend with Retention Counselors and staff at SSS, I uncovered one reason why there may appear to be more Latino/a students involved with SSS.

SSS shares an office with another federal program, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). According to the CAMP web site, this program is geared toward assisting “migratory or seasonal farmworkers or children of such workers enrolled in their first year of undergraduate studies at an institution of higher education” (“Migrant Education”, 2011). Retention Counselors were able to explain to me more about CAMP at Green University. They said that although students who participate in CAMP are not required to be, the vast majority of these students are Latino/a. As part of their experience with CAMP, students are encouraged to apply for SSS for continued support. CAMP also employs several staff who are Latino/a.

For the Latino/a student, who was also a member of CAMP, being around people of a similar ethnicity was comforting:

But when I was in CAMP I felt more like at home. So I think being [at Green], seeing that there's a little bit of our culture here, a little bit of everybody's culture here, it helps [minorities] feel more comfortable here, it helps us succeed.

The other four students, three of whom were Black or African American, did not feel as comfortable participating in SSS because they were not members of what they perceived to be the predominant minority group. While all of these students found the program helpful and spoke highly of their experiences, at times they felt that they did not fit in. The Caucasian student did not necessarily feel uncomfortable participating in SSS, but did initially have misconceptions about who was eligible to participate in the program:

[My advisor] set me up, made me aware of the [SSS] program. I never even heard of it before...I guess I had seen the office a couple times but I guess I thought it was part of the migrant workers thing. I had no idea that it was for non-minorities. I didn't realize it was for first generation college students.

One of the African American students was discouraged after lacking a sense of belonging at SSS:

[SSS], they cater to like, Latino students, I feel. They really do, as far as a lot of the things that they do. I think that that discourages me, because when you walk in there, I think most of the staff is Latino. I'm not saying I have anything against [SSS], but it seems like it's set up for, you know, Latino students versus multicultural students, Asians, African Americans, Africans, I mean. So when you walk in, Latino students work there, most of the advisors are [Latino], and like events that I've gone to were more set up for Latinos, so that kinda discourages me as well...I mean, I feel like it's not for me, you know I feel like I don't belong there, you know?

One of the students explained feeling more comfortable at the multicultural center on campus:

But what I've found with SSS is that it's predominantly Latino/Latina and not that I have anything against...I get along perfectly fine, but it was just a different atmosphere than I felt in the multicultural center, just being with people that are kinda like me...and if you're not in that Latina/Latino group, and I'm saying there's nothing wrong with that, it's not the same, you know? You notice it, just being around [SSS], in the environment. It's not anything bad that you feel because you're in that environment, but you do feel a sense of people look like me at the multicultural center. And when I'm [at SSS], I feel fine, I don't feel weird when I go there, but I could see how somebody who doesn't go there a lot might not feel as comfortable, just because you know their own cultural background.

These findings are consistent with the literature. Students who are members of an ethnic minority generally feel more comfortable participating in programs where they feel they fit in and can connect with staff who they perceive as being similar to themselves with respect to ethnicity (Aries, 2008). Although students who were not Latino/a did not always feel like they fit in at SSS, they all said that their experiences with SSS were very valuable.

The findings reveal significant trends related to participants' experiences with SSS. Although staff members advertise SSS by giving presentations at various student events and class meetings, students find out about SSS through referrals from friends and advisors. They generally join and remain active in SSS because they are interested in incentives such as priority registration. Some participants' comfort level with SSS was impacted by the perception of a predominant ethnicity served by SSS. Regardless of their own ethnicity, all participants spoke positively of their experiences in SSS. The most important service provided by SSS is the chance

to form a relationship with a Retention Counselor. Through this mentoring relationship, Retention Counselors offer students personal support, academic and career advice, and assistance with other issues.

Additional findings are consistent with the literature. Although their parents were unable to provide practical assistance about navigating campus, participants appreciated their emotional support and encouragement. Many students said their parents set high expectations for them to perform at college, causing them to feel pressured. Participants were also motivated to be positive role models for younger family members.

On the whole, students felt unprepared for academic transition to Green University. The most difficult aspects of this transition were larger class sizes and the large campus. The following chapter offers a discussion of key findings and recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the college experiences of FGCSs affiliated with SSS, with the goal of determining which services offered by SSS FGCSs view as most useful. To obtain that goal, I interviewed a sample of 12 FGCSs that was diverse with respect to sex, ethnicity, and year at school. Much of what I found in the study is in line with current literature on FGCSs. In this section, I will describe findings of particular interest, including students' experiences with SSS, the adjustments students made to life at Green University, and the role of parents and cultural capital in these students' transitions.

