

2017

Stress, Coping, and Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation College Students

Samantha Fitz-Gerald

Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, samanthafi@pcom.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.pcom.edu/psychology_dissertations



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fitz-Gerald, Samantha, "Stress, Coping, and Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation College Students" (2017). *PCOM Psychology Dissertations*. 423.

http://digitalcommons.pcom.edu/psychology_dissertations/423

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Dissertations, Theses and Papers at DigitalCommons@PCOM. It has been accepted for inclusion in PCOM Psychology Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@PCOM. For more information, please contact library@pcom.edu.

Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Department of Psychology

STRESS, COPING, AND ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY IN
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Samantha Fitz-Gerald

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

May 2017

**PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

Dissertation Approval

This is to certify that the thesis presented to us by Samantha Fitz-Gerald
on the 2nd day of May, 2017, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology, has been examined and is
acceptable in both scholarship and literary quality.

Committee Members' Signatures:

Chairperson

WBPP

[Signature]

Chair, Department of Psychology

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Celine Thompson, Dr. Stephanie Felgoise, and Dr. Amy Paciej-Woodruff, for your endless support. Your tenacity and persistence allowed me to succeed throughout the process and I am forever grateful for that.

Also, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my dad. My dad is the one person who always encouraged me to follow my dreams. He allowed me to make my own choices and supported me every step of the way. He was the person who helped me overcome every obstacle that I experienced, making sure that I knew how proud of me he was. Most importantly, my dad is the person who told me to never give up after my mom passed away, promising that he would be at every graduation I attended with a smile on his face. Dad, I love you and I hope I've made you proud.

To Matthew, my fiancé, thank you for moving to Philadelphia with me to support my dreams. I cannot express how grateful I am to have someone by my side who understands me completely. You have been there for me through every milestone I have achieved throughout this program. I am lucky to call you my best friend. See you at the altar in October to say "I do!"

Lastly, a special dedication goes out to my mom. My mom taught me that it is okay to struggle and make mistakes. She is the person who told me that it is okay to ask for help and I am blessed to be able to spend my career helping other people the way she has helped me. Mom, I love and miss you more than words can say.

Abstract

This qualitative research was conducted with first-generation college students who were enrolled in one of two university settings in northeastern Pennsylvania. The purpose of the study was to explore the unique stressors and coping mechanisms first-generation college students experience and how these impact their academic self-efficacy beliefs. A total of 10 participants were interviewed for the study using a demographic questionnaire, self-report stress scale, and semi-structured interview. Grounded theory of analysis provided the theoretical framework for the study, allowing the researcher to code the data to discover four emerging themes. The themes found included (a) the first-generation college students' motivation to attend college and their positive experience in applying, (b) emotional coping as a first-generation college student, (c) difficulty adapting to college due to unrealistic expectations, and (d) the importance of a positive support system during the first year of college to cope with unique stressors.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	5
Stress in First-Generation College Students	5
Social Support.....	8
Stress	11
Perfectionism	12
Psychoeducation Programs	15
Social and Cultural Transition	16
Coping.....	18
Coping strategies.....	19
Academic Self-Efficacy	22
Academic success	22
Purpose of the Study	25
Research Question	26
Chapter 3: Method	27
Research Design.....	27
Design Justification.....	27
Participants.....	30
Recruitment.....	33
Inclusion criteria	33

Exclusion criteria	33
Risks and benefits	34
Measures	34
Procedure	36
Chapter 4: Results	39
Emerging Themes	40
Motivation to attend college and positive experiences in applying	40
Emotional coping as a first-generation college student	43
Adaptation to college	46
Positive support during the first year of college	47
Research Question Findings	51
Chapter 5: Discussion	54
Limitations	60
Implications for Future Research.....	61
Relevance to the Theory and Practice of Psychology.....	63
Advocacy	64
References.....	66
Appendix A: Informed Consent A.....	75
Appendix B: Informed Consent B	78
Appendix C: Demographic Survey.....	81
Appendix D: Perceived Stress Scale-10 Item Version	83
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview.....	85
Appendix F: Codes	88

List of Tables

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information	32
Table 2: Emerging and Definitions.....	39

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of Problem

A first-generation college student is someone whose parents did not receive a bachelor's degree (Thayer, 2000). They account for nearly 50% of today's student population (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Being a first-generation college student may mean that an individual experiences unique challenges that others do not. Currently, there are more than 4.5 million low-income first-generation college students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These students have been described as having more academic potential than their counterparts, but they may feel uniquely pressured to succeed in order to help or bring honor to their families (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012). Additionally, this group tends to be disadvantaged by several factors that influence their entrance and transition into postsecondary education. These include having a lower level of educational aspiration, lower level of academic preparation, less support and encouragement from family members, less knowledge regarding the application process, and fewer resources to pay for college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Additionally, this group often delays their entry into college, attend a college close to home, live off campus, attend school part-time, and work full-time while enrolled, furthering their disadvantage compared to their counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Accompanying this unique experience is a number of internal and external stressors (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). External stressors that affect first-generation college students include lower levels of social support, as well as demanding familial and work obligations (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Internal stressors include having an

internal locus of control, low self-esteem, and being introverted (Hand & Payne, 2008; Torres, 2003). As a result of these stressors, first-generation college students are at the highest risk of dropping out of college during their second year (Ishitani, 2006). Statistics show that first-generation college students are 51% less likely to graduate in four years compared to other students (Ishianti, 2006).

Additionally, when they encounter difficulties related to being college students, first-generation college students may use both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Four types of adaptive mechanisms utilized by this population include seeking instrumental social support, engaging in active coping strategies, executing planning skills and techniques, and engaging in positive reinterpretation (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). Maladaptive coping mechanisms and responses include denial, venting, avoidance coping, behavioral disengagement, and substance use (Giancola et al., 2009). Student Support Services (SSS) programs can be beneficial to these students by providing supportive services such as courses that help students transition into college, an “early warning” advising system, and academic support systems ranging from development coursework to tutorial and learning sessions to provide peer-assisted support to students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Such academic support services begin in the student’s first year of college and focus specifically on academic and social preparation, and can be sources that encourage healthy adaptive coping strategies that lead to successful academic outcomes (Thayer, 2000). First-generation college students make up 54% percent of the population of the students seeking these services, with the remaining percent being non-transfer students (Kuh, 2003).

Lastly, self-efficacy beliefs may affect the success of first-generation college students. Research suggests that first-generation college students may not have adequate coping skills to respond to the demands of college, resulting in lower levels of self-efficacy (Majer, 2009). One study found that self-efficacy beliefs, such as beliefs that they can succeed academically and do well in their majors, affect grade point averages (GPA) and persistence rates in first-generation college students (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). These beliefs have been found to affect the underperformance of first-generation college students in comparison to others (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). Such research findings suggest that first-generation college students may benefit from interventions that address self-efficacy for education (Majer, 2009). Ramos-Sánchez (2007) found that first-generation college students who had low self-efficacy beliefs about performing well in their chosen majors also experienced high levels of stress. Additionally, researchers have found that first-generation college students may not have adequate coping skills to respond to the ongoing demands of college, which may result in lower levels of self-efficacy (Majer, 2009). Understanding how first-generation college students cope with academic stress could be helpful for educators and clinicians who work with this population. Focusing on stress, self-efficacy, and coping in first-generation college students is important to understand how these students can succeed academically.

Therefore, it is likely that low self-efficacy and its relationship with academic stress affects the educational outcomes of first-generation college students (Gore, 2006; Majer, 2009). Although first-generation college students make up a significant portion of those attending colleges and universities and are likely to benefit from a variety of academic resources, they continue to struggle academically in comparison to others. For

example, only 20% of first-generation college students enrolled in college earned a degree within 8 years compared to 43% non-first-generation college students (Engle et al., 2006). Research examining the use of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in first-generation college students who are experiencing significant academic stress is necessary to inform treatment and interventions for this unique group.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

First-generation college students are defined as those whose parents did not attend college (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). They represent a unique sample of the college population, and as many as 4.5 million first-generation college students were enrolled in college level courses in the United States in 2008 (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These students often come from families that exhibit lower levels of involvement and engagement in high school and have lower incomes (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Additionally, this group of students is overrepresented in disadvantaged gender, racial, and ethnic groups (Choy, 2001). First-generation college students experience a significant number of challenges in pursuit of their undergraduate degrees. These include being older than traditional students, having familial obligations, having full-time jobs, and attending college part-time (Payne, 2006). The challenges with which first-generation college students are presented have been demonstrated by research highlighting their decreased chances of obtaining college degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008). A student's level of self-efficacy at the beginning of the year may be predictive of later college adjustment; thus, it is important for college counselors to be aware of self-efficacy when helping at-risk students, including those who are first-generation (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). Lastly, the unique stressors that first-generation college students face and how they manage them may influence the academic performance and success of this group in comparison to their peers (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007).

Stress in First-Generation College Students

Stress can be described as an interaction between a person and his or her surroundings, which the person sees as surmounting his or her coping resources (Lazarus

& Folkman, 1984). Stress results from everyday life, is normal, and usually only lasts for a brief period of time (Uliaszek et al., 2012). Stress has been linked to academic adjustment (Demeuse, 1985), with researchers finding that students who have experienced more than 12 stressful life events, such as marriage or the death of a close friend, demonstrate poor academic performance and adjustment (Lloyd, Alexander, Rice, & Greenfield, 1985). When coping strategies do not help alleviate a student's stress, he or she tends to view these stressors as uncontrollable and threatening (Towbes & Cohen, 1996). With the increase in non-traditional students attending college, including part-time students, first-generation students, and students with dependents, the importance for learning how to cope with multiple demands and roles is increased (Giancola et al., 2009).

