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Assessing Strategies for Success for First Generation College Students at Merrimack College

Sarah Duke

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April 24, 2015

Abstract

First generation college students, who are increasing in number in higher education, often lack support and face barriers in their educational pursuit ultimately affecting retention (Gofen, 2009). This qualitative study investigated the experiences of students involved in Generation Merrimack, a program designed for first generation college students as a career and professional support initiative. The study sought to explore how to improve Generation Merrimack from students' experiences and perspectives. Interviews were conducted to collect data from current students, who were asked questions about challenges, supports, and involvement in Generation Merrimack. The findings, which will be used to aid in the recommendation of the yearly plan, summer bridge program, implementation of outing and events, and increasing visibility on campus. These findings will inform the planning of workshops, career preparation and exploration, implementation of a Professional Mentor Exchange, and more contact from faculty and staff. Overall, interviewed participants expressed an interest in more contact from faculty and staff, more workshops, connections with alumni, and career development. Recommendations for Generation Merrimack include a yearly plan that would ideally be implemented in the 2015-2016 school year. Along with recommendations designed to benefit the overall experience for all first generation college students on Merrimack's campus.

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Introduction

First generation college students have been an increasing population within higher education institutions in the recent decade. With more first generation college students attending college, it is important for faculty and staff members, as well as other students to understand the struggles that they face in order to provide support to them (Gofen, 2009). First generation college students need to be understood in the post-secondary education system as they often struggle with retention and require support in attaining their educational goals. As Stebleton & Soria (2012) stated, “Institutions of higher education struggle with college success as measured by persistence and graduation rate continues to be a problem” (p.8). In a similar statement, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) stated, “First generation students are more likely to leave a four year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled or be on a persistence track to a bachelor’s degree”(p.250).

To begin, I reviewed the relevant discourses on this subject for historical and current contextual influences. To elaborate on the qualitative study of first generation college students at Merrimack College, I conducted comprehensive research to understand the barriers first generation college students’ face, the factors that contributed to their retention or persistence, and the role the institutions had in aiding first generation college students. Through the information learned from personal interviews of three seniors, one sophomore, and three freshmen first generation students, I contributed to the limited body of knowledge on this population and presented findings that will inform higher education professionals concerned with increasing retention rates and success of first generation college students. For this study, I concur with Gofen’s (2009) definition of first generation college students. Gofen (2009) stated, “An individual who attains higher education, whereas both their parents did not, is referred to as a

first generation college student (FGC)” (p.104). Some research even categorizes students as first generation college students, even if their parents enrolled in some secondary education or have obtained an associate’s degree (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Researchers have focused on the bachelor’s degree to be more of an issue of access especially to first generation college students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Characteristics of first generation college students usually include coming from low income families, being minority students, and often being women. Another term I used in comparison to being first generation is non-first generation. Non-first generation (NFG) refers to the students who are not first generation college students. Also, to define my research question more clearly, the term ‘retention’ refers to keeping first generation college students in college to graduation. Other important terms used in this research are barriers and supports. Barriers which refers to the challenges a first generation college student faces. The second term ‘supports’ refers to social interactions and support systems to help the student be successful.

Merrimack College, located in North Andover, Massachusetts is a small, private college with Augustinian Catholic traditions. The student population is approximately over 2800 students (Merrimack College, 2014). Approximately 40% of Merrimack College’s student populations are first generation college students. With an increasing number of students who are first generation college students, Merrimack College has created a program called Generation Merrimack (2014) to support the needs of these students. Generation Merrimack is a program designed for first generation college students’ as a career and professional support initiative. Generation Merrimack is designed around five components to foster student development. The structures focus on peer mentor connections, academic focus, social focus, career focus, and faculty engagement. Generation Merrimack fosters student development by providing academic

workshops, career exploration, and building a community and sense of belonging within the college (Generation Merrimack, 2014).

The purpose of this project was to provide recommendations to develop an effective year by year plan for students' to achieve while being a part of Generation Merrimack and to provide overall recommendations for the program. The study determined what first generation college students feel is important to help them succeed and reach their educational goals. In this literature review, I investigated what barriers and supports exist for first generation college students' and their experience accessing a post-secondary degree (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). I have examined how the barriers and support systems impact their educational goals, career development, and social interaction with others (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). In this study, I conducted eight semi structured interviews of three freshman, one sophomore, and four senior students involved in the Generation Merrimack program. I documented the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of first generation college students, consequently, to improve the Generation Merrimack program by developing a yearly plan to help students overcome barriers they face and have greater support while in college. The data was analyzed using standard qualitative data analysis techniques.

Through the literature on first generation college students and my qualitative study, I learned the way that Merrimack College's Generation Merrimack programs aims to better the experience of their first generation college students. It is important to consider the ways that student development relate to the needs of first generation college students? This paper first reviews prominent theories on first generation college students in higher education, followed by an overview of empirical research focused on first generation college students and persistence,

then a description of my methodology, and final, I offer the results of the study conducted at Merrimack College. A conclusion with recommendations for best practices are included.

Literature Review

Obtaining a college degree can be a challenge, especially for first generation college students. These challenges often start in high school when planning begins about attending a post-secondary institution. As Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron (2013) asserted “There is evidence that FGCSs are at a disadvantage in terms of family support, level of financial assistance, knowledge about higher education, academic preparation, and educational expectations”(p.129). However, there are support systems that institutions put into place to help these students overcome the barriers and achieve their educational goals.

Barriers to College Enrollment and Retention

When first generation college students apply to college, stress and confusion may ensue. Many first generation college students do not have the knowledge about how to apply for college. According to Gardner & Holley (2011), “ Many of these students did not receive any assistance in navigating access to the higher education system nor were they aware of how certain institutional types or institutional rankings might affect their future career choice”(p.88). First generation college students often have to rely on the guidance department to help with applying to college. Parents of first generation students do not have experience with how to choose a college and how to approach and fill out applications. Also, many first generation students and parents often do not know about or how to sign up for standardized testing that is may be required for attendance to an institution. As Gardner & Holley (2011) have stated, “High school counselors, teachers, and higher education administrators need to receive guidance and

professional development in relation to first generation students' needs" (p.88). For non-first generation students, their parents have had the personal experience in the application and decision process of college. This benefits these students tremendously as they have support from someone they are close to and can give them advice on the process.

Having advice and support of parents or a close individual who attended college is a privilege that non first generation students often benefit from. This privilege has been noted to create better outcomes and experiences before and after college. To evaluate the difference in outcomes and experiences of both groups, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) conducted a study on first generation college student's experiences and outcomes. The study is broken into categories including college choice process, degree attainment, transition process from high school to a post-secondary institution, and experience while in college. The researchers conducted a quantitative comparative study on first generation and non-first generation students from eighteen four year colleges and universities. Pascarella et al., (2004) found that first generation students experience significant challenges in college in academic and non-academic experience, parental involvement, and finances. Regarding the findings on finances, Pascarella et al., (2004), discussed how first generation college students often face financial barriers before attending college. Before choosing an institution to attend, many first generation college students are concerned about how they will fund their education. These concerns are based on the tuition of an institution, books, and other fees institution may have. Often, first generation students are more likely to be low income students (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Therefore, parents of first generation students may not be in a position to help the student with college expenses. This leaves the student in a stressful position questioning how they will be able to finance their education by themselves. Many first generation students choose to attend

public institutions or community colleges to help keep the cost low. As Pascarella et al., (2004) explained, “53% of first generation college students started higher education at a two year college as they cannot afford tuition at four year institutions” (p.249). First generation students also often choose to live at home to save more money on living expenses, however, they do not receive the advantages that residential life provides to students.

Many students often are hesitant to apply to college as they feel they will not be able to afford it. Many students are unaware of scholarships and the federal student aid program available to them to help fund their education. For first generation students, a barrier of knowledge also exists when first generation students apply for financial aid. The application process can be very daunting and stressful for first generation students the first time one has to complete it (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Gardner & Holley (2011) asked twenty first generation doctoral students in an interview on their experience with the financial aid process. Gardner & Holley (2011) found that first generation students described the process of financial aid as stressful since they were not receiving support from their parents on how to answer the questions and had to figure out how to complete it on their own. When students apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) it is completed through an online application. The application process is set up into sections of components it requires the student to fill out. The application requires not only the student’s information but also the parents and guardians of the student if the student is a dependent. The application requires an array of information including tax information and assets. This application has to be renewed annually for financial assistance. This application provides access to federal loans and grants.

As many first generation college students are low income, they will receive a Pell grant and a Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG). A Pell grant is awarded to students

with the greatest financial need. It is calculated by taking into account family resources and the cost of tuition. A Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant is a need base grant that help low income students fund their education. Each grant is offered yearly to students and currently stand at a maximum of nine thousand dollars combined (US Department of Education, 2014).