Experiences with SSS

The main goal of this study was to determine how FGCSs viewed various services offered by SSS. The four research questions that guided the study all dealt with SSS: (a) How do different SSS services impact first-generation students at college; (b) What types of outreach or support do FGCSs use; (c) What issues persist among FGCSs involved in SSS; and (d) How do FGCSs become involved in SSS, and why do they persist in the program? Some of what I found is in line with the literature, while other findings are not.

The SSS services participants discussed most frequently were financial assistance in the form of counseling or monetary aid, academic, personal, and career counseling, and priority registration. This is consistent with other research on FGCSs in general (Engle et al., 2006). However, while priority registration, textbook loans, and tutoring seemed to draw students toward the program initially, students did not seem to find tutoring through SSS as a very helpful service, mostly because they had received tutoring from somewhere else. Chaney et al. (1998)

recommend that SSS programs provide tutoring, but this may not be necessary if program staff are able to refer students to opportunities for tutoring elsewhere on campus.

One of the more significant findings of the study deals with a service which is left out of or drastically understated in the literature. This service is students' relationships with program staff. In the literature, studies refer to different forms of "counseling" as something that is beneficial for programs, but the value of the relationship with staff seems very minimized (Aries, 2008; Chaney et al., 1998; Engle et al., 2006). In addition to counseling, Retention Counselors provided students with advising, information about campus, referrals to other services, and a positive mentoring relationship.

Participants felt that their relationships with Retention Counselors at SSS were invaluable, and often the most beneficial service offered on campus. They not only appreciated the advice they received, but also that Retention Counselors were supportive and invested in their success as students. Most of the students did not have role models with extensive knowledge of the college environment. While teachers may have served as mentors for participants in high school, students said they were either reluctant or unable to form relationships with their professors because of large class sizes. In Retention Counselors, participants found people willing to provide mentoring, give advice to students on how to navigate campus, serve as positive role models, and help students deal with any sort of issue they had.

Another interesting result in the study deals with how SSS affects students' social integration. Building a relationship with a Retention Counselor was significant, but other research would suggest that students benefit from participation in workshops by building relationships with other students (Chaney et al., 1998). However, only two of the participants

described meeting another student through SSS, and the two students were referring to each other. This may be unique to the culture of students viewing workshops as something they had to “get out of the way.” It may also be the result of a lack of time to socialize at the workshops. At workshops I attended, students took their seats and then the presentation began. With someone facilitating interaction between students, they may be able to use workshops as a tool to expand their social networks. The physical space of the SSS office was also not conducive to socializing, as several participants said was the case at the multicultural center. Participants tended to form their social relationships through other organizations and other students in their classes.

Ethnicity also played an important role in social integration at SSS and on campus for participants. This is especially significant because it came up even though I did not directly ask students about ethnicity. The role of ethnicity as a deterrent or draw for students is consistent with what the research says about multicultural centers on college campuses; students feel more comfortable taking advantage of services where people look like them and who they perceive as coming from a similar background (Aries, 2008).

Even though SSS is a program to assist students from all ethnic backgrounds, participants perceived it as a service for members of ethnic minorities, specifically Latino/a students. Students who were Latino/a felt comfortable taking advantage of services offered by SSS. For students who were not Latino/a, the multicultural center at Green provided a more comfortable setting. Although there are many Latino/a students in SSS at Green, the slight majority of students served by SSS are Caucasian. Of the five Retention Counselors, two are Caucasian, two are Latino/a, and one is African American. Because students seek out spaces on campuses where they feel welcomed, programs need to be aware of these types of perceptions and do their best to

be welcoming for all students (Aries, 2008). Despite feeling that SSS caters toward Latino/a students, non-Latino/a students still perceived SSS as a very helpful service.

The only issue that persisted with participants was the desire for more monetary assistance with funding their education. While the persistence of financial issues may also point to rising costs of tuition, it is also a result of at least three fourths of the participants in this study being from low-income backgrounds. That students came into the program with a variety of academic, social, and personal issues but were able to find assistance with all of them speaks to the usefulness of the SSS program as a whole.