College students, especially first-generation college students and college freshman, are prone to stress due to having to transition into a new environment (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). For example, Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) identified the top five stressors college students experience: vacations or breaks, new responsibilities, change in eating habits, change in sleeping habits, and increased work load. Furthermore, these students are faced with unique external and internal determinants of stress. External determinants of stress include stressors that exist beyond one's control. Examples of external determinants of stress in first-generation college students include financial problems due to having to hold part- or full-time jobs in order to provide for their families and relationship difficulties as a result of a lack of family support during their college experiences (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Conversely, internal determinants of stress come from within and play a role in determining how an individual

cope. Internal determinants of stress in first-generation college students include unrealistic expectations of what the college experience will be and perfectionistic tendencies (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Stress may be experienced when unrealistic expectations of academic success, a facet of perfectionism and self-efficacy, are not met and the individual does not believe that he or she is being supported in his or her decision and efforts.

Van Yperen and Hagedoorn (2008) argued that individuals who believe that they fail to meet their own standards on a daily basis academically are engaging in a maladaptive or negative response set. In contrast, the setting of high standards is not always negative. They hypothesized that “the perception of individuals that others hold high standards or expectations for them may be particularly stressful when these individuals do not set high standards for themselves but perceive that they consistently fail to achieve their standards” (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008, p. 338). In this study, first-year university students were assessed for perfectionism, generalized self-efficacy, and stress. Findings suggested that perceived stress has a significant impact on their lives (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). Results indicated that there were consequences, such as a decreased sense of self-efficacy, for individuals who perceive that they do not reach their established goals consistently, such as to maintain a 3.9 grade point average (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). In particular, there is a demonstrated link between how students perceive their stress and how intense their stress truly is (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008).

Phinney and Haas (2003) focused their study on the stress faced by ethnic minority college freshmen who are predominantly the first generation in their families to

attend college. The authors reviewed the stressful situations that minority first-generation college students face, the strategies they use in coping, and the personal characteristics that influence the coping process (Phinney & Haas, 2003). The research indicated that first-generation college students tend to experience stress related to having to hold a part- or full-time job, lack of social support, and academic pressure (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Conversely, participants were able to identify seeking social support as the most successful coping strategy (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Although they were able to identify an adaptive coping mechanism, results indicated that the majority of first-generation college students were lacking in their beliefs about their abilities to succeed (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Because of this, first-generation college students who become overwhelmed with their work may choose to leave work incomplete (Phinney & Haas, 2003). First-generation college students may feel relieved through use of an avoidant coping strategy initially; however, as time lapses, they may realize that they have fallen too far behind in their studies, which may result in dropping classes or taking time off from college (Phinney & Haas, 2003). As such, it is important to encourage first-generation college students to engage in adaptive coping mechanisms. For example, first-generation college students identified being proactive and seeking support as the most helpful adaptive coping mechanisms (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Social Support

First-generation college students are at a disadvantage compared to non-first-generation peers because they often do not have the benefit of parental guidance and postsecondary experience to help guide them (Orbe, 2004). Because of this, these students tend to experience a lack of familial support in their decisions to attend four-year

colleges or universities. They describe their parents as less supportive in their decisions to attend colleges and less encouraging throughout their college experiences in comparison to non-first-generation college students (McConnell, 2000). Because the parents of first-generation college students have not received the benefits and success of attending college, not only may they be unsupportive of their decisions to attend colleges, but they may also hinder their success (McConnell, 2000). Research indicates that first-generation college students who received emotional and social support from their families (e.g., parents and family members encouraged them to attend colleges) reported decreased stress levels (Wang, 2008). Since family support may function as a protective factor to reduce stress levels in first-generation college students, university counselors should develop outreach programs for students and their families (Wang, 2008). This may help them understand the challenges first-generation college students face, with the ultimate goal of increasing family support to promote successful academic outcomes (Wang, 2008). Activities can include inviting families to campus, initiating group discussions among parents, and providing family counseling sessions if needed (Wang, 2008). Activities intended to bolster support from families may be beneficial for first-generation students who feel disconnected from their families, and may lead to decreases in students' stress levels (Wang, 2008).

Because first-generation college students may not receive the needed support from their families, they may feel embarrassed, isolated, and unable to confide in their families and peers when faced with stressful experiences, such as working longer hours than non-first-generation students and experiencing increases in family obligations (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). It has been proposed that the amount of stress

related to the college experience disclosed by first-generation college students would be lower in comparison to non-first-generation college freshmen (Barry et al., 2009). Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) hypothesized that first-generation college students are faced with difficulties due to differences pertaining to social support relevant to the college life experience. Additionally, they hypothesized that non-first-generation college freshmen would differ in what they disclose compared to first-generation students (Barry et al., 2009). They believed that when first-generation college students are not provided with an opportunity to disclose these stressful life events, they may experience short- and long-term health problems in addition to academic difficulties (Barry et al., 2009). Results indicated that first-generation college students reported lower levels of disclosure compared to non-first-generation college students (Barry et al., 2009). Feeling supported by social networks would help first-generation college students reduce their stress, enhance their academic success, and increase their overall health (Barry et al., 2009). Also, being supported by a social network could increase a first-generation college student's ability to cope with stress by utilizing social comparison with peers in similar situations (Barry et al., 2009). The findings suggested that low levels of disclosure by a first-generation college student may be predictive of a lack of a social support network (Barry et al., 2009). Specifically, first-generation college students reported significantly less disclosure of stressful life events among friends at home, friends at school, and family (Barry et al., 2009). It is recommended that college staff and faculty provide opportunities to first-generation college students, such as support groups or guest lectures, and intervene to address the differences in level of disclosure presented by first-generation college students (Barry et al., 2009). Particularly, first-generation college

students may feel embarrassed or isolated because they may have fewer people in their immediate social networks who can understand and relate to their problems (Barry et al., 2009). Because these students do not feel like they have supportive social networks, they may utilize negative coping strategies, such as avoidance and denial.

Stress

Stress among college students has been prevalent for many years. Individuals learn how to cope with and manage stressors in various ways. Thus far, research on how first-generation college students cope with stressors is minimal. Brougham, Zail, Mendoza and Miller (2009) examined the sources of stress (e.g., academics, financial, family, social, and daily hassles) and coping strategies (e.g., self-help, approach, accommodation, avoidance and self-punishment) among college students. It was hypothesized that women would report greater stress levels overall, as well as greater family relationship stress, social relationship stress, and daily hassles compared to men (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). Additionally, it was hypothesized that women would report greater overall use of self-help, approach, and accommodation coping strategies, and also would report greater use of self-help approach and accommodation in response to the specific stressors of familial relationships, social relationships, and daily life hassles (Brougham et al., 2009). It was found that female college students in comparison to male college students reported (a) higher overall levels of stress; (b) greater stress in familial relationships, social relationships, and daily hassles; and (c) greater overall use of self-help approaches to cope positively with stress (Brougham et al., 2009). Additionally, it was found that (a) college women reported greater stress for finances than college men, and (b) college women in comparison to

college men reported the use of self-punishment as an overall coping response (Brougham et al., 2009). Thus, these findings provide support for women college students' reports of greater overall stress and greater use of emotion-focused strategies (i.e., self-help and self-punishment) to cope with stress than college men (Brougham et al., 2009).

Differences and similarities have been found between the sexes concerning coping with stress. Regarding sex differences, college men reported the use of self-punishment, a maladaptive strategy, to cope with family stress. College men also reported the use of accommodation to cope with financial stress and self-help to cope with social stress (Brougham et al., 2009). As for sex similarities, both college women and men reported using the maladaptive strategies of avoidance and self-punishment to cope with daily hassles (Brougham et al., 2009). Thus, for specific stressors, college men were found to use maladaptive and adaptive emotion-focused coping, whereas college women were found to use only maladaptive emotion-focused coping (Brougham et al., 2009). Therefore, creating opportunities for improving college students' emotional processing and regulation of emotion should lead to reduced stress and greater use of adaptive coping responses (Brougham et al., 2009). Because first-generation college students are faced with significant stressors, including internal (e.g. obtaining a degree in something one finds pleasurable) and external (e.g. obtaining a degree to make friends or family happy) drives to succeed, learning how this group of students copes with such internal and external demands should be investigated.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism has been identified as an enduring, stable personality trait. No

single definition of perfectionism has been agreed upon, but perfectionism can be characterized as the tendency to set extremely high standards for personal expectations or performance (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionism can be an adaptive trait, but has often been conceptualized and studied as a maladaptive trait. Maladaptive perfectionism can be defined as “excessive concerns about making mistakes, self-doubt, and perception of failure to attain personal standards” (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). People who believe they must be perfect abide by certain irrational beliefs. These irrational beliefs consist of self-defeating beliefs, referred to by Karen Horney as "the tyranny of the shoulds" (Sorotzkin, 1985). An example of this is the belief that "I should be successful." Another irrational belief is that in order to be accepted by others, one must always do everything perfectly (Halgin & Leahy, 1989). Adaptive perfectionism can be described as the setting of high personal standards and goals in order to receive the rewards associated with achievement (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002). Contrarily, maladaptive perfectionism can be described as the setting of unattainable high standards, including feelings of anxiety or uncertainty about one's abilities (Enns et al., 2002). Although maladaptive perfectionism may not be the core issue at referral, as a student begins working with a professional, he or she identifies related problems that include having difficulty meeting parents' standards and difficulty meeting his or her own standards (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006).

