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Assessment of First-Generation Students Success Strategies at Long River College

Merrimack College

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Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Education in Higher Education

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**Abstract**

Educational establishments have long been working on the development of educational programs for students to enhance their performance and motivation. However, colleges often fail to consider the specific needs and concerns of first-generation students who are often less motivated to enter higher education (Davis, 2010). The purpose of this study was to explore the major challenges of these students in order to enhance their motivation to continue their education. Additionally, the program director of a recently transformed first generation initiative was interviewed for insights about the process. The research was based on a qualitative methodology. It included interviews with first-generation students and a first-generation program director at a small liberal arts college. From the findings, interviewed participants expressed an interest in more contact from faculty and staff, more workshops, connections with alumni, and career development. Recommendations include enhancement of career programs, a summer bridge program, and orientation program for parents, as well as implementation of outings and events, and increasing first-gen student visibility on campus.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Literature Review.....	6
First-Generation Students Challenges.....	6
Retention and First-Generation Students.....	9
Methods.....	11
Student Interview Findings.....	14
Challenges of First-Generation Students.....	14
Family Challenges.....	18
Pride in Being a First-Generation College Students.....	20
Support and Successes.....	21
Participating in Generation Long River .....	26
Program Director Interview.....	29
Recommendations.....	33
Conclusion.....	46
References.....	48
Appendix A.....	52
Appendix B.....	53
Appendix C.....	54

### **Introduction**

The number of first-generation college students is steadily increasing in higher education, and they often lack support and face barriers in their educational journey, which affects their retention. First-generation students are those who enter higher education for the first time in their family among other children (Ward, 2012). First-generation students are entering into an important time in post- secondary education. For the last decade, it has been reported that over 4.5 million first-generation students were enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the United States (Ward, 2012). The problem is that first-generation students are more likely to leave higher educational institutions in comparison to their counterparts. This group of students tend to be older, have children, be married, be full-time workers, and are less involved in educational activities. As Petty (n.d.) stated, “first-generation students face more challenges to graduate from college than students of parents who are college graduates” (p. 258). In this respect, the challenges of first-generation student problems should be explored in more detail.

When compared to continuing generation students, first-generation students experience greater problems in college because of being the first who attend college or university. According to Garcia (2010), “access, attainment, and persistence are some of the challenges first-generation students encounter” (p. 46). Due to the fact that first-generation students enroll in college, there are differences between them and other types of students, which are seen in certain social factors. Specifically, first-generation students tend to attend two-year institutions in contrast to four-year institutions, and they are not able to attend them on a full-time basis. Furthermore, co-curricular engagement requires an extra time commitment and, therefore, first-generation students need to finish college while attending an educational establishment. These activities can also require additional expenses, which creates a serious obstacle for first-generation students from engagement, particularly when financial issues are the major concern.

Receiving admission is only one of the challenges of first-generation students. Transition from high school is another problem, because it bridges students' home environment with the educational environment which is essential, particularly among students' first year of study. Friends and family of students contribute to this difficult transition when they are planning to enter college, which is perceived as something that disconnects them from their children. Therefore, the presence of these challenges should find reception and reaction on the part of college faculties, and they should be concerned with creating new educational programs and academic techniques to support first-generation students. The findings provides a framework for planning workshops, career preparation and exploration, implementation of a Professional Mentor Exchange, and more interaction between first-generation students and faculty.

This study sought to answer the following questions: what do first -generation College students feel is important to help them to be successful and reach their educational goals at Long River College? What barriers and support exist for first-generation college students at Long River College? The ultimate goal of this study was to understand learning and teaching techniques for first-generation students at Long River College. Through the interviews, students discussed benefits, academic challenges, family challenges, and support services received by first-generation college students. They also discussed their involvement and experiences in the Generation Long River program and areas for improvement before it turned to a student's organization this year. The study also sought to study the programs that serve first-generation students, including mentoring programs, college advising, and tutoring programs. The data from this study were used to inform recommendations for improved practice relating to supporting the success and retention of first generation students.

## Literature Review

### First-Generation Student Challenges

First-generation students have encountered challenges while pursuing graduate education. Lunceford (2011) explained his personal experience to prove that he was not able to receive advice from his family and approval from his job supervisor; therefore, it was necessary to gain experience through personal endeavors. Using his own experience, the author focuses on practical advice for introducing a successful transfer from college to graduate education. The study provided conclusions with a range of questions that can be helpful in identifying the major challenges that first-generation students face (Lunceford, 2011).

The study by Cabrera, Miner, and Milem (2013) have focused on the influence of the University of Arizona's New Start Summer Program on students' GPA and retention. Programmatic participation predicts GPA and retention among students, whereas this relationship is insignificant when it concerns first-year college student development and experiences. Programmatic effectiveness is influenced by the way practitioners focus on participants' cognitive abilities. Further, Cabrera et al. (2013) have argued that lack of preparation and knowledge makes it challenging to begin the enrollment process into post-secondary education. As soon as first-generation students enter an educational establishment, they start facing problems, which are often challenging to overcome unless the student is engaged in the academic process. Insufficient research has been carried out on the influence of engagement on first-generation student success. Further, research should rely on the first-generation students that attend different educational establishments. Research on non-traditional first-generation students is also important. Discovering if specific types of engagement created different levels of success, which can be beneficial for further learning and development of first-

generation students. It is also hopeful that additional research is available with regard to the experience of the student population.

Interestingly, Housel and Harvey (2011) have also explored the problems related to first-generation college students who often straddle diverse cultures between home and school. Due to this cultural diversity, students often face barriers to academic performance and demand extra support and resources. Offering additional financial aid, therefore, fails to address emotional and cultural problems that these students encounter. Housel and Harvey (2011) call for the necessity to approve the need to assist college administrators and staff in their endeavors to encourage first-generation students to be more enthusiastic about the academic process.

Additionally, Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007) have focused on the analysis of the influence of parents' educational level on the desire and readiness of first-generation students for full engagement into the educational process. Specifically, Inkelas et al. (2007) have argued, "first generation students tend to be less academically prepared, have lower reading, math and critical thinking skills and be more likely to attend high schools with less rigorous curricular than students who have college attendance in their backgrounds" (pp. 405-406). Furthermore, first-generation students are unlikely to take entrance examinations at college, as well as advancement placement tests.

In the studies by Jenkins, Belanger, Londono, Connally, and Duron (2013), attention has been paid to the analysis of sophisticated cross-socioeconomic cultural transitions into college life. The authors have compared first and continuing generation undergraduate students, posttraumatic stress, social support, depression symptoms, and life level. It has been reported that first-generation students experienced less social support from friends and family, and, as a result, they have single-event traumatic stress, more depression, and less life satisfaction as compared to continuing generation students. However, the researchers found a strong



intersection between generation and gender. Because of the psychological well-being variables, first-generation female students were shown to do significantly worse than non-first-generation students. Meanwhile, first-generation males do significantly better than their non-first-generation counterparts. In such a manner, it is also possible to define the major obstacles, problems, and the solution which could improve the situation.

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) have analyzed the gap between attainment and educational aspiration, along with the role of parental involvement affecting first-generation students' perceptions. Research on first-generation students is abundant, but the post-college attainments are not investigated enough. The study examines whether family influences are essential among first-generation students' decisions. Additionally, the authors have argued, "the issue of family income or SES is a main factor related to the concept of cultural and social capital for first generation students" (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 535). The analysis of such an approach could be used for managing economic and financial aspects.

In contrast, the study by Olive (2008) also focused on first-generation college students, particularly the individuals whose parents have not attended college, but who have a negative influence on their children who strive to obtain a higher degree. Their personal academic preparation, cognitive development and first-year performance have all been the focus of the analysis. At the same time, little research has been conducted out in terms of the motivation of these students in seeking higher education. There are few studies targeting academic motivation in Hispanic students. The purpose of the given research is to develop a phenomenological evaluation of the desire and motivation to attend college among first-generation students who participated in academic support programs. The interviews were conducted for volunteer participants who were engaged in the program. During the program, Olive (2008) concluded that there were specific factors contributing to the students' motivation, including the effectiveness of

academic programming, identity of self-efficacy, desire for approval and advanced socio-economic status, as well as the necessity to contribute to the well-being of others. This is the influence of respected role models in promoting the motivation for higher education in first-generation Hispanic students.