Participants joined and remained affiliated with SSS initially to take advantage of incentives such as priority registration and the textbook loan system. Priority registration served as the main incentive for students to attend workshops. However, students who had been in the program longer often stopped attending workshops and thus did not receive priority registration. One explanation is that students with more credits do not benefit as much from priority registration, as they register before students with less credits; in essence, upperclassmen already have priority registration. Also, students do not need to maintain active membership in order to continue meeting with their Retention Counselor, which students perceive as the most valuable service offered by SSS.

The most significant findings related to students' experiences with SSS are the amount of assistance they receive from Retention Counselors, the role of ethnicity as a draw or deterrent for participation in services, and the fact that students had nearly all of their issues at college addressed through participation in SSS. Participants' issues with the transition to Green University are covered in the next section.

Transition and Perceived Support

The study's findings about FGCSs' transition to the university were closely in line with the research that grounded the study. Students in this study felt very unprepared for the academic rigor, time required for schoolwork, class sizes, and institutional size of the university, whether they came from a community college experience or not, as students in other studies have indicated (Chen, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle et al., 2006; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Unlike those studies, while students seemed to appreciate any form of financial assistance, monetary or educational, none of them mentioned being surprised by extra costs once they arrived at college (textbooks, food, transportation, etc.). That I interviewed 7 transfer students may be a partial explanation for that, as those students would have had prior experience with some of those expenses. I also did not specifically ask students about the costs of college.

Literature suggests that FGCSs view institutions, including faculty and staff, as less supportive than other students (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). However, students I interviewed did not say they felt like either the institution or faculty members were unsupportive. Although several students did express feeling uncomfortable forming relationships with faculty, this was mostly due to class size and the fact that the university professor role was not as involved as what students had experienced before. Students who developed relationships with professors thought they were supportive. One factor that may contribute this is that Retention Counselors advise students that getting to know professors is beneficial. In addition, many of the students had positive relationships with Retention Counselors. By having a trusting relationship with a university staff member already, students may have been more inclined to pursue relationships with other staff and faculty on campus. This lends further credibility to mentoring as a strategy for assisting FGCSs with the transition to college.

While FGCSs in this study exhibited many of the same issues with the transition to college as students in other studies, they found assistance with those issues through their involvement with SSS. Contrary to what research suggests, participants did not mention feeling unsupported at Green University. However, this result may not be significant without a comparison group. The results dealing with FGCSs parents and transmission of cultural capital are covered next.

Parents and Cultural Capital

Cultural capital “refers to specialized or insider knowledge which is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture, and to educational credentials” (Walpole, 2003, p. 49). Although the focus of the study dealt more with integration, it seems that cultural capital may have played a significant role in students’ ability to integrate, as some research suggests (Pascarella et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). The fact that participants’ parents were only able to offer encouragement and support rather than practical advice on how to navigate campus is a result of their parents not having extensive experience at a university. Parents did not have the cultural capital regarding higher education to pass on to their children.

Acquiring cultural capital may relate to why students spoke so highly about, relied upon and very much appreciated their relationships with Retention Counselors. By developing a bond with students and teaching them how to approach issues they are having difficulty with, sharing best practices of successful students at a university, and educating them on how to navigate social and academic relationships, Retention Counselors increased the amount of cultural capital the FGCS participants had.

According to Bordieu (1985), the benefits a person attains from schooling is dependent on the amount of cultural capital that person has. In other words, a student who attends college

having a good idea of what types of services and involvement to pursue and how to navigate the social systems on campus will get more out of the experience than someone who does not. It seems that Retention Counselors are able to provide a large amount of cultural capital for students.

The pressure that participants felt from parents to succeed at college was also a fairly significant finding. Research shows that students appreciate parents who try to motivate them, but that this form of motivation does not have a significant impact on their success (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). In the study, participants did not say whether they appreciated the high expectations or not, but did note that their parents could not relate to their experiences at college. They also said the pressure added significant stress to their experience as FGCSs.

Consistent with the research, students I interviewed did not receive the cultural capital regarding how to transition and succeed at college from their parents. Parents also had high expectations for their children, which many times translated into pressure. This pressure is not something that is overtly described in literature specific to FGCSs. The next section describes limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had several limitations. Perhaps largest is that FGCSs are also part of the broader set of college students. At times it was difficult to ascertain which of the phenomena they experienced were a function of their FGCS status or simply experiences common to college students. The use of a comparison group in future studies would allow the researcher to tease out these differences. SSS programs may be a useful place for this, since they serve not only FGCSs, but also students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities.