Perfectionism can be seen as particularly stressful, in that it can consist of excessive worry about attaining the status of “perfect.” Rice, Leever, Christopher, and Porter (2006) tested the psychological and academic consequences of perfectionism. They explored a causal relationship between college students' perceptions of stress,

social status, academic stress and adjustment. They proposed that if stress and the way people connect with and relate to one another play a role in creating perfectionism issues, then stress management and self-esteem training may be beneficial for perfectionists (Rice et al., 2006). Results from this study indicated that perfectionism is a predictor of maladjustment, stress, and social belonging (Rice et al., 2006). For example, students who noted that they set high expectations for their academic performances, a facet of adaptive perfectionism, connected more with their classmates (Rice et al., 2006). Stress tended to exacerbate the emotions of students who scored high on maladaptive perfectionism, and was a concern for students who scored lower on adaptive perfectionism than others (Rice et al., 2006). Further, because maladaptive perfectionism is correlated with psychological functioning, it is possible that first-generation college students who score high on maladaptive perfectionism may perceive more stress and are more likely to be considered “outsiders,” potentially resulting in isolating themselves from others due to the lack of development of social networks (Rice et al., 2006).

Similarly, Aldea and Rice (2006) studied emotional dysregulation and its link to perfectionism and psychological distress in university students. They proposed that maladaptive perfectionism would correlate positively with psychological distress. Results indicated that emotional dysregulation accounted fully for the association between perfectionism and psychological distress (Aldea & Rice, 2006). It seems likely that individuals with maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies would view challenging situations in dichotomous ways, and emotional reactions to situations and others are likely to be inapt and fractious. Strategies directed at helping first-generation college students with better regulating emotional sensitivity and reducing their tendency to

experience things and people as perfect or flawed could then, in turn, reduce the effects of maladaptive perfectionism on symptoms (Aldea & Rice, 2006). An imperative strategy in treating perfectionism involves understanding differences in emotionality that distinguish maladaptive from more adaptive functioning (Aldea & Rice, 2006).

Students may not recognize that the setting of unrealistic expectations is maladaptive (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). For example, they may perceive their performances as failures if they do not meet their own standards (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). Alternatively, students who set lower standards for themselves may not experience the effects of stress because of their own expectations but experience stress because others hold high expectations for them (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). First-generation college students may struggle with feelings of anxiety and depression when they believe that they are not meeting their own expectations to succeed.

Psychoeducation Programs

Another obstacle that first-generation college students are presented with includes finding resources that can aid their success. Such resources could include psychoeducation programs. These programs can include consultation services, outreach, and research that are created to enhance college student adjustment (Martin, Swartz-Kulstad, & Madson, 1999). Consultation services may include college counselors and student affairs representatives working together to increase the amount of formal contact made between the first-generation college students and staff members (Martin et al., 1999). Outreach programming can involve conducting seminars for first-generation college students, including providing education about what academic success is, how to obtain support resources, how to pick a major area of study, and career development (Martin et

al., 1999). Research includes assessing the needs of students to help promote success (Martin, 1999). For example, Gloria and Castellanos (2012) conducted a qualitative study to examine Latina first-generation college students' experiences and coping mechanisms . These students reported that they had unique experiences as first-generation college students (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). First-generation Latinas described their education as a “privilege,” but noted that it was difficult, challenging, and required sacrifice (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Lack of support remained an ongoing theme because students reported that their families did not support their decisions to leave their homes to go to college (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Consequently, these students did not feel comfortable talking to their parents about issues with school (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Instead, these first-generation college students had to balance separate family and school lives (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Although this was a struggle, the individuals believed that they had strong individual initiative and motivation to achieve their degrees (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Nevertheless, it is clear that first-generation students are vulnerable because they do not know what to expect in the college environment, how to navigate college life, or how to obtain resources (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Pairing first-generation college students with psychoeducational programs may help them address cultural issues, such as stereotyping and making assumptions about a specific population (e.g. Latina), in order to help them create a balance between home and school demands (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

Social and Cultural Transition

First-generation college students experience stress from cultural and social transitions in addition to the typical anxieties, fears, and frustrations of being in college

(Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students from ethnic minority cultures may experience cultural interactive strain as they attempt to cope simultaneously with identity development, acculturation, and gender and cultural socialization (Constantine & Barón, 1997). In addition to cultural aspects such as gender role and ethnicity, college settings define specific norms, values, and behavioral expectations that make up an academic culture (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013). First-generation college students do not have parents who can prepare them to enter and acculturate to college academic culture like their non-first-generation college student peers (Jenkins et al., 2013). Therefore, the education setting can be an environment of acculturative stress for first-generation college students (Jenkins et al., 2013). First-generation college students who must negotiate between a very different academic culture and their home culture with which they have been familiar their entire lives experience higher stress reactions to being in an environment with different cultural aspects such as race, ethnicity, and social class (Miville & Constantine, 2006). These students may lack the academic skills and knowledge that non-first-generation college students are supplied with by their educated parents (Jenkins et al., 2013). Possible sources of academic stress related to acculturation that should be considered by college counselors include alienation, demoralization, academic self-efficacy, and psychological well-being (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Therefore, first-generation college students experience unique stressors that may impact their college performance. These stressors include transitioning to a new environment, lack of parental guidance and involvement, setting high or unrealistic expectations for oneself, and lack of resources or programs to help guide their college

experiences. This extensive list of stressors exemplifies the need to understand how first-generation college students utilize both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies to manage these stressors.

Coping

The methods used to cope with stressors can be different for everyone. Additionally, there are many competing definitions of coping. It has been defined as "the person's cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986, p. 572). Coping involves cognitive and behavioral efforts utilized to manage the internal and external determinants of stress (Folkman et al., 1986). Further, coping strategies can be described as adaptive or maladaptive, meaning that coping can have helpful or harmful outcomes. Coping strategies fall typically within two categories, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping entails strategies to modify the given problem at hand by generating options to solve the problem, examining the costs and benefits, and identifying and implementing steps to solve the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, involves learning how to manage an individual's emotional distress that is specifically related to the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adaptive strategies of emotion-focused coping include positive reinterpretation of events and seeking social support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Maladaptive strategies include denial and venting of emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

First-generation college students cope with stress in many ways. For example,

some first-generation college students tend to be proactive by planning their activities and staying up longer to complete coursework in order to manage academic stress (Phinney & Haas, 2003). They may use acceptance to manage the many challenges associated with being college students (Phinney & Haas, 2003). They may even seek support by attending study groups or talking to others about stressful situations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Nevertheless, first-generation college students may also choose to engage in distancing and avoidance by stepping away from the problems at hand or trying to forget about them (Phinney & Haas, 2003). How first-generation college students cope with stress can impact their college experiences and how successful they will be.

Coping strategies. Burns, Dittmann, Nguyen, and Mitchelson (2000) were interested in how stress and coping mechanisms relate. The purpose of their study was to provide a better understanding of procrastination, perfectionism, and control in undergraduate university students. These behaviors and coping styles appear to be functionally related to vigilant and avoidant coping styles (Burns, Dittmann, Nguyen, & Mitchelson, 2000). Vigilant coping can be described as strategies that are characterized by “intensified intake and processing of threatening information” (Krohne, 1993). This may include academic procrastination or task aversiveness (Krohne, 1993). Vigilant coping is often triggered when a situation provokes a significant degree of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty (Miller, 1996). An individual who employs an avoidant coping style is assumed to lack confidence in his or her abilities to handle stressful situations and is preoccupied with his or her deficiencies (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003). The results of the Burns et al. (2000) study provided evidence that negative or maladaptive perfectionism affects sensitivity to negative outcomes, failure to succeed, and criticism

by others. This means that first-generation college students tend to utilize negative coping strategies when confronted with stressful events. Therefore, if first-generation college students hold beliefs that other people view them negatively and that they will not succeed academically, this may become internalized due to limited self-efficacy (Burns et al., 2000). First-generation college students may not possess the knowledge and experience of understanding how to utilize positive coping mechanisms. Learning how to identify first-generation college students' specific needs and challenges can help inform appropriate responses and coping strategies for their problems. Therefore, it may be helpful for college counselors to assist first-generation college students in becoming more aware of the positive coping mechanisms that can be used when confronted with stressful situations in order to help them steer away from negative coping mechanisms (Burns et al., 2000). Additionally, the incorporation of positive coping mechanisms are particularly useful for first-generation college students to help minimize the risk of dropout due to their misperceptions of and lack of preparation for college compared to non-first-generation college students (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

A study was conducted to determine whether the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress is mediated by unhealthy coping mechanisms for college students (Gnilka, Ashby, & Noble, 2012). Results indicated that participants who scored high on maladaptive perfectionism engaged in escape-avoidance and distancing, which are examples of negative or unhealthy coping mechanisms (Gnilka et al., 2012). Because first-generation college students tend to utilize unhealthy coping mechanisms, psychologists and college counselors should focus on teaching first-generation college students positive coping mechanisms throughout sessions, as well as

self-care techniques that can help those who can be described as maladaptive perfectionists engage in healthy coping strategies.

When individuals do not implement positive coping mechanisms, they may find themselves experiencing one or several pitfalls that can limit their success in the college environment. One such pitfall could be described as “excel at any cost,” in which individuals will do whatever it takes to reach their high standard goals (Lombardi, Florentino, & Lombardi, 1998). Other pitfalls include “futility/do nothing,” where such individuals lack ambition to do anything, and “conceal at all costs,” in which these individuals make excuses for when they fall short of reaching their goals (Lombardi et al., 1998). Additionally, first-generation college students may experience “jitters” or “the blues” when something goes wrong, instead of utilizing an adaptive coping strategy (Lombardi et al., 1998). This can result in “abnormal behaviors” such as, alcoholism and suicide (Lombardi et al., 1998). As a means of preventing these pitfalls, first-generation college students require education about the benefits of using adaptive coping mechanisms to manage everyday stressors.