### **Retention and First-Generation Students**

Pike and Kuh (2005) have also explored the differences between typical students and first-generation students to define future development. Specifically, the authors have argued, “first-generation students’ lower persistence and graduation rates, and their lower scores on standardized assessment measures are the result of differences in the precollege characteristics of first- and second-generation students” (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 277). In this respect, first-year students are less determined for the success and lower levels of engagement at colleges and schools. What is more problematic is that first-generation students had lower educational motivation as compared to second-generation students. Several aspects of college life can impact first-generation students. For instance, first-generation students do not tend to live on campus or develop relationships with their instructors and faculty members. Therefore, they are less enthusiastic about communicating with their peers, expressing lower levels of motivation to participation in college activities and life.

Though lack of motivation and disapproval from parents are among the most important issues, first-generation students face other difficulties while entering an educational establishment as well. As such, Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman (2014) place an emphasis on students’ sense of belonging, use of mental health services, and mental health status as compared to continuing generation students. The authors have reported that first-generation students are more likely to introduce lower degrees of belonging, which are followed by higher levels of

stress and depression, as well as lower use of services determined for academic learning and development.

Moreover, a study by McKay and Estrella (2008) focused on the opportunity for first-generation students to introduce social and academic integration and academic success. The study explores the quality of interaction between faculty members and first-generation students, as well as reveals new ways in which service learning courses are engaged with first-generation students in community service projects. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, it is possible to introduce the results which confirm the important role of communication and interaction with first-generation students, as well as the potential it will have for service learning success. Implications for continued research are heavily explored as well.

Additionally, Collier and Morgan (2008) have also introduced that students should master their academic role in order to grasp the instructors' expectations and apply those to their academic skills effectively. The article explores the connection between university faculty members' expectations. The discussions among groups of students define important differences in terms of time management and aspects of coursework. This could be determined by the incongruities between student and faculty perspectives and define differences between first-generation and traditional college students. It has been reported that the variations in cultural and educational experiences fit in the important differences in each group. Furthermore, the authors conclude that there are practical and theoretical implications emphasizing the role of cultural capital. The step toward understanding different perspectives of student and faculty explore each groups' perceptions of factors engaged in student success at the level of the university. It has been proposed that there are existing skills which meet those expectations. According to Collier and Morgan (2008), "students from a more traditional background enter the university with a level of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to become 'role experts'" (p. 6). Therefore,

it is important for the development of conceptual models for first-generation students because of the importance of role distribution at the educational establishment.

In contrast, a study by Aronson (2008) provides an overview of objective and subjective class differences among first-generation students in post-secondary education. Employing the metaphor of a funnel, the author argues that cumulative disadvantage outcome occurs when first-generation college students are disproportionately singled out at each stage of the educational process. Subjective class differences are served to provide the current inequalities, despite the potential for evident transformations. The study focuses on the disparities during the transition from childhood to adulthood, with the subsequent stratification and class differences in post-secondary education attendance, college life, enrollment, as well as attainment and financial aid. There are different methods for understanding how first-generation students could improve their adaptation to an educational environment.

In general, this overview of the resources and analysis of different perspectives provided crucial insight into the new programs and solutions which could be developed for first-generation students. Additionally, the review also highlights the evident challenges that first-generation students face in their attempt to adjust to an educational environment, regardless of the disapproval of parents and friends, being low-income, and working while going to school. Faculty should be more concerned with this type of student and encourage them to be more proactive regarding their academic pursuits.

### **Methods**

In this study, I collected and analyzed the data qualitatively to answer my research questions. The paradigm of this research is transformative due to the population and sample. As Mertens (2009) described, using the transformative paradigm allows the researcher to conduct qualitative research with a marginalized population. The goals are to change the current practices

to be more supportive of these students, that's what makes it transformative. As first-generation college students are often considered marginalized at 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 is important to capture and to understand these differences to implement better resources for these students. For this project, social change was addressed on campus to serve this population in their educational journey. The population I used to conduct my research was first-generation students at Long River College. I used purposive sampling as Mertens (2009) described,

When using a purposive sample the goal is to add to or generate new theories by obtaining new insights or fresh perspectives, purposive schemes are employed by the researcher to choose strategically elite cases or key informants based on the researchers' perception that the selected cases will yield a depth of information or a unique perspective. (p.357)

This method is suitable for this sample. The interviews took about 20 to 25 minutes. The interviews measured the challenges, supports, and student involvement on campus.

For the purpose of better understanding first-generation students at Long River College, I looked at Generation Long River, a student run organization for first-generation students, and I interviewed the founder of Generation Long River, Dr. Rebecca Smith. I also interviewed nine first-generation students, most of whom were involved in the program before it became a student organization. In these interviews, we discussed benefits, challenges, and support services 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.

Students often had similar demographic characteristics, challenges, supports, and experiences in the college. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked to describe themselves. The participants often described themselves with demographic information.

Most of my participants were students of color, such as, Asian, Latin and identified as female. The responses of 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.

There are different approaches to managing the challenges and barriers that first-generation students face. Therefore, there should be specific methods for solving those challenges, such as the development of training programs and an organization of polls and surveys for students and their instructors. Therefore, the qualitative aspect of the research design included interviews composed of semi-structured questions. These questions were proposed both to students and to a faculty member to check whether their perceptions and objectives coincide. After the interviews were carried out, the researcher conducted the transcription and coding of all the responses received to create thematic nodes and classified the answers in accordance with the research objectives.

Further, the analysis introduced different approaches to managing students' challenges. Apart from practical considerations, there are also ethical concerns related to the research process. The interviews were carried out separately for each participant to ensure confidentiality for the respondents. Further, the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as about the necessity of recording the interviews for further detailed analysis and discussion. All the participants were assured about the purpose for asking each question. Also endeavored to conduct careful analysis of students' responses and to construct a meaningful narrative of them.

In such a way, it will be possible to develop a conceptual framework that connects back to the literature review. In this combination, a new theoretical ground will come forth to contribute to the solutions and improvement of the current situation with first-generation

students. First-generation students should be approached with greater attention due to the problems and challenges they encounter. In addition, the researcher considered the social and cultural background of the participants in making meaning of the findings.

### **Student Interview Findings**

#### **Challenges of First-Generation Students**

Challenges faced by first-generation college students can overall affect their retention and success at any institution. Of the many challenges that first-generation college students face, most participants indicated that financial challenges were the most significant. Kristi described her financial challenges attending college:

I would say that finance-wise, it's quite difficult for first gen students. It's difficult for anyone, but for us it's a little bit more of a strain on our backs because then we have to worry about "Where's this money going to come from? Do we have to take out these big loans? How are we going to do this?" And our parents don't know exactly what these loans entail, or how is it when you pay back student loans afterwards. They don't know, so it's kind of we're moving forward and we're trying to figure out on our own, with their help in some sense, with the actual finances, but we're the ones who have to be like, "Okay, we have this many years to pay it off and we have to start now."

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

The toughest experience was finances in my first year of college; I'm now junior. So two years ago, my father stopped supporting me with paying for college, so that was really, really stressful on me and my mother's back. I had to figure out how I was going to do it; I wasn't sure if I was even going to come here my sophomore year because of finances. And, like I've said before, that's one of the main stresses for first gen students, because their parents don't know. I don't live here, so I don't need to pay for room and board, which is way more... Makes it way more expensive to be here.

This reflects McCarron and Inkelas' (2006) findings that the issue of family income is a main challenge for first-generation college students.

Being a first-generation student means that students cannot seek out information from their parents, who are unfamiliar with the process of applying to college and financial aid.

This results in the students feeling less equipped than other students, and having to navigate a

difficult process. John also explained his challenges at home and with understanding and applying for financial aid:

None of my parents have gone to college. They don't know what the challenge is. It's really challenging, especially when you first apply, especially with the FAFSA and the Common App. They really don't know what to expect, so I had to do a lot of research on that, figure out what I needed to do, especially time management, trying to get things in on the deadline. Especially now again that the FAFSA 's coming up again, it's like the same cycle all over again just trying to get some more money to go to school. So it's a very hard experience, especially when your parents haven't done it. And so you really need to learn for yourself how to do things.

While explaining the challenges of students' debts incurred by first-generation students through financial aid, Edgar noted:

The thing is I'll take it back to being in college you end up in debt or whatever. So knowing exactly how to handle your debt when you're done in college. Because you're the first generation, you have no one to tell you, "Hey, do this, do this." Yeah, your parents do help you out, but they didn't go through the college, so they don't really know.