Expenses while in college can be a challenge for first generation college students. Gardner & Holley (2011) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing twenty students in doctoral programs on the barriers that first generation college students face. Gardner & Holley (2011) found that first generation student often struggle to navigate networks, having a sense of belonging to an institution, and experience financial obstacles. Even though the article focuses on doctoral education, the articles examine barriers that are faced by all first generation students at any level. While in college, there are many expenses that can cause the student financial stress. This includes the cost of textbooks and activity fees. Textbooks are very expensive, especially buying multiple textbooks for classes. Also, schools often have activities such as group outings that can cause financial strain for the students who would like to attend. These activities can include going bowling, to a professional sporting events, or even apple picking. Many students feel left out since they cannot afford to go. As Gardner & Holley (2011) have stated, “students from this population are more likely to grow up in low income families and hold a full time job during college”(p. 77). As mentioned previously, many parents of first generation students may not be able to provide financial support for college expenses.

In order to attend college, many first generation students feel the only way they can afford to attend school is to be able to work to pay for it. Gardner & Holley (2011) focused a section of their research on being employed while attending college. They found that when students hold a job while concentrating on their studies, they can experience fatigue and lack of

engagement in academics. Working full time can cause students to take longer completing their bachelor's degree and have lower career aspirations since they are focused on making money to stay in school. Also, working full time can impact social interactions that are important to the college experience. First generation students are less likely to interact with faculty and staff as well as their peers. They often go to class and then leave campus to work or study at home (Gardner &Holley, 2011).

Academic achievements can be very challenging for first generation students ultimately affecting retention. As mentioned previously, many first generation college students are often from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Often, under-resourced and low performing high school do not prepare students academically for college level work causing students to be placed in remedial education. Bettinger, Boatman, & Long (2013) expanded on previous research on the role, cost, and impact remedial education has on the college population and the institution. The study on the subject of remedial on placing students in various support services and effect on the students' academic development. Bettinger, Boatman, & Long (2013) suggested that when first generation college students start college they are often not prepared academically for college course work. The findings also suggest that institutions have limited resources and funds to provide academic support to their students. These students often do not have the opportunities to take advanced courses or perform well on standardized testing. This finding is comparable to Gibbson, Pelchar, & Cochran (2011) findings on non-gifted first generation students. Even though these researchers focus on gifted students, their literature review suggests that non gifted first generation students have low performance and are not academically ready. They suggested that, "First generation students often have lower SAT scores and are less likely to have taken advanced courses while in high school than their peers. Overall, prospective first generation

students are less prepared for college than their peers” (Gibbson et al., 2011, p.115). These students often have to take remedial classes in college due to their high school performance or preparation. Remedial courses or developmental courses help the student gain the ability to become prepared for college level material. These courses are focused in writing and mathematics and are usually taught at public institutions (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013).

First generation students’ academic challenges

Taking remedial courses can hurt a student’s self-esteem by making a student feel out of place in an institution or incapable of handling college work. Often, first generation students are able to handle the work but they are not aware of the professor’s expectations for the course. This includes how much time should be spent studying for the course (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The unawareness of professor expectation could be impacted by the lack of a student’s cultural capital. As Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke (2011) explained, “Social capital is referred to familiarity with traditions and norm to be successful in higher education” (p.22). This is developed from interaction with others. As a result, first generation college students struggle with social capital since it is often obtained through parents and friends. If the student does not know a college graduate they may experience issues with social capital.

Collegiate skills are another area of struggle for some first generation students. Gibbson, Pelchar, & Cochran’s (2011) research highlighted how first generation students often struggle with academic related skills. Gibbson, Pelchar, & Cochran (2011) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing a mother and daughter regarding gifted students from low educational background and challenges of first generation college students. Their findings suggest time management and organization skills were the source of the struggle in having academic success. As they explained, “Interviews with first generation college students suggested that many feel

unprepared for college and have difficulty with time management, along with problems with written work and understanding complex vocabulary used by instructors” (p.115). These issues are very common and can impact a student’s success. Often, retention is most affected by this. Many students feel overwhelmed with their school work and cannot balance their time. When the student is overwhelmed, their work starts slipping and they fall behind. This can affect their graduation date or the student may drop out of school. Often student attendance affects their school work. Many first generation college students miss class and set themselves behind. As Aronson (2008) has stated, “Students can also drop out of post-secondary education due to discontinuous or interrupted attendance, which make completion of a bachelor’s degree less likely” (p.46). The usual cause for missed class is related to the student’s work schedule if they are employed, exhausted, or have other family issues.

To many first generation college students, family is very important to their education and career goals. Family issues and lack of support from the family while in college can affect a first generation student’s success and retention. Gofen’s (2009) study aimed to investigate how family support can be a huge barrier for first generation college students. Gofen (2009) conducted a qualitative study by implementing a semi structured interview to collect personal stories of fifty first generation students. Gofen’s (2009) research found that parents of first generation college students often are unable to support their child in their educational aspirations. The lack of support exists before and during college. Before college, first generation college student’s parents are usually unable to aid in the college search process of applying for financial aid. Parents are usually not able to provide academic support while the student is in college. The student is unable to receive their parent’s opinions on a topic, or even get help with editing a paper since their parents have not experienced college. Gofen (2009) reported even though most

parents are supportive of their student's attendance to college, there are some parents who are not. Often parents of first generation college students are not supportive of the student attending college at all. As Gofen (2009) asserted, "Sometimes, parents and friends even encourage them to not go to college, and they would therefore reject family culture in order to pursue an academic goal" (p.106). This can be the result of many different reasons such as finances or even the lack of knowledge that first generation students and families have. Parents often may not understand how much time the student has to invest in their education to be successful. This lack of encouragement can really affect the student's success while in school since they have conflicting thoughts (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Gofen (2009) research is consistent with Perna & Kurban (2013) research on family support. Both articles suggest that parents are not as supportive during the college process and while in college but have high aspirations for their attendance in college. As Perna & Kurban (2013) have suggested, "Parents typically have high aspirations for their children, but many parents have limited involvement because of economic, social, and psychological barriers as well as their limited experience with higher education"(p.20).

Resiliency and first generation students

With consideration of all the barriers that first generation college students' face, it is important also to note the factors that these students bring to being successful. First generation college students often display resiliency in their academic achievements even though they are considered a marginalized at risk population. Stuber (2011) conducted a qualitative study on first generation college students. In this study, she interviewed twenty eight first generation college students and asked about their academic, social, and cultural adjustments to college life. Stuber (2011) found that feeling marginalized among the students and the amount of integration on

campus was varied by student. In a comparable study on resiliency and institutional engagement, Martinez, Bilges, Shabazz, Miller, & Morote (2012) found variation of participation in engagement on campus and employment type. As Martinez et al. (2012) explained, “Data analysis shows a significant relationship between resiliency and employment type, but no significant relationship between institutional engagement and employment type. Our findings indicate students who balance academic and employment exhibit a higher resiliency toward attaining graduation” (p.28). In a comparable study on resiliency, Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski (2007) researched the effects of the Educational Opportunity Fund program had on resiliency of first generation college students. The intervention study was conducted to better understand how resiliency and social supports help the transition from high school to college for both non-first generation and first generation students. The participants were issued a pre and post survey for the program to evaluate the effectiveness. Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski (2007) found that program was very successful and that the counselors provided the best support needed to motivate the students and helped them to be independent. As Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski (2007) have explained, “The study suggests that educational resilience can be fostered through academic programs that include a strong, consistent, supportive counseling component that addresses both academic and personal issues” (p.583).

Strong emotion of motivation and desire to attend a higher education institution is also a strong contributor to resiliency of first generation college students. Olive (2010) conducted a qualitative study on Hispanic first generation college students enrolled in a post baccalaureate achievement program. In the study, she interviewed five seniors, three males and two females, who met all the criteria. Olive (2010) found that resiliency and success was fostered by barrier faced and supports they received. With this resiliency and success students also demonstrated

self-efficacy and motivation for future educational goals. As Olive (2010) has explained, “I discovered that without the resilience and success in previous endeavors, the participants would most likely not have developed the self-efficacy and motivation to consider future educational goals” (p.384). In comparable on Latino youth and resiliency, Archuleta (2015) conducted a quantitative study on one hundred and fifty student. Archuleta (2015) found that individuals that experienced positive outcomes despite being exposed to challenging circumstances display resiliency and emotion regulation. Archuleta (2015) also found that students who had “positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and environmental mastery was related to high levels of emotional regulation” (p.281).