It is important to remember that coping is idiosyncratic. College counselors can help first-generation college students develop multiple ways to cope that are flexible and most appropriate for specific stressful events. Since college students often use maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as procrastination and drinking, it is beneficial for counselors to help these students become more aware of adaptive coping strategies, such as acceptance and problem-solving, in order to maintain healthy lifestyles (Brougham et al., 2009). Adaptive coping strategies and academic self-efficacy have been found to be related to the persistence and adjustment of academic achievement (Burns et al., 2000).

If first-generation college students do not believe they are obtaining adequate support, they may begin to doubt their academic abilities, therefore, hindering their academic success.

Academic Self-Efficacy

How a first-generation college student perceives his or her academic self-efficacy may influence the career path the student will choose to pursue, the amount of effort placed on his or her studies, how he or she will persevere when faced with challenges and threats of failure, and how he or she will cope with the demands of being a first-generation college student (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Self-efficacy can be defined as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). It represents a cognitive resource pertaining to a person’s confidence in his or her abilities to engage in behaviors aimed at obtaining a desired goal (Bandura, 1997). A student’s confidence in his or her ability to perform well in college can influence how he or she experiences stress and copes with it. As mentioned, academic self-efficacy may play a significant role in how first-generation college students manage their college experiences. It is important to focus attention on the concept of academic self-efficacy in first-generation college students (Chemers et al., 2001).

Academic success. Self-efficacy has been found to predict higher grade point averages in college students (Majer, 2009). Majer (2009) investigated the impact of academic self-efficacy in regard to socioeconomic characteristics over time, which included being a first-generation college student, to identify predictors of academic success. Results indicated a positive significant relationship between academic self-

efficacy and cumulative grade point averages (Majer, 2009). This finding suggests that academic self-efficacy is crucial in promoting educational attainment in first-generation college students and that first-generation college students may struggle with utilizing positive coping skills when experiencing the ongoing demands of college (Majer, 2009). This may result in lower levels of self-efficacy; therefore, first-generation college students may benefit from interventions that address self-efficacy for education (Majer, 2009).

Perhaps related to the numerous obstacles first-generation college students face, research has shown that first-generation college students report lower academic success expectations compared to their non-first-generation college student peers (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). First-generation college students' beliefs and expectations for academic success have been found to directly impact their career and educational intentions (Fouad & Smith, 1996). First-generation college students may hold beliefs that they may be unable to pay for college, be successful during college, or may be unable to finish college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The findings from Gibbons and Borders (2010) suggest that first-generation college students believe that attending college may result in fewer positive results compared to their non-first-generation college student peers because of the obstacles they may face. This result is important for considering the academic and career development of this population (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

The academic success of first-generation college students depends strongly on the resources available. First-generation college students are less likely to obtain their college degrees compared to non-first-generation college students (Knutson, 2014). Because of this, support systems aimed at helping first-generation college students

achieve academic success are growing in numbers. This support system is usually in the form of support programming, such as freshman orientation seminars to help build personalized connections within the community (Knutson, 2014). It is also important to include support in the form of individual attention, including positive role-models through staff, faculty, advisors, and peer mentoring programs (Knutson, 2014). Knutson (2014) examined whether a parent's level of educational attainment could affect his or her children's academic self-efficacy beliefs as college students (Knutson, 2014). Specifically, the influence of a parent's level of educational attainment on college students' reported levels of academic self-efficacy was examined (Knutson, 2014). Results indicated that first-generation college students report lower levels of academic self-efficacy compared to non-first generation students, providing evidence that first-generation college students have lower levels of academic self-efficacy (Knutson, 2014). Lastly, it is also important to consider that their levels of academic self-efficacy may be affected by non-academic factors, such as current financial need and familial obligations (Knutson, 2014).

Cruce, Kinzie, Williams, Morelon, and Yu (2005) explored academic self-efficacy beliefs of first-year college students including first-generation and non-first-generation students. They noted that if a difference in self-efficacy beliefs exists, the results would identify a significant differential impact on academic success and engagement in college. Results indicated that first-generation college students had lower academic self-efficacy compared to students who identified at least one parent who received a bachelor's degree (Cruce, Kinzie, Williams, Morelon, & Yu, 2005). Regardless of the measures taken to prepare the first-generation college students for

college, they continued to score lower on academic self-efficacy beliefs (Cruce et al., 2005). The results indicate that this group of students may not believe in their abilities to succeed academically in a four-year institution and may benefit from outreach programs.

Although the number of first-generation college students is increasing, they still endure unique challenges that may hinder them from obtaining college degrees. First-generation college students are faced with a number of stressors, including having to hold a full- or part-time job, lack of social support, unrealistic expectations of the college experience, and perfectionistic tendencies (Inman & Mayes, 1999). These stressors may impact first-generation college students' academic self-efficacy. Specifically, first-generation college students often have low academic self-efficacy beliefs that impact their career and educational goals (Fouad & Smith, 1996). Thus far, minimal research has examined how first-generation college students cope with these stressors and self-efficacy beliefs. Some studies have found that first-generation college students perceive themselves as less capable to succeed academically (Ramos-Sánchez, 2007). If college counselors and psychologists who work with these individuals can identify areas in which first-generation college students are lacking, this information can be used to target intervention programs aimed at identifying academic self-efficacy beliefs and positive coping mechanisms that can be implemented to help students succeed.

Purpose of the Study

Few research studies were found that examine the relationship between stress, coping, and self-efficacy in first-generation college students. Limitations in these studies include small sample sizes, short duration of time, and studying first-generation college students who only attend community colleges (Gore, 2006; Majer, 2009). The current

study attempted to contribute to the literature by exploring first-generation college students' experiences of stress and coping in college. The results of this study provide additional information about how these factors can contribute to retention and attrition rates of first-generation college students.

Research Question

A grounded theory design was used to explore the following question: In a sample of stressed first-generation college students, how do they experience the transition to college and stressors associated with the college experience?

Chapter 3: Method

Research Design

The study used a qualitative design that was conducted in a semi-structured interview format. The qualitative design employed a grounded theory analysis method. The qualitative, grounded theory design was chosen due to the limited research available describing stress, coping, and self-efficacy in first-generation college students. The lack of theory available provided an opportunity to explore first-generation college students' experiences in order to induce common themes and develop preliminary hypotheses (Merriam, 2002). The qualitative research design also provided an opportunity to explore the impact of stress, coping, and self-efficacy on the first-generation college student's experience. A qualitative method was utilized to enhance further research on first-generation college students and their college experiences to benefit the growing population.

Design Justification

The grounded theory of qualitative analysis outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) supplied the base for the current data analysis. The grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to recognize common themes and concepts in order to develop an integrated theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By utilizing this approach, the researcher was able to develop hypotheses and gain knowledge of the given population without having to develop specific hypotheses beforehand (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The uniqueness of grounded theory of analysis includes the ability to both explain and describe an integrated set of concepts with minimal predictability (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By conducting interviews and observations, the process of qualitative research

sought to uncover relevant themes and patterns in hopes of gaining new insight and strength into an emerging theory.

The analysis and interpretation of the data were initiated by the researcher after all 10 interviews were completed. Specifically, each interview transcript was read several times by the researcher. After reading through the transcription for the first time, the researcher was able to gain an understanding of the information that was presented, and identified and developed different concepts that emerged. The concepts included anything that stood out or emerged from the transcription, including emotions, events, behaviors, and relationships, among other variables. As different concepts became apparent and comparisons showed that certain concepts resembled each other, the concepts were then grouped to form categories. A category can be defined as a set of concepts that relate to the same phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories are more abstract than concepts and have been recognized as the cornerstone of identifying an emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As the process of categorization became more pronounced, the researcher began to code the data as a way of organizing the information. By identifying categories, the validation team met to develop possible theories, which is the final step in conducting a grounded theory analysis.

A selected validation team helped analyze the data in order to enhance the external validity of the study. The validation team consisted of four volunteers who were clinical psychology doctoral students and were working under the primary investigator. Three of the selected coders were first-year students and one coder was a fourth-year student. Prior to beginning the coding process, each of the coders met with the researcher for 1 hour to engage in training pertaining to the coding strategy for the study. Once the

coders completed the training process, each team member was provided with the same set of three transcribed diverse interviews. Each team member was prompted to conduct the coding process independently prior to regrouping with the validation team.

The first step of the coding process was open coding, which included the breakdown of data by labeling different concepts that emerged and categorizing each concept (Pandit, 1996). The purpose of open coding is to develop insight about a particular phenomenon by identifying similarities and differences between concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The validation team then met a second time 1 week later to discuss process memos written by each team member, which formed the basis of the analytic process. The notes helped identify evidence for the basis of coding through the process of analyst triangulation. Analyst triangulation helps identify different aspects of empirical reality by including multiple analysts of data collection in order to consider multiple perspectives that can explore and identify possible alternative explanations of the data during the coding process (Patton, 1999). A comparative method was utilized to group together similar concepts at an abstract level to form categories (Pandit, 1996).

The second step of the coding process was axial coding. In axial coding, the development of categories is further explored by examining the relationships between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this phase of coding, hypothetical relationships are being offered for consideration but cannot be verified until they are tested against data by showing that the relationship is recurring (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The purpose of axial coding is to establish connections between categories and their sub-categories, and to verify these categories through the data in order to develop a general theme (Pandit, 1996).