Time management was also a difficulty experienced in college by half of the first-generation students in this study. Monica, a freshman, explained her challenges with time management in the beginning of her college career, and learned to prioritize her time as years went on:

The most difficult I have to say is time management, some of my classes that have a lot of work. Like I said, I dropped two of them or three of them because they either have a lot of work or they overlap each other. I have two, four or two to four hours of class in one day.

Since they have to take a job in order to earn more money to support themselves while in college, some participants observed that this is another challenge in the area of time management. This manifested greatly in their struggle to balance work and study as John observed:

The most difficult thing was managing the finances and the time because I know that I didn't really want to take out loans, so I just had to find time to go to work and manage all of these activities, so really working around 20, 30 hours a week as well as doing all this homework was very difficult, especially my first semester and it's



just going to get harder and harder here on out. So you know, it's a challenge.

Transitioning to college can often be impacted by students' access to social capital. It is important to be aware that first-generation students are lacking certain forms of social capital. As Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke (2011) explained, "Social capital is referred to as familiarity with traditions and norms to be successful in higher education" (p.22).

Students may face challenges not encountered by their peers, such as exclusion or lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate campus environments. When Wendy was asked about the most difficult thing she encountered in college, social capital seemed to have the largest impact on her transition to college:

The most difficult thing was transitioning and leaving my high school friends behind because, like I said, I'm from a really small town, I only graduated with 64 kids, and I had been with all of them since kindergarten. So it's people that have been in your life every single day for however many years that you're not seeing anymore. So that was really stressful. And I'm not really a... I'm kind of a shy person, I guess, I am not one to put myself out there right away so that was hard, so I didn't make immediate friends right away.

As soon as first-generation students enter an educational establishment, they start facing problems, which are often challenging to overcome unless the student is engaged in the academic process. Transitioning from high school and adapting to the college life was seen as one of the largest challenges for the participants. Most of the students in the study noted that a significant challenge was associated with transitioning and adapting to a new environment. As noted by Cabrera, Miner, and Milem (2013) that lack of preparation and knowledge makes it challenging for first-generation students to begin the enrollment process into post-secondary education. Each participant had a different explanation regarding their individual struggle with adaptation and how they adapted to the new environment. As noted by Collier and Morgan (2008) "students from a more traditional background enter the university with a level of cultural capital that makes it easier for them

to become ‘role experts’” (p. 6). Heather briefly explained her adjustment difficulty especially that she did not have parental background or family experiences related to college:

The most difficult was coming in to college, because I didn't have that background, or family stories. I just had my cousins. And even my cousins are kind of, I just come from a weird background of a family, so I think coming in I was just really nervous. I didn't know what I was expecting, especially getting accepted into the honors program, I was like, "Okay, do I really qualify for this?" because in high school I didn't take any AP classes, or honors, so how I got into the program here is beyond me, but, I guess just super nervous.

Bree explained her challenge with the scheduling difference between high school and college and how she managed to adapt to the college:

I think maybe the most difficult thing was to realize the scheduling difference. Going from high school, you have that set schedule. Boom, boom, you go to class, go home, whatever. It took me a little while to figure out the fact that you should probably stay at school and get your work done, you make new friends that way and you just feel more of a part of the school itself. So, it took me a little while, maybe my first semester and then by second semester, I found a little group of friends, and we have lunch together when we can, and I'll sit in the den, have lunch, and then after that, go to the library, do some homework.

Edgar also supported Bree's claim by explaining his experience this past semester being new and how he adapted himself to be prepared to take exams in college:

The challenging thing was not knowing what I was coming into. I was just like... Cause the high school I went to, we got rid of exams in my senior year, so I couldn't really necessarily prep to be ready for a college exam. So I was really nervous about exams here, but it's been better than I thought.

This finding reflects Housel and Harvey's (2011) study about the problem related to first-generation college students who often straddle diverse cultures between home and school. Due to this cultural diversity, students often face barriers to academic performance and demand extra support and resources.

Colleges need to realize that first-generation students do not easily come forward to seek help. There is magnificent stigma associated with first-generation status. As a result, some of

these students may choose to remain invisible. Once they identify, they might feel that their academic ability, achievement and performance may be underestimated by others. Their background is viewed as a deficit rather than a strength and they are unnecessarily pitied by others. A few students pointed out how it could be challenging for them just to be stigmatized or categorized as a first-generation student. Heather's experience supported this claim:

Probably the negative stigma and people look at you differently. Like my biggest pet peeve is when you introduce yourself in those circle games and they like step into the circle if you're a first generation student and then everybody claps for you. That just pisses me off. Like I don't want to be clapped for just because I'm a first generation. That really bothers me.

Kristi understood how challenging it is for first-generation students to be stigmatized after she was a mentor for Generation Long River:

Just because some students don't reach out to us, and we're endlessly reaching out to them and trying to do it in different ways, and meet with them, have lunch or have a dessert night or something and they just don't seem to answer back, cause it's just kind of, in their mind it's like, "Why do I need to do this? I don't want to be categorized as Generation Long River," which is it's not a bad thing. And for those students who think that you're being categorized, yes, but it's a good categorization. It's not a negative.

First generation students might feel intimidated to be stigmatized or categorized as a first-generation student. The above quote demonstrates the pressured that first-generation students experienced.

### **Family Challenges**

When students were asked about the most difficult challenge they experienced, several themes were mentioned. Disconnection from family due to lack of college experience and family obligation was a major challenge for most of the participants. Sarah explained the challenges she experienced this past semester being new to the college:

My family, not really understanding like they always want to come up and see me and I can't... they are always trying to come here and hang out all the time and the problem with that is they like to stay for hours and I have to study. I have five classes and what is worse is because my family lives in Groton, most of our medical based stuff is in that

area, so they are trying to bring me back there for appointments and it's like the classes that I take are very intense, but higher level classes 3000 range and it is rough for me to leave school and not having the time to study, just to go home and do what I need to do to be healthy, and that's a real struggle.

Other participants also identified that another challenge that first-generation students face from family is the fact that their families are naive about the whole college life operations and experience. Bree supported this view in these words:

You couldn't just turn to a family member and be like, "Oh, what is this?" And they don't know, they're just kind of going along for the ride as well as you are, so that's kind of tough. As far as being, once you're in college goes, I think if you're trying to describe to them how it works, they're confused and you're confused too cause you're like, "Well, I think it's like this." And there's no one there to correct you. Or you're trying to tell them, just how grades go and, "What's the registrar's office? How do you add classes?" And they're like, "What? I don't know." So yeah, trying to explain to them, this is a little bit of a disconnect there, cause they're not sure either what you're talking about half the time.

This finding reflects Inkelas et al.'s (2007) study about the influence of parents' educational level on the desire and readiness of first-generation students for full engagement into the educational process.

Some participants expressed issues adjusting to campus life due to distance away from loved ones. Sarah explained her challenge to adjusting to not being with her family:

Adjusting to not being with my family, I have a younger brother who he's really struggling. He just came out as transgender and it's like really awkward for my family and I'm the only person who understands, so me being three, two, three hours away and not being there for him is really rough, and so that kind of hurt when I realized like I wouldn't be able to see him or help him out, and then it's really hard being away from my mom because she kind of has... We're really close and my brother's already moved away, he lives in Texas, and that was really hard for her so watching her go through my brother leaving just made it that much harder for me to want to live on campus, so that was really rough but I feel like if I weren't a first generation student and if they had gone to college like they would understand easier that like, they kind of got to let me go, but it almost feels like they don't want me to, so that's really hard.

Some of the students felt overwhelmed, and they were under pressure from their family to do well in college. Brianna explained how challenging that is for her:

I think challenges are just like I want myself to do well. So sometimes I'll put extra

pressure on myself, I guess I would say. I just know that my brother... I have an older brother who goes to American International College. He's getting his Master's degree now. And he did super well in college. He was everything and anything. He did sports, he played rugby. He does theater now too. He's a theater director now, as a Master's. And so I guess there's just that little bit of pressure, I'm like "Okay, I got to do as good as he did." But I don't think I kill myself over it. I just remember to work hard.

Monica also had a similar experience being under family pressure as she described it:

I feel like a lot of pressure from my family because I am first-generation. So, they want me to go to grad school after college too and they want me to be more successful than them and then like my brother and stuff because I actually went through college. Yeah, and that's what I'm kind of afraid of. Like getting out of college and finding no job.

First-generation students might feel overwhelmed and pressured from family members to succeed in college. The above quote demonstrates the anxiety that first-generation students experienced.