Supports for First Generation College Students

Before students start college, public high schools often will offer support programs and trainings on the college process. These support programs and trainings offer college advising, mentoring, and tutoring prior to the start of college (Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011). These seminars occur more in urban school setting where more first generation students live. Public high schools often have colleges from the surrounding area visit to provide interest in the school. Students can go to an information session to learn more. Also, many public high schools will provide seminars on how to apply to college. This often focuses on filling out college applications and tips for writing an excellent college essay. Some public schools also offer a seminar on applying for federal financial aid and locating local scholarships for the students. As La Rosa, Luna, & Tierney (2006) stated “Many public schools provide early ongoing college planning information and financial aid assistance. Often, schools require filling out a FAFSA form or a private scholarship a prerequisite for high school graduation” (p.2). The support is very beneficial to first generation college students and families since it helps overcome the first set of

barriers. These barriers can really impact the student as they often do not know where to begin in the process.

During the transition to college, many students can be a part of the upward bound program. The upward bound program is federally funded and is often offered at public secondary institutions as well. The upward bound program is designed to increase high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion for underrepresented group in higher education (Upward Bound, 2014). To participate in upward bound program, students must be from low income families and must be a first generation college student who exhibits need. The upward bound program is intended to increase retention of these students (Perna & Kurban, 2013).

The summer before college starts can be a crucial time for first generation college students to be exposed to the transition to college life. Many colleges offer a summer bridge program for first generation college students to get exposure before the students start their semester in the fall. The program is designed to improve re enrollment rates and retention of these students. Suzuki, Amrein-Beeardsley, & Perry (2012) conducted a study on a pre-enrollment initiative called Pathways Summer Bridge program at Arizona State University. The retention initiative exposed nontraditional first year students to college level coursework, campus resources available, training on academic skills to be successful, and fostered community with peers and faculty. The result of this study found that participants felt more confident about college expectations and their sense of belonging to the university than the control group. They also found that their re enrollment rates were higher than the university average. As Suzuki, Amrein-Beeardsley, & Perry (2012) have discussed about their overall findings that “a summer bridge programs provide these students with compensatory skills and supports strategies needed to succeed in college” (p.102). In a comparable study conducted by Castleman, Arnold, &

Wartman (2012) on summer melt, produced the same findings. Summer melt is described as the summer after graduation where students are committed to a college and reconsider matriculation. To evaluate this phenomenon, Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman (2012) conducted an experimental study to evaluate the effects of providing a college counseling summer program that focused on financial and information barriers. The findings suggested that providing college counseling helped to improve college enrollment and retention.

While they are in college many different support systems targeted to first generation students exist. TRIO is another program designed for low income students, first generation college students, and disabled students. TRIO provides students with counseling, mentoring, academic support, and financial aid assistance (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As Filkins & Doyle (2002) have explained, “ Thanks to Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the TRIO programs were designed to help first-generation, low-income students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education”(p.6). The support these students receive, helps increase the probability of retention and academic success increases. Graham (2011) has supported this claim with her publication on her experience as a student in a TRIO program. She reported that students who were a part of a TRIO program were supported to pursue their academic goals, stating:

“First generation college students are able to use transformational learning, or taking knowledge and translating it into action. TRIO programs provided academic, social, and administrative knowledge that shaped me to become an academic. Being a first generation college student, I did not know how education would change my career goals, and also influence me personally, I have found with TRIO programs I was given the

resources, preparation, and support to succeed both professionally and personally for my academic pursuit” (Graham, 2011, p.38).

Living learning communities (LLCs) are also designed to support first generation college students. A living and leaning community is designed for students who live together in dormitories and take the same courses as each other. This program is beneficial to all types of students, especially first generation students. To support the effectiveness of living learning communities, Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard (2007) conducted a comparative study that evaluated the effectiveness of being a part of the community. The study was conducted on thirty three institutions where half participated in the living learning community and the other did not. The participants were asked to complete a survey at the completion of the study. The researchers found that the living learning communities supported students’ social and academic transitions to college. As Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard (2007) have stated, “Most living learning programs are committed to the academic and social integration of their residents and may consequently be particularly beneficial to first generation college students” (p.405). Living together provides first generation students the ability to connect with other students and provide academic support to one another.

Many colleges often provide mentoring programs for first generation students. These programs are designed to peer match first generation college students with other first generation students. The match consists of an upperclassmen with a freshman student. The mentoring program has students meet as a group to interact and connect with one another. Social interaction is an important part of first generation success. This helps the student to feel like they are not alone and the only one who is first generation. The mentors often provide the mentees with help to overcome barriers they face. They will direct them to different supports on campus

as well as provide ideas on how to better their college experience. The college may also offer small group programs designed for first generation college students to overcome barriers. Folger, Carter, & Chase (2004) conducted a study on a Freshman Empowerment Program (FEP) for first generation college students. The FEP supports these students by discussing topics in a small group with faculty and staff. These topics included academics and academic skills, college resources, career advising, and engaging in the college community. Folger, Carter, & Chase (2004) found that students were able to foster a better community between peer and faculty mentors. As Folger, Carter, & Chase (2004) have stated, “first semester and second semester cumulative GPA were significantly higher for those students involved in the FEP. An additional outcome for FEP was higher rates of retention among student involved in the program” (p.2).

Many colleges across the United States are focusing on career development as early as freshman year. Introducing career planning in freshman year has been proven to be effective with in helping students explore, attain goals, and to have a smoother transition when finishing college and getting out into the working world. For first generation students, early career planning can be very important as they do not have experience and may not have the support from family on career development. To evaluate this theory, Ayala & Striplen (2012) conducted a study at California State University on the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) career introduction model designed for first generation college students. The Educational Opportunity Program is an interactive approach that connects first generation college student educational goals to their career goals. The EOP model provides knowledge to students on occupations, connections to the resource center, and help to increase self-efficacy. Ayla & Stiplen (2012) conducted an experimental study on freshman students enrolled in seminar course. The experiment was incorporated into the seminar in four day plan where each day focused on

reaching their education and career goals. As Ayla & Striplen (2012) discussed, “research has shown that for first generation students, the motivation to enroll into college is a deliberate attempt to improve social, economic, and occupational standings”(p.57). Ayla & Striplen’s (2012) findings indicated the career introduction model helps support first generation college students in adjustment issues, feelings of isolation, increased confidence, occupational exploration, and major exploration.

Community engagement has also been proven to provide first generation college students with student growth opportunities. Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman (2014) have conducted a study in a service learning course comprised of first generation college students and non-first generation college students. The study was conducted on juniors and seniors at a large urban public university where students were asked to complete a survey upon completion of the course. Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman (2014) reported significant academic and professional development after participating in the service learning program. The researchers suggest overall growth in writing skills, oral skills, leadership skills and clarification of professional goals. The researchers also found significant difference in growth between genders. Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman (2014) reported similar growth in both female first generation students and non-first generation students. However, the researchers indicated a difference in male non first generation students from minority and low income background reported least growth in comparison to first generation males of the same demographics. As Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman (2014) have explained, “future research is need to address the question related to first generation college cultural and non-first generation college cultural assimilation to campus environment and how service learning may assist in assimilation process” (p.62).

As the literature reviewed in the study has shown, first generation college students are a growing population in American higher education. Research has shown that first generation college students experience both barriers and supports that can hinder and help their success in college. It is important for faculty and staff to understand the struggles that they face in order to provide support to them (Gofen, 2009). With support that first generation college students receive helps these students to be more resilient (Stuber, 2011).

Methods

In order to better understand the participation and experience of first generation college students in Generation Merrimack, I conducted forty five minute interviews with students at a small, liberal arts college in Massachusetts during February of 2014. By using qualitative research, I was able to better understand first generation college students and their perspective on what is important in the Generation Merrimack program. This project was transformative in nature due to the population. As Mertens (2009) described, using the transformative paradigm allows the researcher to conduct qualitative research with a marginalized population. As first generation college students are often considered marginalized on college campuses, it is important to consider issues relating to power and trust. Assuming that every first generation college student is experiencing college life differently, it was important to capture and to understand these differences to implement a better resource for these students. For this project, social change is addressed on a college campus to serve this population in their educational journey. Recommendations for a yearly plan for students to participate has been developed to help students overcome barriers and be supported on campus.

I conducted interviews as my method of data collection, as I felt it allowed the participants to express their individual experiences, perspectives, and opinions on areas of

improvement for the Generation Merrimack program. The questions focused on the five program structures and how to better implement them into the yearly program. In order to understand how the program functions over time, I interviewed four seniors, one sophomore, and three freshmen students that attend Merrimack College and are involved in the Generation Merrimack program. Four students were commuters and four students were resident students. Six participants were employed on or off campus. Of the sample, most participants were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The program coordinator provided me with a list of students involved in the program and their email addresses. I contacted the students via email to see if they are interested in participating in the study and want to set up an interview. Although the senior students will not be a part of the program next year, I felt that their opinions mattered as well to help improve the program for all first generation college student involved.