Another limitation is the diversity of the sample. Although I obtained a sample that was diverse with respect to sex, ethnicity, and year at Green University, there are other factors that I did not focus on. Nearly all of the participants had supportive parents and were somewhat active in SSS. Also, none of the participants participated in pre-college TRIO programs such as Upward Bound or Talent Search.

In similar future studies, achieving a sample that is comprised of students with diversity in regards to sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, year in the program, level of activity in the program, participation in pre-college programs, and relationship with parents and family would be useful to compare experiences of students with different experiences.

Over the course of this study, I was involved with SSS through a practicum placement. This may have impacted how students perceived me as a researcher and could have skewed answers. Much of the available literature on SSS is also conducted by stakeholders in the US Department of Education. A study with a neutral researcher may result in more varied responses, due both to student perception and researcher biases.

Finally, while my study considered the role of integration at the university and its role in student success, cultural capital clearly played a role in FGCSs' ability to navigate campus and seek out those opportunities for social and academic integration. A study with a large sample examining the relationship between integration and cultural capital would yield useful results. The next section includes recommendations for SSS and student support programs on college campuses based on the results of the study.

Recommendations for SSS and Other Programs

The results of this study translate into several recommendations for SSS program staff as well as student support staff affiliated with other programs serving FGCSs. Based on the data

collected, it is important for student support staff to facilitate meaningful relationships with staff, promote both social and academic integration, be intentional with the workshops and other presentations, and provide incentives for participation when possible.

Facilitating relationships with staff.

Perhaps the most important recommendation for student support programs has to do with the relationship between staff and students. Because FGCSs come to college with little or no cultural capital from their parents as to how to navigate campus, they benefit to a large degree from conversations with counselors and advisors who are invested in their success (Pascarella et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). Hiring staff who value mentoring and student success is important, as these staff also serve as important role models for students. The student to staff ratio should be kept as low as possible so these meaningful relationships can be formed and maintained effectively.

Social and academic integration.

Although programs are generally geared toward FGCSs' academic success and graduation, both social and academic integration at college are important (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). A variety of academic success initiatives are certainly important, but the social aspect of helping students form relationships, both with program staff and students with whom they can relate, is critical (Aries, 2008; Chaney et al., 1998). To do that, staff should attempt to make presentations interactive, potentially providing an activity for students become acquainted with one other during workshops and events, even if that activity takes place during a break.

In addition, it is imperative that staff are aware of how students perceive their office. Students may be reluctant to participate fully if they do not feel welcomed. Staff should pay

attention to making the physical space of their offices comfortable and inviting. If there is a predominant ethnicity, gender, or other type of visual characteristic for a program that is open to all students, hanging signs up or advertising that the program is open to all students may be beneficial.

Workshops and presentations.

When hosting presentations or workshops geared toward FGCS success, it is important to ensure that material is relevant to students. Financial literacy seems to be the most beneficial topic, including money management, how to acquire funding for school, and responsible credit management. However, students seemed to benefit from a variety of topics. First year students benefitted from college success workshops such as time management, study skills, and test taking, whereas upperclassmen appreciated workshops on internships, employment post-graduation, and graduate school. It may be useful to have new student and experienced student tracks, where topics can be more focused.

Also, students who attended stand alone workshops reported varied levels of usefulness for the topic, many times because the topic did not apply to the student. When presenting multiple workshops, students have a higher chance of learning beneficial information and thus viewed the experience as more helpful. This may be a useful strategy for offices with limited staff.

Incentives for participation.

As student support staff working with at-risk students, it is important to ensure that the students who need services take advantage of them. Some students do not realize the benefits of certain services until they experience it firsthand. Having an incentive for students to participate in programs is one way to accomplish this.

At Green University, a highly regarded benefit of being an active member of SSS was priority registration. Most students in this study admitted that they attended workshops simply to remain active in the program, but many of them found something useful about the material that was presented. Without the incentive, students may not have attended workshops and may not have even joined the program, potentially missing out on the chance to build a relationship with a Retention Counselor and acquire valuable cultural capital. Other incentives, such as scholarships, tutoring, and textbook loans may be useful in getting students to take advantage of services.