### **Pride in Being a First-Generation College Student**

Participants were asked to describe the benefits, challenges, and supports they had received as a first-generation students. Most of the participants shared similar experiences being proud to be a first-generation student because it is an accomplishment that you can share with others. Sarah affirmed this statement, explaining:

It gives me a lot of strength like if I were be able to do this it will really make my family proud, I would be making the best situation for my parents because I will be the first one to make it through . I think another benefit is people know you are first generation student and they kind of like theirs is no respect for it but it's like "wow you are the first one who make it" and its gives me sense of accomplishment and its feels great.

Bree also indicated that the sense of accomplishment has been motivating for her to continue to succeed:

I think it's definitely a driving force. I know that my parents, they work hard every day. My dad is a small business owner, my mom also works for him in his office, and he's an auto mechanic. And I see them work hard every day to put me into a good school and put me here. And that's kind of my driving force to do well and be the best student that I can be. Besides the fact that I have internal motivation for doing well, cause I've just always been like that, I want to do well. And I always want to make them proud. They're putting their hard work and effort to see me succeed.

A sense of accomplishment and the motivation of first-generation students to seek higher education is reflective of Olive's (2008) research. Olive (2008) found that there are specific factors contributing to the students' motivation, including the effectiveness of academic programming, identity of self-efficacy, desire for approval and advanced socio-economic status, as well as the necessity to contribute to the well-being of others.

Other participants also described the benefits of being first-generation students was to change people's expectations about how successful they would be in college. Wendy stated:

The benefits of it is looking back on the successes that I've had, and being the student that I am, and getting the grades that I am. I don't think people expect that first-generation college students a lot, but my goal is to just be successful, It's kind of like you prove the people wrong, I guess, they like think that first generation students aren't going to finish college, and they beat the odds and the statistics that they're going to drop out, and obviously I didn't. So, I don't know, I guess that makes me proud.

This finding contradicts Pike and Kuh's (2005) finding that first-generation college students have lower persistence and graduation rates, and lower educational motivation as compared to second-generation students.

### **Support and Success for First Generation Students**

Participants were asked about the easiest thing they have encountered in college; most participants agreed that developing connections and friendships on campus was the easiest.

Sarah explained how the campus community helped her to make connections with other students:

Actually adjusting. Moving here was rough, but you know being here was just like incredible. Everybody here is so kind and like there's a real like family kind of community. I'm friends with so many people that I wouldn't have thought I'd make friends with and it was all like first day like I knew everybody's names, I had so many friends, I could turn to basically anybody for any help that I need and I think that's really cool, that was probably the easiest part of coming here was making friends.

Edgar also spoke about Long River's sense of community and how it helped him develop friendships on campus. Edgar explained, "The easiest thing so far in college, especially

here at Long River, is being able to meet people. Because I feel like it was just so easy to meet people.”

Other participants’ shared similar experiences about the easiest thing they have encountered in college. Brianna explained how it was easy for her to get involved in the campus, describing:

The easiest things was joining things here. It was really simple to sign up my thing with the fairs. It's easy and people aren't... Cause everyone's signing up so, it's just like, "Alright, I can sign up too." And then that's how you get involved. So, I think there's good marketing and ways of joining things.

Kristi also supported Brianna’s claims by explaining how easy it was for her to get involved with different organizations:

I would say the easiest thing would be getting involved with these different organizations that I am in, and making friends within it, within those organizations.

This finding refuted Stebleton et al.’s (2014) study that first-generation students are more likely to experience lower degrees of belonging, which are followed by higher levels of stress and depression, as well as lower use of services provided for academic learning and development.

When participants were asked about the benefits of being a first-generation student, some participants had similar experiences that being a first-generation student has helped them to be more independent. John explained how being a first-generation student had helped him to mature faster:

I think the benefit is that you mature a lot faster. You learn to be dependent on yourself and not really rely on your parents to do the Common App, do the FAFSA, you make sure your deadlines are on time. So I think it would help you in schoolwork wise.

Kristi described a benefit of being a first-generation student, explaining that most first-generation students that she knows have a tremendous work ethic:

I would say, at least the people I know that are first generation college students, we

have a tremendous work ethic. We work really, really hard. Whether it's studying or actual work in like a field, or we work at a department store or something, we just work really, really hard and we know what it is to struggle in a sense. But I would definitely say that we are continuously motivated by the people around us, and we're very supportive of others that are first generation students.

Developing support systems in college is vital to the success of a first-generation college student. Support systems can range from programs to individual people.

Participants were asked about what student support services have assisted them in college.

Each participant's answer was unique in the support received. However, half of the participants agreed that Generation Long River provided the most support in their journey.

Wendy discussed how Generation Long River had helped her through her freshman year:

During my freshman year I got a first generation peer mentor [through Generation Long River]. Her name was Shirley and she helped me, we would have our monthly one-on-one just seeing how we were doing, what we needed help with, if we had any questions, and I guess I didn't really know about that and, like I said, my roommate was first generation college student, so we kind of did it together. I know that a lot of people didn't do it, because they didn't know anyone, or they thought they would be the only one, but we decided to do it together and I'm really glad that we did because I wouldn't have gotten shown and involved into the Generation Long River program if I didn't do it.

Kristi explained how Generation Long River has helped her to realize the important role of the mentor after her experience being a mentor:

Generation Long River was a huge support for me. At first, I never spoke to my mentor. I emailed back and forth, I never met with him. And now I totally know how he felt with students not meeting with him because I was a junior mentor last year, and many, many, many students did not answer back. And it's a little stressful because we're there for them, and we're there to help them in any type of way that we can, point them in the right direction of people who can help them further. We're there for another face on campus, another support person on campus.

Most 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 Long River. John described how Transitional Programs, the



First Year Experience, and other offices at Long River have supported him:

I would definitely have to say First Year Experience, the required class. FYE was definitely a very good support system as well as the fellow the students here. Orientation was definitely a big key, too. Coming into college, not really knowing what to expect, but having those orientation leaders really help me out, direct me in the way to go, especially to the O'Brien Center for Success, and we have just so many good places here on campus that are able to support us.

Monica explained how the transitional programs has supported her on campus:

I joined TRIO or GEAR UP or Step Up. So, I was an ambassador in TRIO and the counselor there and everybody there help me apply to college. So, what they do is they take first-generation like us to visit colleges and see what we want and to help us apply for it and help us throughout the process.

Faculty, especially professors and advisors, were also mentioned in response to the questions about supports. For Sarah, advisors and the library were the most helpful support she received on campus:

So far mostly the advisors have helped me just because you know when you have to pick classes and stuff, so that's one of the only ones that I've actually really taken advantage of, and the library has like a help desk and I'm constantly there. They know me by name at this point, so they've helped me a lot.

Monica explained that her professor support was her largest support on campus:

I would say my professor support cause I have one professor that really help me a lot and she help me by... After our class, she offer to write my essay. The essay for me and then she offer jobs and interview and stuff for me too.

This finding reflects McKay and Estrella's (2008) data, which focuses on the opportunity for first-generation students to introduce social and academic integration and academic success. The study explored the quality of interaction between faculty members and first-generation students, as well as revealed new ways in which service learning courses are engaged with first-generation students in community service projects.

Family and friends were one of the main responses to the question of the support systems the participants received. Wendy described how family and friends were her ultimate support:

Obviously, my family. My family knew... I guess, they kind of felt bad in a way, they were like, "We didn't go to college, so we don't understand, but we support you no matter what. We'll always be there." So, they would come down, during freshman year, when I was having rough days, they would come down and surprise me, on the weekends and just here and there surprise me. And my mom would send me care packages. And my best friends that I went to kindergarten through high school with them. They would reach out to me, and they would come up and see me, because I was having a really hard time adjusting.

Edgar explained how friends and graduate fellows were the biggest support for him on campus:

Definitely friends and graduate fellows here have really helped. They've really helped. But mostly, you look at your friends and of course you see your friends more, and some of them might have the same class, might have taken the class a previous semester, so I definitely have to say my friends.

This finding refutes Jenkins et al.'s (2013) data that first-generation undergraduate students have more posttraumatic stress, social support, depression symptoms, and life level than the continuing generation. It has been reported that first-generation students experienced less social support from friends and family, and, as a result, they have single-event traumatic stress, more depression, and less life satisfaction as compared to continuing generation students.