While conducting my research and data collection, there was no intended harm to the participants. There was no inherent physical risks in the procedures and it was not anticipated that participants experienced other kinds of risks in completing the interview. Participants were not exposed to any more risk of harm or discomfort than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. The project was fully vetted and approved by the Merrimack Institutional Review Board. Occasionally, individuals became more aware of or reminded of uncomfortable or difficult memories as a result of participating. During the interviews, the participants were told they were free to discontinue completing the interview at any time. In addition, information about supportive professional counseling services was made available to the participants if interested. The information collected from the interviews are confidential and was only used for research purposes. To protect the participants' identities, their actual names were not used in the report of the findings

Findings

For the purpose of better understanding Generation Merrimack and the support it provides to first generation college students, I interviewed eight students who are involved in the program (Appendix B). In these interviews, we discussed benefits, challenges, and supports received by first generation college students. We also discussed their involvement in the program and areas for improvement. After analyzing the data, several trends surfaced related to the students' experiences. The group shared many traits that were shared in the responses. Students often had similar demographic characteristics, challenges, supports, and experiences in the program. At the start of the interviews, participants were asked to describe themselves. The participants often described themselves with demographical information. Most of my participants were students of color and identified as female. From the responses the participants indicated that there was a split of resident and commuter students. Participants also indicated if they were employed while attending college. Most participants indicated that they were employed on campus or off campus.

Pride in Being a First Generation College Student

Participants were first asked to describe the benefits, challenges, and supports they had received as a first generation student. Most of the participants agreed that that being a first generation college student is a title that they should be proud of, since it is an accomplishment that you can share with others. Mia affirmed this statement, stating:

A first generation college student is a title gained in college. Being one makes you think that you have opened the door of success. However, being a first generation student can be difficult at times if you do not find the right mentors to guide you. I feel the benefit is to share the great journey with people that are going through the same things as you. It is a great experience to share with others about how proud you are to be where you are right now.

Other participants also indicated that since they have attended college they have been able to inspire others to go to college. Juana stated briefly:

It feels like an accomplishment because no one else in my family has gone to college. I feel that I did the right thing because I want to set an example to my brother and sister. When my brother and sister go to college, I will be able to help them with some of the same experiences I will go through in college.

Lucas also indicated that the sense of accomplishment has been motivating to continue to succeed.

One of the benefits of being a first generation college student is that sense of accomplishment. It feels good knowing that you are the first person in your family that is going to gain a bachelor's degree. That sense of accomplishment motivates me even more to continue succeeding.

Sense of accomplishment and desire to motivate others and further their own educational goals is reflective of Olive's (2010) research. Olive (2010) found that resiliency and success was fostered by barriers faced and supports they received. With this resiliency and success students also demonstrated self-efficacy and motivation for future educational goals.

Challenges of First Generation Students

Working full time can impact social interactions that are important to the college experience. First generation students are less likely to interact with faculty and staff as well as their peers. Ariana described how participating in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom can be a challenge for her:

Since I am a commuter it is really hard to get involved on campus. The timing of club meetings can be challenging since I do not live here. I just got involved in campus ministry from the winter involvement fair. I also work at Dunkin Donuts on campus so it is challenging to be involved on campus and also make time for my school work.

This reflects Gardner & Holley's (2012) findings that being employed while attending college has impact for first generation students. They found that when students held a job while concentrating on their studies, they experienced fatigue and lack of engagement in academics.

Other participants described how involvement has also been a positive for them. Being involved on campus exposes them to the college environment. Ana described her work, community service, and leadership roles on campus:

I am involved in a lot of clubs on campus. I am a Generation Merrimack peer mentor. I am also involved in MPB. My biggest role here at Merrimack is that I am president of the commuter association. I was also an orientation leader this past summer for the freshman and last semester a FYE peer mentor. I am also doing a lot community service for my classes. Since I am an education major I am able to work in an afterschool program where I am able to give back to my community. I also work at the help desk in the library. Being a part of so many clubs and working on campus has helped me in my transition to college.

This concurs with Martinez, Bilges, Shabazz, Miller, & Morote (2012) study on resilience and being employed. As Martinez et al. (2012) found students who balance academic and employment exhibit a higher resiliency toward attaining graduation.

Several students cited that being a commuter student was a significant impediment to student engagement on campus. Being a commuter student, means that participants often feel disconnected from the institution. Some participants compared being a resident student over a commuter student and how they think they would benefit from the residential experience. Outcomes for living in residence halls on campus are well known. It is important to consider first generation college students and the benefit they may receive from living on campus with their peers. Ana described her disconnection to the institution as follows:

One major challenge is being a first generation student and being a commuter. I feel living on campus would be better in making more friendships. I often feel disconnected from school at times since I am not here all the time. If I could afford to live here I would.

Challenges faced by first generation college students can overall affect their retention at an institution. Of the many challenges that first generation college students face, most

participants indicated that financial challenges were the most significant. Ana described her financial challenges attending college:

I had a few challenges financially coming to college. I really did not want to take out a lot of loans to go school. My loans were matching rent for a small apartment. My mom and I are the only ones paying for school. I had to take out a lot of loans this coming year to be here. I feel the financial piece of college is the biggest challenge.

Two participants also discussed how their financial challenges were also increased by the lack of support their parents could provide. Ariana's experience supported this claim:

The largest challenge for me is not having anyone at home to help me. At home no one can explain anything when I have questions. With regards to the FAFSA, I had no help filling it out. It is very challenging and I always need to call the financial aid office for questions.

Victoria also explained her challenges at home and with understanding and applying for financial aid:

Some of the challenges I faced was that I am first generation and an only child so there was no one before that has experienced this. I also spoke Chinese first before I spoke English. I often feel challenged by understanding financial aid since my parents did not experience it before. I also feel like you don't have a heads up on things like non first generation students have since my parents never went to college.

This finding reflects with Gardner & Holley (2011) findings about financing college as first generation students. The students in both studies described the process of financial aid as stressful since they were not receiving support from their parents on how to answer the questions and had to figure out how to complete it on their own.

Transitioning to college can often be impacted by their access to social capital. It is important to be aware that first generation students are lacking certain forms of social capital. Students may face challenges not encountered by their peers, such as exclusion or lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate campus environments. When Mia was asked about the challenges she faced being new to the college environment, social capital seemed to have the largest impact on her transition to college:

There are a couple of challenges in terms of coming from a different background than everybody else and the different environment that I saw during my transition from high school to college. Everything is new and exciting. But, this is the time and one and only opportunity where you have to speak up. Making friends is hard; eating a different type of food might be awful at times but, at the end of the day it will be worth it.

Lucas also supported the challenge of social capital and lack of diversity on Merrimack campus by explaining how his transition to college was impacted by cultural change, and feeling less acclimated as a result of being a person of color on a predominantly white campus. He noted:

One of the challenges is not having the proper resources to guide me for example, knowing the right people for internship and job opportunities. Another challenge is adjusting to the college environment. I had a little experience with the dorm life when I participated a summer session at Phillips Academy, but the people at Phillips were very diverse and I was there with a couple people from my high school. Here at Merrimack I was transitioning into an environment that was predominantly Caucasian. The culture of this college campus was different from my culture at home, but I was able to adjust to it.

This resonates with Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke (2011) research on first generation college students and social capital. First generation college students often lack the familiarity of traditions and norms to be successful in college since social capital is learned from family and friends.

Transitioning and adaptation was seen as one of the largest challenges for the group. Half of the students in the study noted that a significant challenge was associated with transitioning and adapting to a new environment. Tim who entered college as a freshman very excited found difficulty adapting to the new experience:

The main challenge for me was probably just getting use to the whole college life freshman year. This was a completely new experience and just took a little bit of time to get used to.

Juana also supported Tim's claim by explaining her challenges she experienced this past semester being new to the college and a first year:

There are many challenges to being a First Generation Student. When I first started in the fall I felt very overwhelmed and confused just because I didn't know what was expected of me. In the beginning I had very little knowledge of what college is really like, and sometimes there is even the feeling of self-doubt.

In the interview protocol a similar question was asked based on the most difficult thing that students have encountered in college. Adaptation was reported by six out of eight participants. Each participant had a different explanation on their individual struggle with adaptation and how they adapted to the new environment. Juana briefly stated her adjustment difficulty:

The most difficult task was just getting adjusted to the college life in general compared to how it was in high school. Everything is college so different compared to high school.

Ana explained her transition from high school to college and the expectations of professors:

The hardest thing for me that I encountered is adapting to college. It was really hard transitioning from high school to college. I had a hard time since I am really involved on campus but also have classes and school work to balance. I also struggled with professors' expectations compared to high school teachers. They expect you to come to them since they will not seek you out.