The final step of the coding process was selective coding, which is often the most challenging step for researchers. The process of selective coding entails the integration of all categories into distinct core categories in order to develop the framework for an initial theory (Pandit, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is helpful to use a diagram during this phase of coding to integrate the categories and eliminate categories that were poorly developed in order to ensure the consistency of themes and constructs (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As conditions and dimensions developed, theories began to emerge (Berg, Lune, & Lune, 2004).

Grounded theory of analysis was relevant to this study because it allowed for a discovery-oriented process to help gain further knowledge in an area that has been studied minimally and under-theorized (Burck, 2005). The approach allowed for an interpretation of data that included both similarities and diversities in order to explore first-generation college students' experiences in more depth (Burck, 2005). The utilization of a validation team and comparative model allowed for the development of conceptual density, which can be defined as "the richness of concept development and relationships," to demonstrate relationships among the data throughout the entire course of the research project (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 274). Grounded theory was used because of its ability to guide the researcher in creating a possible theory related to the stressors and coping mechanisms first-generation college students experience, and how these contribute to their academic self-efficacy beliefs.

Participants

A total of 10 participants were interviewed for the study. The study sample included six females and four males between the ages of 18 and 22 with a mean age of 19

years, 6 months. Four of the participants were in their first year of college and six of the participants were in their second year of college. Six of the participants lived on campus, whereas four of the participants identified themselves as commuters. The employment status of the participants varied, with two participants being employed full-time, three participants being employed part-time, and five participants being currently unemployed. All but one of the participants used a combination of financial aid resources to pay for college, including scholarships, loans, and grants, and one participant paid out of pocket. Eight of the participants identified their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, one participant identified as mixed race, and one participant identified as Afghan. All but one participant was born and raised in the United States. None of the participants' parents graduated from or attended college. Additionally, three of the participants were transfer students. Overall, the participants' stress level, which was determined by focusing on how they felt over the past month, demonstrated that they were experiencing high stress ($M = 20.6$, $SD = 7.21$). This may be indicative of when the participants were interviewed. For example, four of the participants were interviewed during the beginning of the semester, four were interviewed two weeks before midterm examinations, and two participants were interviewed during the time of final examinations prior to leaving for winter break.

Demographic information can be found in Table 1.

All of the participants were current college students who were attending one of two universities in northeastern Pennsylvania. The first university consisted of a somewhat diverse population, including 74.8 % of students identifying as White, 5.5 % Hispanic or Latino, 2% Black or African American, and 1.6% Asian. In regard to gender, 66.5% of the population identified as female and 33.5 % identified as male. Their

freshman retention rate was 80%. Out of 422 students who were expected to graduate in 2015, 238 of the students graduated on time and 291 students graduated within 3 to 6 years. The second university consisted of a more diverse population, including 81.3% of students identifying as White, 7.8% Hispanic or Latino, 2.4% Asian, and 1.6% Black or African American. From this university, 56.9% of the population identified as female and 43.1% identified as male. Their freshman retention rate was 89%. Out of 961 students who were expected to graduate in 2015, 708 graduated on time.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Information*

Gender	Year of College	Campus Residential Status	Employment Status	Use of Financial Aid Resources	Race/Ethnicity
Male	1 st	Resident	Unemployed	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Mixed
Male	2 nd	Resident	Part-time	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Caucasian
Male	1 st	Commuter	Unemployed	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Caucasian
Male	2 nd	Commuter	Part-time	Scholarships, Loans, Pay out of pocket	Caucasian
Female	2 nd	Resident	Unemployed	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Caucasian
Female	2 nd	Resident	Part-time	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Caucasian
Female	1 st	Resident	Unemployed	Scholarships, Grants, Pay out of pocket	Caucasian
Female	2 nd	Commuter	Full-time	Pay out of pocket	Caucasian
Female	1 st	Resident	Unemployed	Scholarships, Loans, Grants	Caucasian
Female	2 nd	Commuter	Full-time	Scholarships, Grants	Afghan

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from two universities located in northeastern Pennsylvania. An e-mail that included a brief description of the purpose of the study and the researcher's contact information was sent through the universities' portals to the registered undergraduate students. Interested candidates were able to volunteer to participate in the study by contacting the researcher via e-mail. The interested candidates were then contacted by the researcher to arrange a time and location on campus to complete the interview. A total of 33 participants contacted the researcher over the course of 3 months; however, 23 potential participants needed to be turned away from the study because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The recruitment e-mail did not define what it meant to be a first-generation college student and many interested participants believed first-generation status meant that they were a freshman in college, which was later clarified before scheduling an interview but may have contributed to turning away some of the potential participants.

Inclusion criteria. Participants were required to be a full- or part-time undergraduate student at one of the abovementioned universities. Additionally, participants were required to be considered a first-generation college student. A first-generation college student is defined as someone whose parents did not receive a bachelor's degree (Thayer, 2000). They were required to be fluent in written and spoken English. Lastly, participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 22 years and currently enrolled as a freshman or sophomore.

Exclusion criteria. Any student who was not currently pursuing their undergraduate education or is not considered a first-generation college student were excluded from study participation. Students not attending either of the two specified

universities in northeastern Pennsylvania were excluded from the study as well.

Risks and benefits. In the current study, there was minimal risk to the participants. Confidentiality was maintained at all times and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, there was no direct benefit to the participants in the current study. The potential benefit of this study was to the first-generation college student population as a whole, as well as college advisors and clinical professionals who work with this population.

Measures

The qualitative study used a demographic data form that was developed by the researcher and was completed before beginning the interview process to ensure the inclusion and exclusion criteria were met (see Appendix C). Examples of questions included in the demographic questionnaire included gender, age, year of college, campus residential status, parents' attendance in college, intended major, employment status, use of financial aid resources, race/ethnicity, and where the participants were born and raised. A semi-structured interview was also developed by the researcher and reviewed by a faculty member at the researcher's graduate school who was not a member of the dissertation committee. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to obtain descriptive data about the first-generation college students' unique experiences that would later be analyzed to develop emerging themes. Specific data that were gathered assessed reasons to apply to college, stress, positive and negative coping, and the meaning of being a first-generation college student. The following are examples of interview questions asked by the researcher: "What was it like to apply to college?" "What are some of the challenges you face outside of school and how do you deal with

these challenges?” “Given your first-generation status, what does that mean to you and your family?” “How have your ideas about college or yourself as a student changed?” (See Appendix E for more interview questions).

In addition, each student completed the Perceived Stress Scale 10-Item Version (PSS-10; Cohen, 1988). The scale was used in the current study for the purpose of identifying the stress level in a group of college students and the scores were not considered in any statistical analyses. This scale is designed to measure the degree to which specific situations in one’s life may be seen as overbearing. This is particularly beneficial to understand because it can help identify what aspects of the participant’s life are being considered stressful and whether these aspects are a direct response to maladaptive perfectionism or lack of coping skills. The PSS-10 is a self-report measure, in which participants respond to a set of questions about how they felt within the past month using a Likert rating from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*; see Appendix D). Scores are obtained by reversing responses to the four items that refer to low levels of stress (i.e., items 4, 5, 7, & 8) and then adding across all scale items such that high scores are associated with high levels of reported stress. A score of 13 points is considered average and scores of 20 points or higher are considered high levels of stress (Cohen, 1988). Across three samples, coefficient alpha reliability was .84, .85, and .86. The test-retest correlation observed over a 1-week period was .85. Validity evidence included the finding that higher PSS scores were associated with factors such as failure to quit smoking, more cold symptoms, and increased vulnerability to experience a stressful event (Cohen, 1988). Internal consistency had a Cronbach alpha of .74 and test-retest correlations was average ($r < .80$; Trouillet, Gana, & Lourel, 2009). Concurrent validity

was verified by finding "positive correlations between PSS score, depressive symptomatology" ($r \geq 0.65$) and "a global measure of physical symptoms traditionally viewed as psychosomatic" (ranging from $r = .65$ to $r = .70$; Trouillet et al., 2009 p. 361).

Procedure

In order to conduct the study, permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researcher's institution as well as of the universities where the interviews were conducted. Once approval was obtained, an e-mail was sent to both universities where the study was conducted requesting volunteers to participate.

In order to collect the data, candidates who volunteered to participate in the study were contacted by the researcher via e-mail. The purpose of the study, the risks and benefits, and characteristics of the interview process were explained to the participants. A private location at each participant's university was arranged and the researcher and participant met in person. Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time and that their participation is voluntary via e-mail when they inquired about participating and orally before the interview process began. The participant was required to be able to read and sign the informed consent form. It was written in the consent form that withdrawing from the study would not impact their educational status. The informed consent also explained that the interview sessions would be audio recorded (see Appendices A and B). The participants were told that all of their private information would be de-identified to ensure confidentiality. The participants were informed that demographic data surveys, audiotapes, transcripts, and written consent forms would be stored in locked files at all times and destroyed at an appropriate time.

Next, each participant was given a demographic data survey to complete. Once the survey was completed and reviewed by the researcher to determine that the inclusion and exclusion criteria were met, the participant completed the PSS-10 measure. A semi-structured interview inquiring about application processes, common stressors, coping skills, adjustment to college, expectations of college, and self-efficacy beliefs was then completed. Interviews with the participants lasted between 16 and 68 minutes. All interview questions were developed by the researcher and reviewed by the researcher's dissertation committee and one professor at the researcher's graduate school who was not affiliated with the study. When the interview was complete, the investigator thanked the participant and gave him or her a debriefing form. The debriefing form explained the purpose of the study and provided the participant with local resources they could utilize if they felt distressed as a result of the interview. The participant's name was also entered into a raffle to win a \$50 Visa gift card. Additionally, students at one of the universities received credit for their general psychology course by participating in the dissertation study.