### **Participating in Generation Long River**

Participation in Generation Long River was seen as very beneficial by most of the participants in the group. Participating in Generation Long River 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 last year, and the impact that it has on their development as college students. Wendy explained how Generation Long River had motivated her to help other students:

... So, being able to help people that were in my shoes and being able to help... I went and actually did a talk at my high school about what a first generation college student

is, because a lot of kids at my high school are first generation just because of the town we are. So, going back to talk and, I've had numerous kids that graduated last year reach out to me and are like, "I'm having a really hard time, I don't know how to deal with it." So it's just really benefiting to be able to hear that and help them.

Kristi also described how participating in Generation Long River was beneficial for her in a way it made her learn from her mistakes:

During my freshman year I never took advantage of it, because I didn't know what it was. And then being a mentor, I got to experience how my mentor felt because I never reached out to them; did through email, but I never met them. And I regret it tremendously, because I probably would have had a different connection and a different awareness of what it is to be a first generation college student. Being a mentor definitely opened my eyes to the people that actually want to have another support system, and those that just didn't care that you're reaching out to them.

Bree also described how participating in Generation Long River had helped her to change her major:

[my student mentor] was a huge help to me. She helped me change my major when I came to her, I was undeclared for a year, my freshman year. And I said to her in March, I want to say about a year from now, "I think I want to be a health science major." ... I had no idea how to do that. I didn't know anything. So she was like, "Don't worry about it. Just make sure you're sure that's what you want to do... And then she hooked me up with Kayla, we met with Kayla and she was great. Kayla showed me how you go on the website, see all the courses you wanted, you could pick a concentration, I had no idea you could do that...So, it's all about that networking. I had a mentor as well, she helped me out through the first gen, a mentor that was good. And they kind of coached me along, they told me exactly who to see to change my major, and that was great because I would've been lost, to be honest. I really wouldn't have known where to go.

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

I did have a mentor my first year, Aggy Vasquez. And she was super welcoming and always reached out to me. It was like telling me about all the things that I could find if I went up to the office and if I had any questions that was a person my age that has gone through the same thing. She's first generation and if I ever had anything I could reach out to her. So, I definitely think the mentoring is a great thing to have.

Participating in Generation Long River 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 Long River. Wendy explained how developing friendships and connections helped contribute to her sense of support and belonging on campus and what it means to be a first-generation college student:

I definitely built a relationship with [student mentor] who is basically... She's a co-founder of Generation Long River, she's pretty much why it all started. Definitely built a relationship with her and other peer mentors that I was mentoring with because you just knew these people are like me, they are going through the same struggles, whether you knew it or not. Whether they know it or not, you knew that they were like you.

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

I only knew maybe a few of them that were in there just because I don't think the group was very tight knit and put together. We didn't have meetings or anything like that, so it's not like we all knew each other, but I got to know a girl that was also a GM one because she was in a class of mine and then we became friends and she's a year above me. So at some point, she became my mentor too. So I was like... So that was a lot of fun, but she definitely has helped me out in the past and things like that. So... Cause she knew more than I, she was a year older.

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

Participants reported that alumni would be able to support and connect with students, be able to share stories, and help students network outside of the Long River community.

Wendy supported having connections with alumni to help benefit her time here at Long River:

...And as a first generation college student I feel that is kind of hard for me sometimes, because I don't have the connections that other people might, because my parents work average jobs. They don't work in big corporations or anything like other parents, or own their own businesses like other parents do, so I don't have those connections, so I kind of have to rely on alumni and events here to network and get connections made.

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

I feel like knowing the courses that they took, the internships that they used, that kind of stuff would really help especially because I know that I've already taken courses that I didn't really need, so like it'd be cool if somebody could tell me like, "Hey, you don't need this course." As much as they say you do, it doesn't do anything. I feel like it would also help me find if this is really what I want to do. If I really want to be a teacher because it's such a... It's not an incredibly successful job because there's so many of us, especially in the English field, that it's like I'm almost nervous that I won't get a job, so I feel like having an alumni be like, "Yeah, no it's possible", would really help.

The last questions asked of the participants were what suggestions they would make to improve the Generation Long River organization. Most participants agreed that Generation Long River needs to increase its visibility on campus. John believes that Generation Long River needs to reach out more with students to help increase involvement:

My suggestions would be to reach out and branch out, just to try to grow as much as possible as a student organization because like I said before, there are a lot of students out there who don't want to reach out. They're afraid or they don't have the time, they don't know about Generation Long River. I mean I just knew about it today, so just trying to reach out, trying to get involved with as many students as possible. Really a peer mentor program or a required orientation program where first generation college students would meet up with people who've done this before just to know that they're being supported.

Wendy expressed that Generation Long River needs to advertise and bring more awareness to the whole community by engaging more people, such as professors and athletic teams:

I definitely think advertising is good. I think that we need to get athletic teams on board, because we're such an athletic-based school and community that to see how many first generation athletes there are, that might show other students, "Well, these athletes are going through the same thing as I am and they're playing a sport and doing academics." I think that we need to get more people involved and not just students that are just students ... We try to get more professors involved, and I think that helps, and doing maybe more general talks. I think that not focusing on just Generation Long River students, I think the student body overall just to bring awareness. Because I think that a lot of kids that aren't first generation don't know what it means to be a first generation. So I think that we need to bring more awareness to that.

Heather also suggested having more activities and meetings where students can bond and grow together. This could help the student to know what support they can get:

I guess to get people like me more involved would be have some meetings, get to know the office staff because I don't feel like I'm just going to walk up and be like, "Oh hey, I'm Heather. I need the help with this." But I guess to make more things known to people because it is first generation Long River is definitely like a small thing, very inclusive in their little community and I don't think most people know about it. My mom was always like, "Go, Go talk to them." I'm like "Mom, I don't have anything to go talk to them about." So I think if they had meetings or question and answer type things, you could kind of know what support you can actually get from them and how they can help you.

Kristi believed that the changes that happened this year when Generation Long River became a student organization were a good change, as she stated:

Right now, since we're not in the mentor position, which I actually think is good because there's a lot of mentor positions on campus. We still want to be a student organization type of support group, just so people can come and give their opinions, what they want to see on campus how they want awareness to be spread throughout campus, and make other people aware what a first generation student is and the type of challenges that sometimes we're faced with and that we overcome. And so, like I said, we're kind of in the works of getting that different feel on campus with that organization.

### **Program Director Interview**

In addition to gathering data about the experiences of students in this institution, I also conducted an interview with Dr. Rebecca Smith, who is the founder of the Generation Long River program. The program started in 2011 and became a student organization this year. In the interview, Dr. Smith was asked about the reasons why she created Generation Long River and if her background had influenced her decision to start Generation Long River. Dr. Smith stated that her background influenced her decision 100%:

I would say 100%, it did. Well, when I was in my undergraduate, I didn't really know anything; I didn't know how to use the Career Center, I didn't know to talk to my faculty members. I just didn't know anything, and my parents couldn't help me. They were supportive, they were proud of me, but they couldn't answer any questions for me. I didn't know that I had to get those questions answered, I had to seek out help. And so, I just did it... I just tried to figure out on my own, and it took me a long time to graduate, and I took a lot of classes I didn't have to take, and I was confused, and It was

just a process that didn't need to happen if I would have known, and if I would have been second-generation college student, that wouldn't have happened; I would have had that knowledge and that support before I went to college.

When I asked her about the reasons that motivated her to create Generation Long River, she pointed out that 40% of Long River's student population were first-generation students which is considered to be high rate of students who need help.

Career development is one of the biggest challenges that face first-generation students. She also stated that it made sense that they would start an initiative out of the career center, focusing on that career-development piece. Dr. Smith said "first-generation college students are not retained at an institution at levels as high as second-generation students, so it was also a retention effort on our part to help the admissions and the enrollment management department with keeping the students there."

Getting support from the family depends on a lot of reasons and circumstances. The level of support from the first-generation students' families or second-generation families varies from one family to the next. Second-generation students' families have more knowledge. As Dr. Smith talked about variation in getting support from first-generation student families and second-generation student families, she explained that:

The level of support, certainly, varies family to family for a lot of different reasons and circumstances, but I wouldn't say that second-generation families are more proud of first-generation. I would say that they just have more knowledge to help their students. I have an eight and a six-year-old, and we talk about college right now at our dinner table. And so, they're going to kind of grow up with that language. It's like learning a new language; you had to learn English and it's really difficult to do that and it takes a long time, and if you kind of don't grow up with that language, then it's really foreign to you when you get into an environment where you need to use it, and I like that. That's exactly how college is for first-generation students.