Expectations of professors was also reported by another participant, Ariana:

Adapting to college was the most difficult thing for me. I was not use to professors' ways of teaching and having class at different times. I also had to get use to office hours since I was used to having access to my teachers all the time. I had to learn to seek out my own help since professors' do not come to you.

The expectations of professors is reflective of Collier & Morgan (2008) and Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke (2011). Collier & Morgan (2008) reported first generation students are often able to handle the work but they are not aware of the professor's expectations for the course. This includes how much time should be spent studying for the course. Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke (2011) reported unawareness of professors' expectations could be impacted by the lack of a student's cultural capital.

Time management was also a difficulty experienced in college. Half of the participants reported time management as being one of their largest challenges encountered. Mia, a senior, explained her challenges with time management in the beginning of her college career, and learned to prioritize her time as years went on:

It was the first time coming to a different school with so many new things to explore and so many friends to be with that there were times that I had to stay up late to do homework. I was not able to prioritize school before anything else, which caused my grades to be affected due to time management. Years after, I was able to put school first before anything else and my grades improved a lot more.

Samantha who is also a senior explained briefly that her difficulty was a result of procrastination.

Samantha reported once she learned the art of time management she was able to stop procrastinating her coursework and stay on track:

The most difficult thing I encountered was learning to stop procrastinating. Procrastinating hurt my grades in my beginning years of college. Once I developed my time management skills, I was able to stay on top of my work.

Lack of knowledge on collegiate skills such as time management is reflective of Gibbson, Pelchar, & Cochran's (2011) research. They found that first generation students often struggle with academic skills. When Lucas discussed his experience with time management, he was seen as an outlier to the typical responses. As a student athlete who is a part of the cross country team, he saw managing his time as a student athlete the easiest thing he has encountered in college:

One of the easiest things I've encountered in college was managing time as an athlete and student. Having a set schedule to lift and practice times made it easier for me to set schedule times for myself to delegate for homework and studying.

Supports and Successes

When participants were asked about the easiest thing they have encountered in college, four participants agreed that developing connections and friendships on campus was the easiest.

Victoria explained how the campus community helped her develop the required connections with faculty and staff:

The easiest thing for me was getting into contact with anyone here. Professors are easy to contact and are accessible to their students. They are in your classroom and really responsive over email. They are also willing to help you in any way they can. They offer to students to drop by during office hours for extra help and guidance. I was also surprised how professors value getting to know their students. I had a professor know my name in the first week of classes which helped develop our relationship.

Ariana also spoke about Merrimack's sense of community and how it helped her develop friendships on campus. Ariana explained, "The easiest thing for me is to find friends. Merrimack does a great job getting everyone involved in some way. Everyone gets along very well and we are like a community".

Developing support systems in college is imperative to the success of a first generation college student. Support systems can range from programs to individual people. Each participant's answer was unique in the support received. However, half of the participants agreed that Generation Merrimack provided the most support in their journey. Victoria, a freshman, described how commuter support and Generation Merrimack provided her the most support so far: "Commuter support and Generation Merrimack supported me the most. My first semester was really tough and I often had meltdowns over school. They were able to support me and keep me on track."

A few participants also described how Transitional Programs helped support them the most. Transitional Programs provides support and programming for commuter, transfer, and first generation college students. Transitional Programs often helped the participants get involved in Generation Merrimack. Ana described how Transitional Programs, the First Year Academic Counselor, and other offices at Merrimack have supported her:

The support systems that have helped me the most is the office of Transitional Programs, the First Year Academic Counselor, and the career center, O'Brien Center for Student Success. I met the First Year Academic Counselor at a workshop on time management and she was able to meet with me after for more help. I also received a lot of help from Transitional Programs where I connected to Generation Merrimack. The staff of the O'Brien Center also helped me in choosing a major and starting my resume. I also connected a lot with my professors I had for my classes. They are able to help me when I have questions and when I am concerned with stuff. They were great resources for my academic challenges. I also received a lot of help getting involved on campus from the Office of Student Involvement and Office of Residence Life even though I do not live here. They guide me on different clubs that I could be involved in.

Ariana also echoed Ana's response as Transitional Programs and the First Year Academic Counselor were her largest support on campus:

Transitional Programs helped me and also the First Year Academic Counselor. Transitional Program often answered my questions or provided me with who to talk to if they could not answer my questions. The Transition Program director also got me involved in Generation Merrimack to help me be more successful. Also, the First Year Academic Counselor helped me with time management and test taking skills since I struggled last semester.

The first year experience course, which one student (Juana) experienced as the most supportive thus far:

First year experience has helped me a lot actually. The Dean of Campus Life was a great supporter and she met up with me many times. I was always asked if I needed any help in anything by the Dean of Campus Life and my peer mentor for the course. The peer mentor for the course and I are both first generation students so I didn't feel so left out.

Family and friends were one of the main responses to the support systems the participants received. Mia described how family and friends were her ultimate support in addition to academic supports received:

There are many academic support systems but, the main people that will always help you no matter what will be your friends and family. My family and friends have been my main support throughout this process.

Faculty, especially professors and advisors, were also mentioned in response to the questions about supports. Tim explained how his advisor was the most helpful support he received on campus:

The most helpful support system was probably my advisor because anytime I had a question about anything school related he knew the answer too and if he did not know the answer, he knew who would.

One participant, Lucas was also seen as an outlier for the group as he participated in a summer preparatory session to help with the transition to college. This was seen as a valuable support for him. Lucas indicated, “I had a little experience with the dorm life when I participated in a summer session at Phillips Academy”. This concurs with Suzuki, Amrein-Beeardsley, & Perry (2012) overall findings that Summer Bridge programs provide first generation college students compensatory skills and support strategies to be successful in college.

Participating in Generation Merrimack

Participation in Generation Merrimack was seen as very beneficial by most of the participants in the group. Participating in Generation Merrimack has helped students develop connections and friendships as well as supported them in their educational achievements and personal goals. Each participant described their own involvement in the club and its impact that it has on their development as a college student. Ana explained how Generation Merrimack helped develop lifelong connections:

Definitely without being a part of Generation Merrimack I would have never met all these people that have contributed to my success. They are all really helpful! I just know when I am really stressed out and need to go somewhere to talk I can go to them instead of going to my friends and family who may not understand. They are also able to share their stories with me and support me. I have also developed lifelong connections with everyone. When a staff member left her position at the college, she provided me her personal email to talk to her and keep the connection going.

Mia also described how participating in Generation Merrimack has contributed to personal growth through her role as a peer mentor in the program:

Yes, it has been a very great experience. It has been beneficial because I have met great peers, as well as many staff members that helped me out to connect with other departments and people. Furthermore, it has helped me increase my confidence as a mentor, and a public speaker as well. At the same time, this great experience has introduced me to mentors and advisors that are always willing to help those in need.

Lucas also described how his participation in Generation Merrimack has help him prepare for the professional world:

Being a part of Generation Merrimack has helped me meet people that are very resourceful. Most of the people that run Generation Merrimack work for the O'Brien Center for Student Success. Some of them have helped me with resume and career plans for the future. Generation Merrimack also motivates us by preparing us for the professional world. For example, last semester each month we had individual tasks to complete like finishing and editing our resumes at the O'Brien Center for Student Success.

Among the group interviewed, a few participants described their lack of involvement in Generation Merrimack. Participants attributed their lack of involvement to being a commuter student. Victoria explained that the timing of events was challenging to attend since her commute to her home was about a half hour from campus:

I have not participated as much. I receive the emails but have not been to many events. I felt it was harder for me to attend since I was a commuter and the timing of the events. It was harder since I was further away.

Ariana has also indicated that she wants to be more involved due to the value that the program provides to its students:

I am not as involved as much as I should be. I definitely want to be more involved now because I feel it is really important. Being a commuter has made it difficult since I miss meetings with my mentor and events.

Participating in Generation Merrimack has also been seen to contribute to each student's sense of support. Developing connections and friendships was seen as the greatest value of

participating in Generation Merrimack. Mia explained how developing friendships and connections helped contribute to her sense of belonging on campus and what it means to be a first generation college student:

Yes, there are many other students that are part of this organization that helped me understand and see how a first generation student feels on campus. It helped me connect with some of them when I saw that mostly everyone has the same experiences. Also, it was great to listen to others who had different experiences as me but, at the same time they made it to the same position that I have right now. Sometimes, it's just great looking at G1 through many different perspectives, which makes us, enjoy working with this organization even more.

Some participants indicated that their sense of support from other students was only provided from the students that they were close to. Lucas explained the close bond he has developed with another member:

There are, only the ones that I'm really close to. There is one other student that is in Generation Merrimack and we always help each other out. If I ever need advice on something or if she ever needs anyone to contact I'll always be willing to support her and she is always willing to support me. For example, I recommended for her to apply for Teach for America and to use me as reference in the application process.