Once the participant exited the interview, the audio-taped interview was transcribed verbatim by the investigator and then stored in a locked cabinet that only the principal investigator had access to. Each interview and audio recording was de-identified to maintain confidentiality. All recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher upon completion of all 10 interviews. To enhance the external validity of the study, a validation team was recruited for the study. Each coder was provided with the same three diverse transcripts, allowing each coder to engage independently in open coding until the achievement of saturation. The validation team then reconvened with the

researcher to identify different concepts that emerged and begin to group these concepts into different categories. After identifying specific concepts that became evident throughout the coding process, a comparative method allowed the validation team to create a list of specific codes (see Appendix F). Because the validation team consisted of four coders, three of the coders were provided with two additional transcripts and one coder was provided with one transcript. The determined codes were then used to interpret the remaining transcripts, which allowed the researcher to identify categories that included conceptual density. By continuing this process and meeting with the validation team a final time, core themes became apparent. Specifically, four core themes were identified by synthesizing the data and beginning to gather a conceptualization of common topics that were discussed. The themes allowed the researcher to reduce the data even further by contextualizing the findings to begin to explain why the current results differed or were consistent with the results found in previous studies. The utilization of interpretation and explanation allowed the researcher to conceptualize the findings to develop a theory by building upon what was already known about this population and incorporating new content to reveal the complexity of being a first-generation college student.

Chapter 4: Results

During the analysis of the narratives, different concepts became apparent and were grouped into categories as part of the open coding phase. With the help of a validation team to reduce bias and increase the external validity of the study, connections between the categories were further explored, resulting in 10 distinct categories that were later used as codes during the axial coding phase of analysis. The 10 categories included reasons to apply to college, the application method, support in applying to college, the meaning of being a first-generation college student, expectations of college, adaptation and adjustment to college, support in college, stressors and challenges related to being a first-generation college student, coping mechanisms, and emotions. These categories are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2*Emerging Categories and Definitions*

Category	Definition
Reasons to apply to college	<i>Explanations or factors that explain a first-generation college student's motivation to attend college</i>
The application method	<i>Specific procedures used to learn about colleges and complete required application materials</i>
Support in applying to college	<i>Positive or negative people or experiences that assisted in learning how to get into college</i>
The meaning of being a first-generation college student	<i>The value and understanding someone holds about being the first person in his or her family to attend college given that his or her parents did not receive a bachelor's degree</i>
Expectations of college	<i>The anticipation of a specific college experience based on preconceived thoughts and beliefs</i>
Adaptation and adjustment to college	<i>The process of changing and making accommodations to become comfortable with being a college student</i>
Support in college	<i>Positive or negative people or experiences that assisted in the adjustment of being a first-generation college student</i>
Stressors and challenges related to being a first-generation college student	<i>Anything that triggers a negative or uncomfortable response within the individual</i>
Coping Mechanisms	<i>Positive or negative things that someone does to deal with a difficult situation</i>
Emotions	<i>The feelings derived from different circumstances such as being a first-generation college student</i>

Emerging Themes

During the selective coding phase of analysis, the 10 categories were compared for similarities and differences. The discovery-oriented process allowed for different themes to become apparent based off of the distinct categories that were previously determined. Four themes emerged from the transcripts in an attempt to synthesize the abundance of data that were obtained. The four themes that emerged included the first-generation college students' motivations to attend college and their positive experiences in applying, emotional coping as a first-generation college student, difficulty adapting to college due to unrealistic expectations, and the importance of a positive support system during the first year of college to cope with unique stressors.

Motivation to attend college and positive experiences in applying. The first theme that emerged was first-generation college students' motivation to attend college and their positive experiences in applying. This theme can be defined as factors that encouraged first-generation college students to seek college education and the support they received throughout the process. The participants reported that their motivation to attend college included their personal experiences and desire to help people, to provide themselves with an opportunity to gain meaningful employment, and to accomplish something that their parents were unable to achieve. Additionally, many of the participants identified significant people who helped them throughout the application process including guidance counselors, friends, and high school staff. These were individuals who helped them to feel confident when applying, given that their parents were unable to assist them throughout the application process.

Narrative examples of how personal experiences and the desire to help people

influenced participants' desires to attend college are included below:

"I always wanted to do something medical. When I was little, my grandfather had cancer and I never really understood what was going, on so my whole goal with my nursing career was to let people know that they are not alone. I just want to be there to teach them about different diagnoses and give them some kind of understanding that I didn't have, and I knew I could not do that without a college education." - Female, 2nd year student

"I wanted to be an eye surgeon since roughly the end of my eighth-grade year when a stick went through my eye, and pretty much the only way to do that is to go to college and then go to medical school so that's a reason why I'm going to college right now." - Male, 2nd year student

Narrative examples of how participants identified the desire to gain meaningful employment are included below:

"Well to me, college education is necessary. It is now made to a point where if you don't have a college degree it is hard to find advancement in your career. That's just my subjective opinion, so I figured if I want to do something that I love then I need to get that college education." - Male, 1st year student

"My goals required a college education and especially now-a-days in the world, if you don't have any credentials or higher level education, you really can't be considered for a higher position job." - Male, 2nd year student

Narrative examples of how participants wanted to accomplish something that their parents were unable to achieve are included below:

"I'm the only one besides my younger sister who is going to college. I am the youngest of five children and my three brothers just started working right out of high school. My dad went right out and started working after high school and my mom graduated high school and then had us so she was unable to go to college. I knew that I wanted something more. I have a niece and nephew and wanted to show them that they're not stuck here if they don't want to be. I'm not from much so I wanted to show my niece and nephew that you don't have to be super smart or have a lot of money to go places." - Female, 2nd year student

"I'm the first girl from both sides of my family and, most of the time—99% of the time—it was guys who went college, and where my parents are from, sometimes girls would go to school but they would never go to college. It could be the culture reasons or it could be the times right now but I was raised somewhere else and when I got to the United States and my parents saw that girls go to school and college, as a kid I knew that was what I wanted to do. I can be the first person in my family to go to college." - Female, 1st year student

Narrative examples of positive support received throughout the application process are included below:

"One of my friends helped me throughout the application process. I did not know

the system, I did not know how to do the application, and I did not know what the questions were or where to click. He sat down with me and went through the applications. He basically held my hand to submit the application." - Female, 1st year student

"I received a lot of help from my guidance counselor. I met up with him every day after school when I was a senior in high school so that was really helpful. He helped me get all of my applications and essays done." - Female, 2nd year student

Emotional coping as a first-generation college student. The second theme that emerged was emotional coping. This theme can be defined as positive or negative ways someone handles his or her feelings related to attending college when his or her parents did not receive college degrees. The participants reported positive and negative emotions related to being a first-generation college student. Some of the positive emotions included feeling happy and enthusiastic. On the contrary, some of the negative emotions included feeling terrified, nervous, and overwhelmed. Both positive and negative coping strategies were also utilized by the participants. Positive coping strategies included spending time with friends and family, talking to a mental health therapist, and joining groups and organizations to relate to others about their experiences. Negative coping strategies identified included isolation and avoidance. This theme also identified what it means for the participants to be a first-generation college student. Specifically, the participants reported that they were able to feel a sense of pride and honor because they were doing something that would better their lives and that their parents did not have an

opportunity to do.

Narrative examples of positive coping strategies utilized to help manage emotions are included below:

"I would say I'm just happy. I am the first girl to go to college in my family and I have an excitement to go and want to learn and achieve and get something out of life. However, I work full-time, go to school full-time, and take care of my family. Although I am determined, I am also overwhelmed. My dad and friends are always there for me, though. I would sit with my dad and tell him that I don't know if I can do this but he would point out solutions to problems and then something would happen the next day and I would remember what he told me and I would try it and it would work." - Female, 1st year student

"I often feel anxious and nervous because I am the kind of person who wants to have control over everything. However, I learned that by talking to my psychiatrist that it is okay to ask for help and that medications really help me live and it's just a part of who I am. I also put sticky notes up to remind me to do things and I set aside a certain amount of time each week to talk to my parents." - Female, 1st year student

A narrative example of negative coping strategies utilized to help manage emotions is included below:

"College was really frustrating at first. I'm struggling with getting to where my friends already are. For instance, a lot of them have cars and what not but I am

currently saving up to get a car in the first place. I can't change the circumstances so I just don't deal with it because if I can't change it, why am I going to worry about it?" - Male, 1st year student

Narrative examples of what it means for the participants to attend college when their parents did not receive college degrees are included below:

"I have three younger siblings and, to me, it shows my siblings that they can do whatever they want to do. I don't want my siblings to allow anyone to tell them that they can't go further and always have hope. I never dreamt that I would be in America and have the freedom of education and I think education is the freedom to everything. Being able to say that I am going to college makes me feel proud. My dad always wanted to become a doctor and now I think I am going to achieve his dream as long as he continues to help push me forward." - Female, 1st year student

"It is important to follow what you believe deep down. Because I am the first person in my family to attend college, it was hard for my dad to understand why I didn't go into the farm business, but his side of the family still provides me with encouragement. But I think it is pretty cool because my brother is attending college now too and when we create our own families someday, we will have a different lifestyle to relay on our children and our new families can build upon that." - Female, 2nd year student

Adaptation to college. The third theme that emerged can be described as difficulty adapting to college due to unrealistic expectations. This theme can be defined as the process of making changes and accommodations to fit in with preconceived thoughts and beliefs about attending college. The participants noted that they held unrealistic expectations for college. For example, many responded that they believed their experiences in college would be similar to high school. In addition, they believed that they knew how to study in high school, so following previous methods would lead them to achieve the same grades as before college. They reported that these unrealistic expectations made it difficult for them to adapt to college because they learned quickly that they had more independence, less free time, more work outside of the classroom, and needed to learn how to balance their school and social activities in addition to working part- or full-time.