Deciding on and pursuing a career is a big challenge for first-generation students.

When I asked Dr. Smith about challenges that first-generation students experience, she said that a lot of times students are low-income, so they work more than one job in addition to

attending college. As a result, first-generation students often choose jobs they believe are lucrative, rather than ones that interest them.

In order to overcome those challenges, Generation Long River created a cohort of peer advisors who were trained on the challenges and needs of first-generation college students. They paired them up with groups of students, so that in addition to their professionals in the office, they would also get support from someone who was a college student like them. Dr. Smith stated:

We built a model on a peer review, a peer-to-peer model. So a lot of times, first-generation students will gravitate towards their faculty members, but most of the time, and especially with this younger generation, peers are a really big influence on what it is that you do. So it's really about getting whoever the students will listen to in front of them to get them the most support that they need

When I asked her about the strategies that work best for freshman students to get them to be more involved during their freshman year, she said that, “it’s really hard to get them engaged with the campus because they go to campus for classes, and then they leave” (alluding to the fact that many first-generation students are commuter students and live at home). Trying a lot of different things to get them to gravitate more towards campus was the primary way the program was structured, in its early years. Dr. Smith explained that from her own experience:

For first-generation students, I look at that as, ‘How can we let them know early how their major translates into a career?’ Because if they have motivation, say, ‘Okay, I’m going to take this major, finance or whatnot because I want to be an investment banker and I know what that means,’ then you have that motivation to keep going to spend the time and energy to do it. And then, they’re more apt to engage with the college. Getting those professional mentors in their area of interest, so finding a few... Finance, as an example, an investment banker who maybe wasn’t a Long River alum or not, and pairing them up with the first-generation students because then, they see a professional in the field who did make it through the classes, and then, did go on to be successful in their career. That’s not something that oftentimes we grow up with. My father was a truck driver. So I didn’t even know what a professional position was. And had I had a mentor that was in a professional position, I would have had a broader outlook on careers and what my potential was.



From the feedback that Generation Long River has gotten, and the extensive outreach they did to the students they realized that the most effective way that worked for the students was mostly through peer to peer interaction. First-generation students did not respond as the program hoped. As a result, Generation Long River decided to convert the program to be a student organization. This also allowed for the peer to peer relationship to be maximized. Dr. Smith explained the reason why Generation Long River became a student organization and how it is serving the students now:

So because of the feedback that we had gotten the first three years of running the program, the thing that worked the most to get the students into the career center, to get them engaged without programming, to get them the career-related support that they needed, it was mostly through peer-to-peer interaction. So for us, it was a strategy where we said, "If we turn this into a student organization, it's going to be student-driven." So the students are helping each other motivate as opposed to me saying, "This is just one more program that you need to go to." And so, we just made the decision that the biggest outcomes that we had gained from the program were that peer-to-peer interaction and to utilize the peers more to engage the first generation college student. Student organizations are as good as their leaders, and they change frequently. And I would say the probably, the one downfall of any student organization and certainly, Generation Long River, is that every couple of years, you get a new President, you get a new Vice President, you have new leaders. And so if the leaders are motivated... You met [students mentor], she was extremely motivated. Then, the organization works out fantastic. Other times, you don't have those motivated leaders. So I would say that it's really always going to depend on the leadership and what capabilities they have.

At the end of the interview, Dr. Smith shared the biggest win of the program was raising the campus awareness for faculty and staff to pay attention to this population. It does not have to do with students directly. From her own experience as an administrator who cares a lot about first-generation students, she said:

For me, if administrators and faculty members know that first-generation college students have different needs than second-generation college students, they're going to end up being mindful of that when they look at their programming, and they do their advising, and they spend their class time in their out-of-class time. And so, that was the biggest win for me, was that awareness.

She also shared that she had done a lot of presentations on first-generation college

students at regional and national conferences, and a lot of schools were looking at the Generation Long River program as great model for programming. Dr. Smith supported that claim when she stated:

It is really inspiring when Brown University calls up, and says, "Hey, we heard about your program. We would like to mirror a program based on yours." And you're like, "Wow, that's really awesome." Brown's a really good school, Williams is a really good school. So those things really showcase the success of the program.

Generation Long River had a significant impact on first-generation college student's experiences, by raising the campus awareness for faculty and staff to pay attention to this population. It also helped the students to develop connections and friendships as well as supported them in their educational achievement and personal goals. In 2015, Generation Long River transformed to become a student organization, which means it is now entirely led by the students. Therefore, the success of Generation Long River depends on the leadership's motivations and the capabilities.

### **Recommendations**

For the purpose of better understanding Generation Long River and the support it provides to first-generation college students, I have interviewed the founder of Generation Long River, Dr. Rebecca Smith. I also interviewed nine first-generation students, most of them used to be involved in the program before it turned into a student organization. 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. From the interviews and literature review, I got a first-hand grasp of the students' needs and concerns. In this section, I offer recommendations for the offices of Student Success and Academic Support pertaining to the manner in which the offices can prevent distraction from parents/family, parental pressure to succeed, prepare for the challenge of lack of parental role

models, time management, increase access to social capital and reduce stigmatization for first-generation college students. The recommendations offered here will go a long way in helping Long River College improve its practice as well as be a model for other post-secondary institutions which envision having a similar program. By improving the services of the offices of Student Success and Academic Support, freshman students at Long River College who become members and carry high the flag of the organization will have extensive benefits throughout their college career.

***Recommendation 1: Long River College should improve the offices of Student Success and Academic Support's services during the students' first year to foster career enhancement and inspire students.***

Based on the findings of this research from the interviews that were conducted, involving students and the campus director, as well as the information received from the literature review, I recommend that Long River College first concentrate on establishing first generation student-specific career development and advising. This would pertain to helping first-generation college students prepare for future jobs. A good number of the students who were interviewed stated that they did not receive advice from their parents. Others discussed that their parents did not go to college and do not understand what goes on in college. Students at Long River College should therefore take initiative by getting guidance offered by the Student Success and Academic Support. According to Dr. Smith, the previous program director, the challenges that she went through while in her freshman year, thus inspired her creating the Generation Long River program.

This is reinforced by Lunceford's study, which is also an account of the challenges that he went through while pursuing graduate education. Lunceford (2011) explained his personal experience to prove that he was not able to receive advice from his family and approval from his

job supervisor. Therefore, it was necessary to gain experience through personal endeavors. Using his own experience, the author focused on practical advice for introducing a successful transfer from college to graduate education.

Moreover, Long River College can also borrow a page from the study by Olive (2008), which centered on first-generation college students, particularly the individuals whose parents have not attended college, who strive to obtain a higher degree. Olive's (2008) study concluded that there are specific factors contributing to the students' motivation, including the effectiveness of academic programming, identity of self-efficacy, desire for approval and advanced socio-economic status, as well as the necessity to contribute to the well-being of others. In order to support Long River first-generation students with developing careers that will help them be successful, the issue of guidance needs to be addressed. The issue of poor guidance was also echoed by the Program Director who stated that, although her parents were supportive, they did not guide her in various ways. According to her, when she first joined college, she did not know anything, and her parents could not help her. They were supportive and proud of her, but they were not in a position to answer any questions for her.

I recommend that Long River College should arrange a career fair for first-generation students and encourage all departments to reach out to their partner organizations, who are offering internships or job opportunities to invite them to the Long River Career Fair. Therefore, first-generation students from all majors can find different career opportunities and options. This will motivate students to focus on starting their career development. Instructors should emphasize on the role of O'Brien Center for student success in helping first-generation students with creating and editing their resume, by incorporating a resume makeover, graded assignment in one of their senior year courses. The instructors should recommend that first-generation students to start working on improving their resume during their senior year. Visits for resume

editing should be mandatory to get the full grade. This will help introduce first-generation students more effectively to the services offered by the O'Brien Center. This activity will motivate students to attend the career fair to hand out their professional resumes to the organization's representatives.

Chapman University in Orange County, California hosts the promising futures mentoring program to get first generation student connected to faculty and staff. Faculty and staff mentors at Chapman use this as a source of support, especially for freshman first generation college students to help their transition into the university (Chapman University, 2015). The goals of the mentoring program were to guide, support, and help first-generation college students to feel connected to the university by matching them with faculty and staff, as well as helping the students to develop and achieve their academic goals. The program had a significant impact on first-generation college students. As a result from the feedback they received, students felt more confident to make it through college. They felt very comfortable to reach out to their mentors to help them to utilize the resources available on campus. They also loved the idea of having the connections and resources to further aid in their college career. Mentors and mentees were required to meet three times in the semester and attend group activities designated for all mentors and mentees relationships. Mentors and mentees were agree to a yearlong commitment, as well as providing feedback on their experiences evaluation of the mentoring program (Chapman University, 2015).