Freshman participants indicated that the peer mentors provided the most sense of support in the program. Having an upperclassmen to talk to and to check in with helped the freshman student's transition. Ariana explained this in her response that her mentors and friends that were first generation helped her in her journey thus far:

Yes the peer mentors have done a lot for me to help me feel at home. I have peer mentors that are seniors who always check in with me and see how I am doing. I also have some friends who are also first generation who support me with challenges and questions I have.

When participants were asked about having more connections with faculty and staff, half the participants agreed that it would be more beneficial. Faculty and staff provide a lot of support to the first generation college student now, but most students agreed there is always room for more and that they should keep up the great work they do for their students. Mia explained how

more contacts and connections for first year students would be very beneficial. Mia believes that the first year of college is very challenging with regards to transition and faculty and staff have the tools to help the students navigate around campus:

Yes more contact, especially for students who are first years at Merrimack College. I believe staff members have the essential tools to help students to connect with other staff members, as well as to navigate around campus. I would like to see more contact between students and staff, which helps to build a better relationship on campus.

Other participants believed that faculty and staff are providing enough support but students are not utilizing the support and resources provided. Ana explained how students need to utilize resources provided instead of relying on their professors:

I feel this is tough since we do have so many resources on campus. I feel students need to use these resources. They need to start taking advantage of them more instead of relying on their professors. I also feel that faculty and staff are so available since they teach courses and they could be your advisor. I feel students just need to take more advantage of the resources and office hours.

Lucas also provided an alternative opinion as faculty and staff are not available enough. Lucas explained how he felt faculty and staff have too much on their plates and cannot commit the time to students. He also explained how alumni might be able to help out in providing support to students:

I do feel that it would be beneficial to have more contact with faculty and staff here to support my educational goals, but I also feel that most of the faculty and staff already have so much on their plate. With the exception of those professors and faculty members that you have a close bond with, I feel that most faculty and staff member have a handful of issues that does not allow them much time to help support as some alumni could provide to students.

When the participants were asked about the benefit of involvement of alumni, all of the participants in the study agreed that having connections to alumni would be a great benefit.

Participants reported that alumni would be able to support and connect with students, be able to

share stories, and help student network outside of the Merrimack community. Ana supported having connections with alumni to help benefit her time here at Merrimack:

I feel it would be beneficial to be connected to alumni since we could foster a relationship outside of Merrimack. It would be good to share stories together where we can relate to one another and to talk about working in the field. This would also be a good networking piece as well.

Ariana also explained how alumni could answer questions she has about being in the field:

Yes I do think it will be beneficial. I have a lot of questions and I feel they could provide good answers. I really am still trying to figure out if I am in the right major and thinking about career paths. I want to ask them what a typical day is like and what it is like to do this job. I also think it would be helpful for them to share stories with us about being first generation and we can learn from them. They can also be another support since they understand what it is like to be first generation.

Workshops are very important to Generation Merrimack program. When participants were asked about what kind of workshops they would like to see Generation Merrimack provide, many different answers were provided. Most participants agreed that more workshops on developing study skills and financial literacy. Lucas explained how he would like to see both kinds of workshops developed for the program:

The kind of workshops I would like to see Generation Merrimack provide are topics like learning about credit scores, understanding what loans each students have, even topics in financial aid, and more importantly resume building and professionalism. I also feel first generation students need more help with developing study skills and note taking. I really struggled with all of this and could use more help.

Tim also suggested having a workshop with alumni to connect with students. The alumni would be able to talk about their struggles and successes with students:

Maybe have an alumni panel that has current students from all class years. This will help get students connected with each other, alumni, and receive support by talking about their struggles and successes as a first generation students.

Ana also suggested having a workshop on how to utilize resources on campus:

I feel there needs to be more workshops on how to utilize the resources we have. Often, with my mentee I have to explain resources in-depth since they do not understand sometimes what they offer. Also, more in-depth workshops on the Financial Aid office,

Bursar office, and Hamel Health since the students often have questions that are not well explained and they do not understand the services they provide.

One of the last questions asked of the participants was what suggestions would they make to Generation Merrimack. Most participants agreed that Generation Merrimack needs to increase its visibility on campus. Ana believes that Generation Merrimack needs to get the word out sooner to students to help increase involvement:

I really think Generation Merrimack is really solid. The mentors do a great job meeting with their mentees and going to events together. For overall improvements, I think more awareness for Generation Merrimack. Like I said before, I think the Generation Merrimack really needs to get the word out earlier to students. I think at summer orientation may be a good time. I have been talking to people on how to develop awareness on campus. There is negativity and isolation being first generation that it needs to be built up as a good thing and have students feel proud of.

Victoria also suggested having more activities and events where students can bond and grow together. Victoria compared her experience in Generation Merrimack to her involvement in the Commuter Association as a way to improve:

I really only know two people from Merrimack and one from high school so I think that we need to connect as a group better. I really don't know anyone from Generation Merrimack. I am not fully active in it since I don't hear too much about Generation Merrimack. There was a commuter social and they had snacks and ice breakers if Generation Merrimack did more events like that we would all connect better. Also, have other students who are not first generation get involved in some of the events. Having a movie night or having dinner all together would help.

A few participants also suggested developing better connections between the peer mentors would help increase effectiveness in the program. Lucas suggested having training like the resident advisors at Merrimack College participate in to develop a better bond between the mentors:

I would suggest Generation Merrimack to make improvements on creating closer bonds with the mentors themselves. For example, having the mentors do workshops or other activities that will create a closer knit family like what the residential advisors do. I feel with that closer bond the program will become more successful and more ideas can erupt to help better this program and help create a stronger relationship with the mentees.

Through this research, the findings concluded that participants experience many challenges and supports being a first generation college student. The research also concluded that first generation college student feel proud of their accomplishment and are resilient. Generation Merrimack was also supported in the findings as helping student develop a sense of belong on campus.

Recommendation

After reviewing the literature and conducting interviews, I was able to investigate the needs and concerns of first generation college students at Merrimack College. I was able to identify the barriers experienced, supports received, and perspectives on participating in the Generation Merrimack program. By conducting this study, I attempted to answer the following research question: How can Generation Merrimack improve their efforts to support first generation college students? In this section, I will provide recommendations for Generation Merrimack in ways the program can improve their visibility on campus, involvement of students, and involvement of alumni. These recommendations will aid in the development of a yearly plan. The yearly plan will be developed by incorporating the program's five structural components. The yearly plan will require collaboration from other offices on campus, including workshop development, event planning, and engaging the Merrimack College community. Ideally, this plan will be implemented in the 2015-2016 school year by the Generation Merrimack coordinator. Freshman students who identify themselves as a first generation student and join the program will benefit from the yearly plan being implemented over the course of their undergraduate career. In addition to the yearly plan, overall recommendations for Generation Merrimack are indicated.

Recommendation 1: Merrimack should provide an optional summer bridge program for first generation college students matriculating at Merrimack

To support first generation residential students, many colleges and universities have developed summer bridge programs in addition to summer orientation to help incoming freshman first generation college students. Summer bridge programs aid in the transition from high school to college, where expectations and skills are taught. California State University hosts a six week long program developed specifically for first generation college students (California State University, 2015). While attending Summer Bridge, the incoming freshmen meet with their mentors, attend university lectures, and participate in a variety of workshops and presentations. Also, while attending, the students have the opportunity to live and dine on campus for a week to have a trial run before school starts. Students also have the opportunity to finalize housing plans, complete financial aid applications, and register for fall courses (California State University, 2015). As discussed in the literature review, summer bridge programs for first generation college students are correlated with success for first generation students. Suzuki, Amrein-Beeardsley, & Perry (2012) found that summer bridge programs provided first generation college students with compensatory skills and supports strategies needed to succeed in college. Suzuki, Amrein-Beeardsley, & Perry (2012) also found that the students felt more confident about college expectations and their sense of belonging to the university and overall has been reported to improve retention of first generation college students.