Narrative examples related to the difficulty of adapting to college due to unrealistic expectations are included below:

"Going back to my first year, it was much harder than I thought it was going to be. I thought I knew how to study and knew what I was doing and then I started taking tests and I actually got a D for the first time in my life and I was mortified. I am very Type A personality and it took me a while to recognize that there is more to your college experience than just your grades. I wanted to continue to be a straight A student and I'm hoping to get my GPA up to 3.8 before I graduate." - Female, 2nd year student

"I expected college to be fairly similar to high school. However, I quickly learned

that I am a bit of a perfectionist and I also cannot relax knowing that I have work hanging over my head. I learned that college requires a lot more work outside of the classroom and while it has been one of the most fun years of my life, it has also been more stressful because when you're in college, the bar for having good grades is a lot higher for the amount of work involved." - Female, 2nd year student

Positive support during the first year of college. The fourth theme that emerged was the importance of a positive support system during the first year of college to help manage unique stressors. This theme can be defined as positive people or experiences that help first-generation college students manage any triggers or experiences that evoke negative responses related to being the first person in their families to attend college. Each of the participants identified specific stressors or challenges that they have experienced, which included familial stressors and finances. Familial stressors included being unable to speak with their parents about their college experiences because they believed that their parents would not understand what they were going through and feeling obligated to take care of their parents. The participants noted that finances were a stressor because they felt obligated to work to support themselves and their families during their college educations. Nevertheless, participants noted that they felt supported by their peers, advisors, and professors, which allowed for a positive experience during their first year of college.

Narrative examples of familial stressors related to being a first-generation college student are included below:

"I am an only child and I felt like I had more responsibilities to my parents than if I had siblings. I have a best friend and she has a big family and all of my friends have siblings and I am the only one who is an only child, so I know different structures of families and I definitely had a lot more responsibilities. Not having to take care of my parents, as weird as that sounds, is just different for me and I am still getting used to that." - Female, 1st year student

"Relationships with my parents is a challenge. There is a lot going on with my family health-wise and I am trying to keep up with them and make sure my grades are still maintained." - Male, 1st year student

Narrative examples of financial stressors related to being a first-generation college student are included below:

"My family isn't well off and we have gone through economic and financial troubles, and I would have to get groceries at times and that was my way of contributing, and I think just being able to buy my own stuff was helpful for my family." - Female, 1st year student

"I am not a person who likes to keep the money at all. I work and my mom has an income and with that money I pay the rent to the house and the rest is insurance of the cars, phone bills, Comcast, my phone bill, credit cards, and then pretty much I am good for school, so I have been saving money for my brother to go to college.

But I am the one who physically pays the bills." - Female, 1st year student

"There was a lot of dealing with my friends and their families having a lot more money than my family. That made it a bit stressful because I would just think about how hard I worked throughout high school to get to where I am now." -

Male, 1st year student

"Finances is a big thing right now. I think there is some debt on my account that I need to figure out soon. I want to get a job soon just to be able to help. For example, if I need to get something like supplies I want to be able to have some money on hand and be able to pay for some of my college." - Female, 1st year student

Narrative examples of the importance of having a positive support system during college are included below:

"I am the typical story of the kid with the sheltered life growing up and now I'm in college and have those freedoms to do whatever I want. But I hang out with friends a lot and they support me and keep me on track." - Male, 1st year student

"I wanted to be involved in clubs. I really enjoy singing so I joined the choir and also the choir director has a very unique personality that I enjoy. I found that there are a lot of people who will help you out if you have any issues with anything. For instance, since I wanted to take the MCATs to go to medical

school, I was supposed to take chemistry beforehand but I was not scheduled to be in chemistry, so the university allowed me to take the placement exam and they were just very accommodating with it." -Male, 2nd year student

"I have a good group of friends and we have a balance between all working really hard, getting good grades, but still being able to have fun, relax, and hang out. I found that everyone here is super friendly and I am still making new friends, so that was definitely a good thing that made my transition easier." - Female, 1st year student

Research Question Findings

In a sample of stressed first-generation college students, how do they experience the transition to college and stressors associated with the college experience?

Overall, first-generation college students found the transition to college to be challenging. They reported that they had unrealistic expectations about college and found it difficult to balance academics, work, family, and social interactions until they developed adequate time-management skills. Many of the first-generation college students reported that they believed that college would be similar to high school because they believed they had successfully developed reasonable study habits. Upon entry to college, they reported that they were faced with more work outside of the classroom and noted that time spent in the classroom focused on discussion and expanding their

knowledge rather than being taught new material, a learning strategy with which they were unfamiliar. Specifically, many of the first-generation college students noted that spending more time learning outside of the classroom and completing assignments made it difficult to work full- or part-time and also spend time with friends and family. Many of the first-generation college students indicated that they had to create daily schedules that included when they would eat their meals in order to have enough time to accomplish everything that they wanted and also get enough sleep. Nevertheless, the participants identified that having positive support systems helped ease their transitions. All of the participants described a positive support system, which included friends, family, advisors, professors, or group affiliations. The first-generation college students noted that being able to go to the library with friends or spend 30 minutes having a meal with friends or family was helpful to them because they had an opportunity to either talk about something other than their schoolwork or had people to study with and get them through course material that they did not understand. Additionally, many of the first-generation college students reported that being able to speak to their professors and advisors about their schedules and any questions they had related to their coursework made them feel more comfortable and confident in their ability to succeed.

When faced with unique stressors related to being a first-generation college student, both positive and negative coping mechanisms were identified to help manage difficult situations. For example, some participants were able to identify positive coping strategies, including spending time with family or friends, seeking mental health treatment, or participating in groups and organizations to relate to others' experiences. Some of the first-generation college students indicated that they were able to reach out to

their college counseling centers or outside mental health professionals to help them cope with their feelings of anxiety related to their transitions. Other students noted that they were able to find support advertised through e-mails and campus flyers that identified additional ways to help their transitions, such as going to the tutoring center. Conversely, some participants had a difficult time implementing positive coping strategies and instead would engage in isolation and avoidance in order to not have to deal with their current stressors. These students had attitudes that focused on the idea that if something was outside of their control, they did not want to think or talk about it. For example, a few of the students reported that they had to deal with many of their new friends having much more money than they did, which made it difficult for them to relate to their peers and also left them wishing they had what their peers have.

Although each participant's experience related to being a first-generation college student varied, it was apparent that many of the participants did not feel as though they were ready for college. Although they expected to face difficulties during their first years, many of the participants reported that they could not have imagined the stressors that they would endure. Some unexpected external stressors unrelated to academic performance included being separated from their families but still feeling responsible for taking care of them, managing money, and determining how they would pay for college supplies and tuition. Those stressors were in addition to the stress of learning how to achieve the same high grades that they maintained in high school. Many of the participants reported that they are still trying to find their niches and learn who they are as both people as well as students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The present study attempted to contribute to the literature by exploring the relationship between stress and academic self-efficacy in first-generation college students. Specifically, the study investigated how first-generation college students' perceived ability to do well in college affects their experiences of academic and psychosocial stress, and how they cope with and respond to such stress. By using a grounded theory of analysis, the outcomes provided evidence for four emerging themes. The themes included the first-generation college students' motivations to attend college and their positive experiences in applying, emotional coping as a first-generation college student, difficulty adapting to college due to unrealistic expectations, and the importance of a positive support system during the first year of college to cope with unique stressors.

The results from the study showed that first-generation college students were motivated to attend college because they wanted to gain meaningful employment and to experience opportunities that their parents were unable to achieve. This is consistent with previous literature that states that first-generation college students view college education as a way to gain stable jobs (Choy, 2001). Specifically, obtaining college degrees puts them at an advantage in the job market compared to not having a college degree. Many of the participants reported that they did not believe there was a way to succeed economically or financially without an education, or to have any opportunities to grow professionally and receive higher paying jobs without their degrees. The participants also indicated that they did not want to experience the same struggles that their parents did because they were unable to attend college, which also motivated them to pursue postsecondary education.

Previous research has found that first-generation college students experience unique stressors such as having to hold a full- or part-time job, lack of social support, and academic pressure (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Similar to these findings, the results of the current study showed that finances are a stressor for first-generation college students. The study found that first-generation college students were currently working during their first years of college or considering gaining employment in order to contribute to their families' incomes. Many of the participants reported that they did not want their parents to feel responsible for the costs of their education or supplies they needed for college. Some students even worried about whether their parents would be able to pay bills at home without additional income from the participants. Academic pressure was also a stressor for first-generation college students because many of the participants had unrealistic expectations of college. The participants reported that they believed their college experiences would be similar to high school, but soon recognized that college was not only more challenging, but also required more work outside of the classroom setting. This resulted in many of the participants having to adapt to an increase in workload, develop new study habits, and continue to be expected to achieve the same high grades by both their parents and themselves.