I recommend Long River College should create a faculty and staff mentoring program for first-generation students to enhance their career development and college experiences. The program could be provided by the offices of student success and academic support. Each first-generation student will be assigned to a faculty or staff member to help them through their educational path. The program will serve first-generation college students at Long River College.

Faculty and staff are required to attend a workshop offered by the offices of student success to learn more about the need and the challenges of this population. The duration of this program will take one year. Mentors and mentees will meet four times each semester. Starting from the fall semester, a required, formal dinner will be held on the first week of the semester. Faculty and staff are expected to arrive earlier on that day and form a panel on the entrance where students will sign their name to insure their attendance. Faculty and staff are also expected to obtain other information from the student through a questionnaire that will be handed to the student upon their arrival and collected after the meeting. That will enable them to identify the needs of every student. The program will be funded through the welcoming center or the student government association at Long River College.

This program is a social and academic support strategy that will aim to foster and strengthen social networking, academic motivation, self-confidence and school connectedness for first-generation students. In addition, they will have the chance to talk to their mentors about their struggles, asked unanswered question, or how they could improve their career aspiration and academic performance. The faculty and staff mentors are the most accessible college members for the first-generation students, and are the primary source of in-class and out-of-class learning experience for students who are new to college life (Atherton, 2014).

Therefore, instituting a career development program, as well as building capacity for mentoring and inspiring students, would go a long way in helping students who come from backgrounds where their parents do not have a college education or those whose parents have gone to college, but are busy or do not find it necessary to guide or offer social support to their first-generation sons and daughters.

***Recommendation 2: The offices of Student Success and Academic Support should institute a department where students who face parental or family interference can engage parents or***

*family in parental orientation day to eliminate such distractions that have detrimental effects on student's performance.*

When participants were asked about the challenges they faced which could have a negative impact of their education performance and career development, parental interference was among the issues that topped the list. To this end, Long River College should focus on expanding its Generation Long River to encompass a department which can aid in advising the students and parents who have this concern. This is supported by McCarron and Inkelas (2006), which centered on identifying the gap between attainment and educational aspiration, along with the role of parental involvement affecting first-generation students' perceptions. Additionally, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) have argued, "the issue of family income or SES is a main factor related to the concept of cultural and social capital for first generation students" (p. 535). Kristi, a participant in the interview I conducted, had an experience which supported this claim. According to her, the toughest challenge she ever went through during her first year in college was finances. Her father abruptly stopped paying her college fees and she was forced to find a way of meeting the financial obligation.

Another participant by the name Sarah also explained the challenges she experienced this past semester being new to the college. Unlike Kristi, she is facing a different type of family interference in that her family is overly concerned about her welfare in college. She is always distracted from her academic work since her family members always go to school and stay with her for long hours despite the fact that her course is time intensive; she has to attend five classes. Moreover, she has to go to her parents' hometown to receive her medications and attend medical appointments. Therefore, she finds it hard to leave school, skip classes, and go home for her medical appointments. Another student also faced parental interference since she has a brother

who is transgender. Sarah cannot offer him the moral support he desperately needs because of her classes, and she gets stressed about it.

Long River College should have a program for first-generation students' parents. New first-generation students need to have support especially in their first day or the orientation day. The type of support that could help those students is by making them discover the university with their guardians or parents. Making an orientation day for the first-generation students' parents will help the parents to learn more about college life and how it works. Having that program will help the students to be more comfortable to discover the school while they are with their parents. On the other hand, for the parents to be more supportive to their kids, they need to have an idea about what's going to happen and what struggles their kids could face during the years in school. As I discovered in my interviews with the first-generation students at Long River College, I figured out that most of those students were having problems with support and understanding from their parents or families.

Many colleges and universities have already developed this kind of program for first-generation students. For example, Connecticut College in New London, CT has two orientation programs for first year students: Genesis, and Odysse. Genesis is on Thursday and Friday before Arrival Day. This program is for underrepresented students, including students of color and first-generation college students. It includes a segment for parents and guardians, giving them an opportunity to meet with the academic deans and administrators from the College's career-planning program, health services, counseling services, student life, financial aid and other offices (Connecticut College, n.d.). At the orientation, parents have to participate in academic programs and student life. In the afternoon, there's a president's assembly, then a reception for students and parents. After that, students only go to start orientation. The other program, Odyssey is for international students. The school offers a lot of activities for parents prior to



arrival day and offer information about local hotels and accommodations. This kind of program will not affect the school budget because it will be the same exact amount of effort the school will put on a normal orientation. It might be longer in time but since it will be before the classes start it will not affect school or class hours (Connecticut College, n.d.).

Despite the fact that first-generation students were in one way or another assisted by the out lined program, their parents were not, and it would have been better if all the involved parties came together and addressed the issue. This would not only benefit the current student but would also be beneficial to future first-generation students since such parents would recognize the mistakes they are making and avoid repeating them in their younger children or in the future semesters. Besides, this approach would also model to the first-generation students going through parental interference to be good second generation parents. To summarize, Long River College should establish this program as it will bring in long term benefits to the current and future first-generation students.

***Recommendation 3: Long River College should include a strategy that will help First-Generation students in the short span they will be in college, to make the transition from high school to college easier by providing a bridge program.***

In the current state, Long River does not possess a way of enabling first-generation students at Long River College to move away from their high school mentality and put academic work first, or enable a student to have a healthy relationship with his or her high school peers and family members in a manner that will help them achieve their set goals. High school mentality and peers can have a detrimental effect on a first-generation student. This claim is supported by Wendy, a participant that I interviewed, who stated that the most difficult thing she encountered in her first year in Long River College was transitioning and leaving her high school friends behind because she hails from a really small town and only graduated in a class of 64 students

that she had been with since kindergarten. The connection that she had with her former high school peers was very strong because they had been in her life every single day for many years. The detachment from her peers affected her psychologically. Besides, she is an introvert, and therefore found it really hard to put herself out there and make immediate friends. The introvert factor made her high school memories and peers linger for a long time, hence getting stressed and having a hard first year in college.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Heather who stated that she had difficulties transitioning from high school to college. The thought of stepping into a totally new environment made her really nervous since she did not know what she was expecting, especially getting accepted into the honors program. Brianna also discussed the scheduling difference between high school and college. Edgar also stated that he continued with his high school mentality straight to college. Interviewees cited unnecessary pressure from parents to be more successful as another problem.

Although these students later got the help of the Generation Long River program to overcome their first-generation challenges, the type of assistance that they received was not holistic. For instance, although Wendy states that she prides herself as being a member of the Generation Long River program owing to the assistance that she later received, we find that the biggest assistance came from her peers and family, but not the Generation Long River program itself. According to her, family and friends were her ultimate supports. Both her parents and friends would go to visit her at Long River College and surprise her with gifts, hence relieving the boredom and stress that she harbored. This makes it clear that the arrangement to visit to school culminated from her family and kindergarten peers, and not from the Long River Program. To this end, therefore, Long River College must improve its services and programs for

first-generation students to encompass a plan for relieving high school mentality and enable students to benefit from their parents and former peers.

To this effect, I would suggest the Office of Student Success should join efforts with the admission office to create a program that simulate the Tele-mentoring program at Amherst College (Amherst College, 2005). In this program, first-generation students who are eligible and trained, would do peer to peer advising sessions using email and phone calls to answer high school student's questions. Eligible college students should be trained on answering questions regarding the application process, financial aid process, adjustments and social issues. For example, a former first-generation college student who had a particular issue regarding the financial aid process would help answer a first-generation high school student's questions who is struggling with the same issue. Long River College can use the services of non-profit organizations like Quest Bridge, a pioneer organization in the mentoring concept to identify first-generation students.

Transitioning from high school to college comes with a lot of challenges and responsibilities. Long River College can use the experiences of Baldwin Wallace University in Berea, Ohio to create a similar program to their Jacket Link/Summer Bridge Program. This program is designed to help students transitioning from high school to a successful college career. The program provides students with the tools and resources to start their first year a week ahead of the welcoming week. Therefore, first-generation students will get the chance to connect with their mentors, get familiar with campus resources and services and learn strategies to transition successfully to their first college year. This program's goal is to provide a supportive and welcoming community for the students. This program services include evaluating the academic readiness level of the students, campus support, financial aid sessions, peer mentor debriefs, and social and cultural enrichment (Baldwin Wallace University, n.d.)