Summary

FGCSs are an increasing population of students at institutions of higher education, and have needs that are different from those of other students. This study set out to determine which services FGCSs affiliated with SSS found most useful. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, it was clear that building and maintaining relationship with Retention Counselors was the most beneficial aspect of their involvement with the SSS. As a result of having this relationship, students found assistance with almost every issue they had. This relationship was something that all students appreciated; it transcended variables such as sex, ethnicity, year in school, and transfer status. Through this relationship, students received information about becoming integrated at school, acquired cultural capital regarding higher education, and had a positive role model to emulate. Regarding other services, students appreciated services that were practical in application, such as financial management, applying to jobs, and transitioning to life post-college.

Colleges and universities that are serious about recruiting and developing students need to take special note of how best to serve FGCSs. Because FGCSs are largely unprepared for how

to navigate the culture of higher education, they need more assistance with the transition to college than their peers. Consequently, strategies that work for this subgroup of college students are also likely to work for the general student population.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background information

- Tell me more about who you are and how you got to this point. (parental role in education, transition to college, experiences on campus, difficulties, being a FGCS)

Involvement with SSS

- Tell me about your experiences with SSS. (how/when involved, services utilized/not utilized, how services do/do not help, frequency of services, most/least beneficial, relationship with program staff/other students, specific issues, links to other involvement)
- How do you view SSS? (reactions to program, how helpful it is, others' views)

Other Issues

- Tell me about issues you have had that SSS did not help with. (description of issue, if/how resolved, people/services who helped, ease of finding solution, whether tried to get help from SSS)

Academic Experience

- How has being a FGCS affected your academic experience at college? (transition, difficulties, comparison to previous experiences)
- Are there other difficulties you have had with academics or the academic experience at college? (what they are, how they began, how managed)

Involvement and Time Management

- Tell me about extracurricular and other activities you participate in at college. (how/when involved, effects on social experience/relationships, effects on academic experience)
- Do you work while attending classes? (reasons why, how decision was made, how found job, effects on social experience/relationships and academics, benefits, difficulties)

- How do you prioritize your commitments? (methods of prioritization, time management skills, problems with time management)

Social Network

- Tell me about your closest friends at WSU. (how became friends, ways relationship is beneficial/not beneficial)

Overall

- What are the types of involvement, people, programs, groups, or services that you have found most helpful in helping you succeed in college?
- Is there any type of support that you are not getting at WSU that you wish you were?
- What is your perspective on WSU as an institution? (level of support, examples)

Biographical information:

Age

Parental Level of Education. Occupation?

Ethnicity

Siblings? Gone to college?

APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling

Research Study Consent Form

Study Title: Student Support Services and First Generation College Students

Researchers: PI: Kelly Ward, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology, 509-335-4702

Co-Investigator: Joseph Nixon, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology, 509-335-0185

What is this study about?

This research study is being done to gain a better understanding of the college experiences of students who do not have a parent or guardian who went to college. Research strongly suggests that these students are at an academic disadvantage in their education after high school. It is important to understand what services may help students succeed. Your experiences as a first-generation college student are relevant to this study.

What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview. The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. In the interview, I will ask you several questions about your experiences at WSU regarding your types of involvement on campus and your perceptions of support services. If you agree to it, the interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, I may contact you via telephone if I have any follow-up questions.

Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?

There is no direct benefit to you from being in this study. However, your participation will help improve the understanding of how being a first-generation college student affects the college experience.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?

This interview could bring up sensitive topics for you, and as a result you may experience embarrassment or discomfort. If you do not wish to answer specific questions, you may choose not to answer or change the subject. You may also end the interview at any time; there is no penalty for ending the interview. If you should experience distress as a result of the questions in the interview, I will provide you with resources to seek the appropriate assistance.

Will my information be kept private?

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Under certain circumstances, information that identifies you may be released for internal and external reviews of this project.

I am taking several precautions to keep your identity confidential:

- The audio recording from the interview will be kept in a locked location. Your interview can only be identified by a coded name key, which will be kept in a separate locked file.
- All names and identifying information about your interview will be changed when completing research reports. In those reports, you may be referred to via the use of a pseudonym so your identity is not revealed.
- The only people with access to the data collected in your interview will be myself and researchers associated with the study
- The data will be kept for approximately 3 years after the completion of the project. After that point, all data will be destroyed.

Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?

There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study. You will also not receive money or any other form of compensation for taking part in this study.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact Joseph Nixon, PO Box 912, Pullman, WA 99163. You may also email me at jnixon@wsu.edu or call me at 509-335-0185.

Your signature on this form means that:

- You understand the information given to you in this form
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

Researcher_____ Signature_____ Date_____

Statement of Consent

I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Permission to audio record interview?
Yes No