While most participants indicated difficulty with transition from high school to college, a summer bridge program would be very beneficial in the support for these students. With collaboration from the Office of Transitional Programs, Office of Student Involvement, Office of Residence Life, and food services, the program could be developed before move in day. The

summer bridge program would require reservation of an open freshman dormitory for students to live in for a week while attending the bridge program. Planning would also have to consider the budget for having staff and peer mentors working the bridge program, food for students, and cost of materials to facilitate workshops. Providing a summer bridge program can offer students the skills and experience needed to have a successful transition. In the summer bridge program, Merrimack could emulate the California State University bridge program by providing workshops on effective study skills, financial aid, and resources available to students. The bridge program can also introduce students earlier to their faculty advisors and career advisors to establish the relationship before the school year begins (Rivera, 2014). It will also provide the opportunity for students to get acclimated to the campus culture and to receive support of unanswered questions they may have upon the start of college. As stated above, other colleges and universities have instilled a Summer Bridge Program that is slotted for one to six weeks at a time. A Summer Bridge Program at Merrimack College would be recommended for one week but can be completed in as few as two or three days to cut costs. Merrimack College could also limit the cost by designating it to a number of student who could participate. This could be on a first come first serve basis and if there is a lot of interest, creating a waiting list. Merrimack could also consider expanding their enrollment in the Compass Program to first generation college students. The Compass Program provides students' academic skills and personalized attention to help reach their educational goal. Expanding the program will provide first generation students the skills to be successful.

Recommendation 2: Implementation of the Generation Merrimack program in the students' freshman year should introduce career development, encourage students to get involved on campus, and attending workshop series on study skills

Based on findings of this research and the literature review on first generation college freshman students, I recommend that the students should first focus on starting career development. This would include starting to build a resume and getting familiar with co-curricular learning opportunities. Students should take the initiative by receiving the guidance provided by the O'Brien Center for Student Success. This is supported by Ayala & Striplen's (2012) research on a career development model, which stressed the importance of connecting educational goals to career goals in first generation college students' freshman year. Generation Merrimack could model Ayala & Striplen's (2012) career model by providing students' knowledge on occupations, introducing them more effectively to services that the O'Brien Center offers, and helping them to increase their self-efficacy. Generation Merrimack could offer more creative and innovative programming related to career development to engage students to help them take the initiative.

Generation Merrimack can also focus in students' first year on getting acclimated with the Merrimack College community. This will help the students develop a sense of community within Generation Merrimack and help them to get involved on campus. Community is very important at Merrimack College and aligns with its institutional mission (Merrimack College, 2014). Building community can be provided by partnering with faculty to build awareness of first generation college students. Building community can also be fostered through sponsoring off-campus outings for the group. This can include going apple picking all together, and having a holiday party, to name a few ideas. Outings would require preplanning from and allocation of the budget in order to plan the activities ahead of time. Bringing all first generation students together to connect will help them feel as though they are not alone. The Generation Merrimack program

should also encourage students to attend other events from Generation Merrimack to build community in other settings.

Another beginning step that I suggest for Generation Merrimack students is to develop a relationship with their professors. This requires them to meet with their professors and get to know them, so they will have someone to talk to if they are struggling in class. As demonstrated in the literature review, first generation college students often do not engage as often with faculty and staff, do not understand expectations of professors, and struggle with study skills. To improve these areas for students, I recommend to Generation Merrimack of having the freshman students who may demonstrate their struggles to attend the workshop series that the first year academic counselors conducted each year. This could specifically help students who are struggling, or students who want to learn more effective study tips that can help them in their educational pursuit. The workshops include assistance on time management, organization, preparing for midterm and final exam, as well as managing test anxiety. Gibson, Pelchar, & Cochran's (2011) research highlighted how first generation college students often struggle with academic skills. For many first generation college students, the workshops could be very important as they often do not have a role model who have been exposed to college and the expectations that change from high school to college.

With regards to faculty and staff, I recommended that the students be supported in connecting with faculty and staff in the program. The program leadership should integrate faculty and staff as mentors to provide students with extra guidance and support. This would be on a voluntary basis from faculty and staff. In the Generation Merrimack program faculty and staff can come speak to students. The workshop series can help students who are undeclared hear about a major, ways to be involved on campus, or developing new skills. A final

recommendation for freshman is to get involved on campus. Getting involved on campus is very important as it helps freshman feel welcome on campus and not isolated from others. Generation Merrimack could have the peer mentors help students navigate the involvement fair as well as suggest organizations to join that they may be interested in.

Recommendation 3: Implementation of the Generation Merrimack program in the students' sophomore year should include more engagement with faculty and staff, participating in community service, and talking about career exploration opportunities

Since sophomore year is a year marked with many decisions based on major selection and exploring their environment more closely, my recommendation for students in their sophomore year is to integrate faculty and staff in the program specifically for students who have not chosen a major, or to be a resource if a student wants to switch their major. Faculty and staff can also help the students engage in service learning as a group building opportunity. Service learning is reflective of Pelco, Ball, & Lockman's (2014) research which suggested that there is significant academic and professional development after participating in service learning. Pelco, Ball, & Lockman (2014) also suggested that first generation college students who participated in service learning had growth in writing skills, oral skills, leadership skills, and clarification on professional goals. I also recommend for students to continue to nurture the relationships with other first generation students that they have built in their freshman year. Students who are incoming as Generation Merrimack students are in the same shoes that sophomores were in the previous year, and they need guidance from other students. This really expands Generation Merrimack students getting involved on campus. Often, first generation college students are employed in order to afford to go to school, however, getting involved on campus is very important. Another area of focus for sophomore year is for students to talk to the O'Brien Center

for Student Success about informational interviews and internship possibilities. Information on interviews and informational interview could be provided through a workshop from the O'Brien Center to reach the students all together and provide an opportunity for questions. These students should also talk about career goals with their faculty advisor as well, along with O'Brien Center for Student Success staff to receive the best support. The students can talk about what classes they should take, other than the requirements of the major, to support their career goals. Students can also reach out to advisors about the possibility of the connections the advisor or other professors have regarding internships or career opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Implementation of the Generation Merrimack program in the students' junior year should include participating in the Professional Mentors Exchange program and talking about career opportunities

Based on recommendations provided by the participants, I recommend that in their junior year, students are provided guidance from alumni in their field of study. Through the O'Brien Center for Student Success, staff can match students with alumni in the Professional Mentor Exchange Program. According to the Merrimack College website, the Professional Mentor Exchange Program will provide students a professional in the field to talk to outside of support provided by the institution (Professional Mentor Exchange, 2015). The mentor can speak to the experience of being in college, their path to their profession, in the field, and naming areas where they should focus to help them before they graduate. Having someone outside of the institution can help the students have a different perspective and provide some guidance that they may be lacking. Generation Merrimack students should also keep ties with the O'Brien Center for Student Success to develop and make sure that they are on the right path with a plan set in stone after college. Being in collaboration with the O'Brien Center, first generation students should be

guided in identifying and applying for internships for the summer before going into their senior year, if they have not done so before this time. Students can also volunteer on or off campus so that if they do not have another commitment that can improve their resume.

Recommendation 5: Implementation of the Generation Merrimack program in the students' senior year should encompass all previous years, talking about after graduation plans with their advisor and career services, and partnering with Hamel Health center for students experiencing emotional distress.

To help first generation college seniors, senior year should encompass all areas described in the curriculum in the previous years. First, students should have already been partnering with the O'Brien staff to develop post-graduation plans and continuing to be a part of the Professional Mentor Exchange Program provided by the O'Brien Center. Students should use the plan that they have had set in-stone from freshman year and use all of the internship experiences they have had as guidance towards a job. Students should be talking about graduation plans in the fall semester so they are able to consider applying for a job or graduate school. Students also should talk to faculty, especially their academic advisor, about their graduation plans to help them in guidance on moving on. Senior year can often bring uncomfortable feelings about leaving college and starting a career. I recommend that Generation Merrimack partners with Hamel Health center in providing help to students struggling with emotional distress since they have not gone through this before. Knowing there is someone to talk to or a way to relieve stress could help these students transition out of college more smoothly. This can also help with the connections that Generation Merrimack students have made with their professors since freshman year, and the academic years that follow as well.

Recommendations 6: Activities related to mentoring and bonding should be integrated every year of a first generation student's time at Merrimack.

Faculty and staff on a college are a great resource for first generation college students. At Chapman University, faculty and staff are professional mentors for the first generation college students. The goal of the mentoring program at Chapman is to provide overall guidance and support for first generation college students. The mentoring helps students develop and achieve their educational goals. Faculty and staff mentors help students navigate the university and make the most out there time at the institution. The mentoring program has appeared to help retention of first generation college students at Chapman. As a part of the agreement for the mentoring program, mentors and mentees must maintain regular communication over the yearlong commitment. Mentors and mentees are required to meet three times in the semester and attend group activities designated for all mentors and mentees relationships (Chapman University, 2015).

For Merrimack College, a faculty and staff mentoring program could be implemented in the Generation Merrimack program. In conjunction to the peer mentors provided to the students, each first generation student could be assigned a faculty or staff member to help them through their educational journey. This could be implement in the freshman year so that the mentors could support them to graduation. Volunteering as a faculty and staff mentors would be on a volunteer basis. This would be beneficial to the peer mentors of the program since they are often lacking support of their own when they become a peer mentor. This could help students feel more of a connection to faculty and staff. Most participants in the study thought that more connections to faculty and staff would be very beneficial to them. This would help grant that wish of the students and provide more support to the program.