***Recommendation 4: Long River College needs to focus on the First-Generation students' concerns, which hinder the development of a well-rounded person.***

The current first-generation support organization is the brainchild of the former Program Director, Dr. Rebecca Smith. It therefore tends to focus on the challenges that she faced during her college life, but forgets that there are other people who go through challenges different from hers. For instance, from the interview I conducted with Dr. Rebecca, it is evident that she created the program based on the need to create an opportunity for career development. As she stated she did not really know anything; including, how locate the career center or how to talk to faculty members.

To this end, the previous program in my view was biased and only focuses on those strategies that will bring about career development. While my first recommendation is important, it forgets that life in and out of college is not entirely about career development. It entails getting acquainted to other social issues. Due to the fact that not all first-generation students at Long River need career development or go through the challenges that form the core values of Generation Long River. For instance, there are those students who come from the backgrounds of holistic secondary schools that familiarize them with the expectations of a college education and are able to get the necessary guidance on college life and career development. Moreover, the advancement of technology has made it possible for those about to attend college for the first time to research on what goes on in college and get themselves acquainted to college life.

However, first-generation students may still struggle learning how to balance a personal and professional life if they do not receive the appropriate support. A typical case would be that of a first-generation student who benefits from career development and excels in his future career by securing a good job in a lucrative global company. This person may still find it difficult starting up a family since his entire college life was geared towards career development. With

this knowledge, therefore, I propose that Long River College should expand the scope of the current organization to create optional workshops that address the various needs of the students whether social, financial, or other aspects of life outside the classroom. They could also send out intentional emails to reach out and let the students know about these workshops and announce other campus events.

To better assist first-generation students to develop a well-rounded personality, I recommend Long River College create with the help of existing first-generation students, a first-generation student club. Mimicking the practices of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, enrollment and memberships would be open to all students in the institution. This should be stated in the club guidelines and be clear for students to read so they feel the sense of belonging. This club's activities and services will be directed toward first-generation students. A college staff member should be assigned as a club adviser, which duties includes, helping in the organizational process, promote club activities among staff and faculty, and meets with the official personnel if necessary (College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, 2012).

Moreover, the goal of this first-generation club is to establish additional supports for first-generation students at Long River College. This club should be encouraged to help first-generation students locate college services and resources, adjust well to their new environment, and the overall college lifestyle. The club activities would include, but are not limited to, movie nights, trips and tours, and group community services opportunities.

This recommendation is supported by Collier and Morgan (2008) who introduced that success in college is not the most important case for students that demonstrate academic abilities. The authors further argue that it is important for the development of conceptual models for first-generation students because of the importance of role distribution at the educational

establishment. Therefore, there should be additional programs that would allow students be more engaged in different on-campus activities.

***Recommendation 5: The Generation Long River Organization needs to increase its visibility on campus.***

When participants were asked about recommendations they had for the organization, most participants suggested that Generation Long River organization needs to increase their visibility on campus by reaching out more with student to increase the student's involvement, as well as provide more activities and events where students can bond and grow together, such as game night, cider and donuts social, which are expected to attract new students to the organization. This could help the students to know more about the services and support systems that are available to them. Another recommendation from the students is that the first-generation organization need to advertise and bring more awareness to the whole community by engaging more people who have power to influence programming and other students such as professors, athletic teams and non-first-generation students. By holding an event where many people can participate, and have a general talk about what it means to be a first-generation students, will help to increase other students and faculty awareness of this population.

Additional awareness will be spread through the presence of social media. The first-generation organization could improve their efforts by being more engaged in social media. This could be effective if they work with campus communications to spread awareness information about first-generation college student success stories. Utilizing technology to connect first-generation college students, will assist them in finding information and resources regarding their college career. Easy access to people who could answers their concerns will help first-generation students increase their confidence regarding college experience and enable them to get the support that they need. For example, the organization could create a website, blogs, Facebook

group, as well as post articles on first-generation college students that could interest students to follow Generation Long River on social media outlets. As a result, they will feel more confident and represented on campus.

### **Conclusion**

Since first-generation students have different challenges than non-first-generation students, instructors and student affairs professionals should develop the corresponding educational programs which could be helpful for students to be more engaged in campus activities and the academic process. In such a way, it will also be possible to create specific conditions for them to be more active and increase their performance. To begin with, the instructors should acknowledge that there are external and internal factors. When it concerns internal factors, attention should be paid to students' initial attitude and perception regarding the necessity of entering a higher education degree. As for external factors, the emphasis is placed on parents and friends who often disapprove of the students' decision to enroll in the university. The major approach for these students is motivating and encouraging. Instructors should deepen their understanding of the problem by integrating specialized programs that would make students more enthusiastic about attending college.

The above plan will respond to the findings from my research questions: what do first-generation college students feel is important to help them to be successful and reach their educational goals at Long River College and what barriers and support exist for first-generation college students at Long River College? The research was based on qualitative approaches, which contribute to the validity and reliability of the research and created a strong practical and theoretical approach for further improvements in the field. The interview measured the challenges, supports, and student involvement on campus. The use of the interviews also enhanced the perceptions and attitudes of students and the instructor on the current issue. The

findings in this study indicated that interviewed participants expressed an interest in more contact from faculty and staff, more workshops, connections with alumni, and career development. The findings were used to aid in the recommendation of the career enhancement programs, summer bridge program, and orientation program for parents, implementation of outings and events, and increasing visibility on campus. Furthermore, the analysis of ethical considerations is also essential for being more open-minded to social, economic, and educational problems related to first-generation students. In this manner, they will be more motivated and engaged in the learning process. Additionally, the programs should also engage parents and friends to be more loyal to their children who are determined to enter higher education, regardless of economic and financial problems. Moreover, they should also provide additional moral and emotional support for them to gain more scholarships.

Currently, there are more first-generation college students attending college than in the past. For that reason, this research is important for the future of higher education to enhance its practices to serve first-generation college student needs. By providing better services, engagement, and programing student will increase their engagement and performance. It is important that higher education professionals understand the way first-generation college students need to be understood and supported in their educational journey. In general, the research is essential since few research studies focus on empirical investigations of first year experiences. Rather, the attention is premised on observational research without any emphasis on actually talking with first-generation students about their experiences. Therefore, the analysis of these qualitative approaches is effective for further involvement of first-generation students. Additionally, the research will also help to develop new and modify existing educational programs for this group.



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**Appendix A**

Participants name	Commuter or Resident	Employment	Works on/off campus	Peer Mentor	Race/ Ethnicity
Kristi	Commuter	Yes	On and off	Yes	White
Sarah	Resident	No		No	White
Bree	Resident	Yes	On	Yes	Hispanic
Brianna	Resident	Yes	On	No	White
Edgar	Commuter	Yes	On and off	No	Hispanic
John	Commuter	Yes	On	No	African American
Monica	Resident	No		No	Asian
Heather	Commuter	Yes	On and off	Yes	White
Wendy	Resident	Yes	On	Yes	Asian
Dr. Rebecca Smith	N/A	Yes	On	N/A	White

## 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. How do you feel about the institutional support you have available to you (i.e. counseling, library resources, advising, and community service opportunities)?
5. With regards to college, what was the most difficult/easiest thing you encountered?
6. What student support services have assisted you in your college experience, if any?
7. Do you feel it would be beneficial to be connected to alumni in your field to provide guidance to you? If so how?
8. What could have helped you be successful in college that you did not receive at home or in college?
9. Was participating in Generation Long River been beneficial to you? If so how?
10. Did you feel that the other students in Generation Long River contribute to your sense of support?
11. What suggestions would you make for improvements for Generation Long River student organization?
12. End question: Is there anything else I should know that I have not asked?

**Appendix C**

Administrator interview protocol:

1. Could you tell me about yourself and your professional path?
2. Are you a first generation student? If so, how has that influenced your work with this issue?
3. When did you start Generation Long River and what motivated you to create the experience for students?
4. Do you think non first generation students get more support from their family than first generation students and why
5. What are the challenges that first generation students experience?
6. How did Generation Long River try to address those challenges?
7. From your own experience what are some of the best strategies for the student to be more involved during their freshmen year?
8. Why did Generation Long River change to become a student organization?
9. How is it serving the student now?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me?