Participants in the study demonstrated that there was a need for more interactions with faculty and staff. At the University of Central Florida, first generation college students are encouraged to invite faculty and staff to lunch to learn beyond the classroom. The students can ask the faculty and staff to have lunch with them to talk about a course they are taking, advising, and career aspirations. Students are also provided a guideline for questions that they can ask to help get to know one another better and how they can improve their performance in the classroom. The lunch is a formal invitation to faculty and staff where the meal is covered by the multicultural and academic support office. Students must prepare for their lunch and learn session prior to meeting with the faculty and staff. Students are also required to fill out a quick surveyed after completion for the offices records (University of Central Florida, 2015).

As a recommendation for Generation Merrimack, providing students the opportunity to ask a faculty or staff members to lunch could help support them in multiple ways. Students can be supported by talking about their struggles, ask unanswered questions, talk about career aspirations, or how to improve their academic performance. Students can ask to be invited to have lunch in the Merrimack Club, a formal dining area for faculty and staff. Faculty and staff can ask students to attend lunch with them in the Merrimack Club. If the budget allows, Generation Merrimack could allocate a lunch for each student a year so they can expand their social interactions with faculty and staff. Currently lunch at the Merrimack Club on campus cost eight dollars a person. Depending on the amount of students in the program, consideration must be given to the budget.

Participants in the study described the experience for peer mentors themselves could be improved for the quality of the program. A few participants who were peer mentor suggested that they would like to see bonds improved between peer mentors themselves. Participants

described that they would like to see Generation Merrimack develop a closer knit family, such as the resident advisors at Merrimack College have developed. Resident advisors at Merrimack College are required to attend team building activities before beginning their assignments. The resident advisors complete a week of training where they participate in icebreakers to get to know one another, large gatherings for dinner or making s'mores, as well as day trips to laser tag, movies, and going out for ice cream. Team building activities help develop a stronger network that is important in providing guidance and support to one another. Providing a training for peer mentors would require the coordinator of Generation Merrimack to lead the team building activities. The cost of the team building activities should be minimal to the budget as it could be a daylong session. In a daylong session, the cost of materials for team building activities and lunch for everyone needs to be considered. The team building activities could be held around campus. The coordinator of Generation Merrimack will need to reserve spaces ahead of time to ensure the program will have the areas they would like to use.

A few participants also suggested as a recommendation to the program is to provide more activities and events for all the students involved in the program. Participants indicated they would like to have more events such as a movie night or dinner party where all students can come together at the same time. Activities and events would require consideration of the budget. Also transportation to events off campus can be provided by Merrimack by reserving vans to use. Participants also suggested having events and activities late afternoon and early evening and on weekends so commuters could attend some of the events. An overall suggestion participants made was to advertise events and activities more so they have notice and can plan to attend the events and activities. Advertisement of events and activities can also be extended on social media sites where students are often more engaged.

Community service has been shown to be important in the development and growth of a college student. Community service provides students the opportunity to engage beyond the classroom. Engaging beyond the classroom provides the students a way to give back to the community and help the institution to develop community partnerships. Community service is found to be a great educational opportunity for first generation college students. Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman (2014) reported significant academic and professional development after participating in the service learning program. The researchers suggest overall growth in writing skills, oral skills, leadership skills and clarification of professional goals.

While the Merrimack community is very engaged in the community around the institution, I would recommend having Generation Merrimack participate directly as group affiliation. This could be done as an event where students will go together to engage in service. Merrimack College already participates in a day of service on Veteran's days. Generation Merrimack could participate in Mack Gives Back which occurs on Veteran's day as a group and work together on a service project. This will provide students a better way to connect to one another and fulfill civic engagement. Generation Merrimack could also partner with the Steven Service Learning Center to identify other service opportunities throughout the year that Generation Merrimack could be a part of as a group.

Recommendation 7: Generation Merrimack should develop its visibility on campus

When participants were asked about recommendations they had for the program, most participants indicated they would like to see more awareness of the program on campus. Many participants echoed the idea that Generation Merrimack needs to advertise the program sooner to help improve engagement from the student body. One participant suggested that summer orientation may be a great time to provide students' knowledge about the program. Students

could receive an email or a flyer in the mail on Generation Merrimack and all the support it provides to first generation students. Also, Generation Merrimack could consider having a breakout session at orientation on the program for the students. One final suggestion for increasing awareness during summer orientation is to sponsor a portion of the orientation by providing small giveaways, such as magnets or pins with Generation Merrimack logo on them. This will help increase conversation about the program before students are on campus in the fall.

While students are on campus, visibility of the program can be improved by having more faculty and staff actively supporting the program. If faculty and staff are first generation college students they can display the logo more effectively in their office space. This will provide students who are first generation comfort that they can connect in that way. Faculty and staff who are not first generation could also support the program by displaying the logo in support of the students they work with. This will provide ally ship with non-first generation and first generation students. Also, Generation Merrimack could be more active by opening up activities and events to non-first generation college students. Welcoming non first generation students to certain events will help provide a larger campus awareness and support for first generation students. An additional awareness initiative is develop Generation Merrimack presence on social media. Generation Merrimack is currently on Facebook and Twitter. Generation Merrimack could improve efforts by being more engaged in social media outlets. Sharing pictures of events, interaction between peer mentors and mentee, as well as articles on first generation college students can interest students to follow Generation Merrimack on social media outlets.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to further expand on the perception and experiences of first generation college students in Generation Merrimack. In this qualitative study, four seniors, one

sophomore, and three freshmen students were interviewed regarding their experiences. From this study, I was able to gain valuable insight into the perceptions of first generation college students on their participation in Generation Merrimack. I was able to answer my research question, how can Generation Merrimack improve their efforts to support first generation college students? The findings of this study indicated that first generation college students face barriers with transitioning, finances, and engagement on campus. Findings also indicated that first generation college students receive many support systems in their educational pursuit and that Generation Merrimack was a large support. This research is significantly important for the field of higher education, as it is vital that higher education professionals understand the way first generation college students need to be understood and supported in their educational journey. In terms of the future of American higher education, there needs to be more awareness of first generation students and their needs and concerns in college. There are more first generation college students attending college than in the past.

This project explored questions of barriers faced by and supports needed by first generation college students. Merrimack College's Generation Merrimack programs aim to better the experience of their first generation college students. With the results of this qualitative study, I provided recommendations for best practice to the Generation Merrimack. Overall, this project was a wonderful experience that helped me better understand how to conduct qualitative research and explore a topic that is very important to me, first generation college students. This study has provided information on how to better the experience of first generation college students in the post-secondary level. This subject is one that will continue to be important to the field of higher education as the population of first generation students is on the rise. Hopefully,

further research will continue to be done on this topic and actions will be taken to improve the overall college experience of first generation college students.

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Appendix A

Name	Class Year	Commuter or Resident Student	Employed	Employed on or off campus	Peer Mentor	Race/Ethnicity
Ana	2017	Commuter	yes	on	yes	Hispanic
Ariana	2018	Commuter	yes	on		Hispanic
Juana	2018	Commuter	yes	off		Hispanic
Lucas	2015	Resident	no		yes	Hispanic
Mia	2015	Resident	yes	on and off	yes	Hispanic
Samantha	2015	Resident	yes	off	yes	Hispanic
Tim	2015	Commuter	yes	off		White
Victoria	2018	Resident	no			Chinese

Appendix B

Interview Protocol:

1. Warm up question: Please tell me about yourself?
2. Describe being a first-generation college student in college?
 - a. What the benefits of being a first generation college student?
 - b. What are the challenges of being a first generation college student?
 - c. What support systems helped you in your journey as a first generation college student?
3. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities outside of the classroom (student groups, work, community service, sports, student government)? Explain.
4. Has participating in Generation Merrimack been beneficial to you? If so how?
5. Do you feel it would be beneficial to be connected to alumni in your field to provide guidance to you? If so how?
6. Do you feel it would be beneficial to have more contact with faculty and staff for more support in your education goals? If so how?
7. What kind of workshop would you like to see Generation Merrimack provide? How do you feel this will help the students?
8. Do you feel that the other students in Generation Merrimack contribute to your sense of support?
9. What student support services have assisted you in your college experience, if any?
10. What could have helped you be successful in college that you did not receive at home or in college?
11. With regards to college, what was the most difficult/easiest thing you encountered?
12. How do you feel about the institutional support you have available to you (i.e. counseling, library resources, advising, and community service opportunities)?
13. What suggestions would you make for improvements for Generation Merrimack program?
14. End question: Is there anything else I should know that I have not asked?