Contrary to the findings from previous studies that noted that first-generation college students often experience a lack of social support, all of the participants in the current study reported that they believed that they had positive support systems during both the application process and their transitions to college. Each of the participants identified specific social supports that helped ease his or her transition into college, including friends, advisors, professors, and group members of various organizations that

were joined. The participants noted that they felt comfortable reaching out for different services if needed via mental health treatment or tutoring, which also allowed them to feel comfortable in their adjustments to college. It can be hypothesized that first-generation college students benefit more from emotional and social support rather than instrumental or practical support during their college experiences. Specifically, many of the first-generation college students who participated in the study reported that contrary to their peers, they knew prior to beginning college that their parents were going to be unable to provide them with financial support or help with completing their college tasks. Although first-generation college students reported that they were experiencing high levels of stress, they also noted that they experienced significant social support from family and friends daily. Additionally, many of the first-generation college students noted that they felt comfortable speaking with their professors and advisors, indicating that they received social support through daily interactions and feedback, which increased their growth throughout the semester. This may have been advantageous given the care ethic of the two universities that were included in the study. The participants shared that attending a smaller university with a nurturing climate helped ease their transition in order to feel as though they could ask for help. For example, one participant shared that one of her professors addressed her by name and asked her how she was doing, which provided her with a sense of comfort to be able to approach this professor in the future. Specifically, one of the universities emphasizes its core values during the first few weeks of the semester, which focus on helping individuals of all backgrounds achieve their full potentials within a welcoming and supportive community. These findings implicate the importance of encouraging a positive support system during the transition from high

school to college to allow first-generation college students to feel confident in their abilities to excel academically.

Another important factor that became apparent from the study included the variation of coping strategies used by each of the first-generation college students. The participants reported feeling overwhelmed and anxious during their first years of college due to a difficulty with balancing their priorities and obligations. Their desires to continue to achieve good grades and excel academically resulted in emotional burden for the participants. In order to manage their stress and emotions, both positive and negative coping mechanisms were utilized. For example, the participants identified positive coping skills such as talking to friends, participating in groups and organizations, and seeking mental health services. This is consistent with previous research that identified that first-generation college students understand the importance of seeking support by attending study groups or talking to others about stressful situations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Also, the incorporation of positive coping mechanisms have been found to be beneficial for first-generation college students to help minimize the risk of dropout due to their misperceptions of and lack of preparation for college compared to non-first-generation college students (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). The present study found that first-generation students did not feel as if they were prepared for college, which may be attributed to a lack of problem-focused coping strategies to prepare for college. For example, utilizing problem-solving strategies and obtaining instrumental support was unrealistic for first-generation college students because they were unable to exert control over their sources of stress. The majority of their stress was attributed to a lack of knowledge and fear of the unknown. Nevertheless, many of the first-generation college

students noted that they received emotional and social support that facilitated their transitions and allowed them to feel comfortable seeking additional resources. Rather than being able to change the problems or the sources of their stress, many of the first-generation college students were able to engage in self-reflection and feel in control over their emotional responses to their transitions by feeling encouraged and having their feelings validated by their social support networks. The emotional and social support they received motivated and empowered them to pursue success during their academic journeys.

To further support findings from previous research, the results of the current study found that first-generation college students also engage in negative coping strategies such as isolation and avoidance when they believe that situations are outside of their control. Phinney and Haas (2003) found that first-generation college students may choose to engage in distancing and avoidance by stepping away from problems or trying to forget about them. This allows for temporary solutions to problems and a sense of relief. These findings can help therapists in college counseling centers recognize the coping skills being utilized and provide alternative positive strategies in order to help students cope with significant stressors related to being first-generation college students.

Overall, the implementation of qualitative research and data analysis allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the unique factors that contribute to first-generation college students' experiences. It can be hypothesized that a first-generation college student will have a favorable transition and complete his or her college education in a four-year timespan if he or she receives positive support during both the application process and first year of college. Positive support may include emotional support from

family and friends, participation in group organizations to relate to others' experiences, reaching out for mental health services or tutoring if needed, and maintaining contact with professors and advisors. The uniqueness of this study emphasized that although this population may have experienced a lack of preparedness for college and inability to call on their parents for help or support, having people to whom they could reach out before and during their transitions allowed for more confidence in their ability to succeed. Many of the first-generation college students reported that having their families remind them of the progress they have made, encourage them to continue to try to do their best, and hearing how proud their families were that they were doing something to better their lives increased their self-confidence and self-efficacy beliefs. They indicated that their newfound confidence reduced their feelings of anxiety by allowing them to set realistic goals for their futures and taking small steps to achieve these goals. Many of the first-generation college students indicated that they had to incorporate problem-solving strategies into their daily routines, such as learning how to develop time-management skills, and found that when they were able to implement these skills successfully, they were able to recognize positive changes that facilitated their progress. Additionally, they noted that they had a new sense of compassion for other first-generation college students and also wanted to serve as role models for their siblings to display how their persistence and determination can lead to positive rewards and outcomes for their futures. Findings from this study will assist high school and college counselors, administrators, and college professors to better understand the vulnerability of this population and the unique stressors that they experience in order to implement postsecondary educational preparedness into the high school curriculum.

Limitations

This study had several significant limitations. The individuals who were interviewed represented people who were willing to speak at great length about their experiences as first-generation college students, particularly discussing their unique stressors and coping mechanisms. Additionally, the participants were individuals who were sought via e-mail from two small universities in northeastern Pennsylvania. Therefore, the use of a homogenous sample, in addition to utilizing a qualitative analysis method, limited the results of the study from being generalized to a larger population.

Another limitation included participants being told the true purpose of the study. Since the purpose of the study was apparent at the start of the study, social desirability effects may have been encountered. The use of semi-structured interviews and a self-report measure may also have resulted in a response bias from the participants. It must also be considered that the researcher had no control over participants' reactions during each session; therefore, there was some variability during each session interview. This variability may have been due to the idea that students at one of the universities received psychology credit for participating in the study and may have not been truly invested in the study content. Also, it is possible that discussing the topics of self-efficacy, stress, and coping in first-generation college students may have contributed to the participants' stress levels, particularly because many of the participants were at a point in the semester when the workload was extensive.

Lastly, the researcher—who would be considered a first-generation college student--may have biases could have shaped the lens for the questions being asked and the incorporation of grounded theory analysis in the research. This bias may have been

noticed when coding and validating the transcribed interviews. Given that three of the four members who comprised the validation team were considered first-generation college students, the inclusion of triangulation was implemented in order to reduce bias.

Implications for Future Research

Although this qualitative study gathered data to help understand the unique stressors and coping skills first-generation college students experience and their beliefs in their abilities to succeed academically, the use of qualitative research was only the first step in trying to understand the uniqueness of being a first-generation college student. The use of a qualitative method serves as a guide to future researchers to develop their own research questions and empirically test hypotheses about this population. By asking specific questions unique to the population, future researchers may be better equipped to explore the amount and frequency of stressors this population endures, as well as effects on coping in academic situations. Future research should explore the impact of race, ethnicity, and culture on first-generation college students' decision to attend college and their experiences throughout college to determine whether there are any contributing underlying factors. This would help high school guidance counselors and college advisors understand their unique experiences across a diverse sample in order to gain more information and establish different strategies to engage first-generation students.

Additionally, future research needs to be conducted to determine the role that age and status plays on first-generation college students' experiences. All of the participants in the current study were between the ages of 18 and 22, which demonstrates their desire seek college education directly out of high school. Conversely, many first-generation college students are older and are seeking their education because they have fulfilled

previous obligations, such as taking care of their families or providing stable incomes. Future research is needed to determine whether age plays a role in the stressors and coping skills that are utilized by first-generation college students. Many first-generation college students are also only enrolled part-time in order to be able to work while seeking education. Therefore future research is needed to determine whether being enrolled part-time impacts first-generation college students' experiences and motivation to complete their college degrees.

Future qualitative research is needed to inform different ways of utilizing cognitive-behavioral methods for acute stress and the implementation of coping models for first-generation college students. Minimal research has been conducted on exploring the implementation of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in a first-generation college student population. Therefore, through understanding the different ways these students define stress and coping and the methods they employ to cope with their stress, future research can be conducted to develop CBT models specific to first-generation college students. The development of such models may be helpful to mental health counselors in college settings because they would be able to tailor their therapy and the teaching of different skills to meet each first-generation college student's specific needs and provide students with hope.

It may also be interesting to explore how being a first-generation college student may be similar to being a doctoral student. For example, like many of the first-generation college students reported, many doctoral students believe that they are prepared to enter their programs because they have already developed successful study habits and are familiar with how to apply these habits. Many may also struggle with

unique stressors, including potentially not having their parents available to help them through their doctoral careers because their parents did not obtain a doctorate degree, having to work full- or part-time to support themselves or their families financially, and living at home with family in order to take care of them which confines them to a specific geographic location. Upon arrival to their doctoral programs, they may recognize that they also were not prepared and may struggle with support from peers or family members because they cannot relate to their unique experiences. Nevertheless, although they may be unable to relate to their experiences, it may be beneficial for doctoral students to have positive support in the form of being told they are doing a good job, providing them with brief distractions from school work, or having groups or organizations to join where they can relate to others' experiences, all of which is similar to first-generation college students' experiences.

Relevance to the Theory and Practice of Psychology

The current study helped provide evidence for the unique challenges first-generation college students face and how they cope with these challenges. The results from this study can be used to help inform college counselors of the importance of promoting counseling services in universities and suggest different types of questions that may help first-generation college students discuss their experiences with stress, coping, and self-efficacy. By doing so, college counselors may be able to develop strategies to improve retention and attrition rates in this population.

CBT may be helpful when working with first-generation college students due to the treatment modality's collaborative nature. Allowing the first-generation college student to learn new skills to help ease his or her transition into college and deal with

stressors related to being a first-generation college student may decrease the chance of dropout. Further, first-generation college students may struggle with negative cognitive distortions, including overgeneralization, all-or-nothing thinking, and labeling.

Therefore, strategies such as thought-challenging and positive self-talk may be beneficial to assist the first-generation college student in recognizing that his or her core beliefs and conditional assumptions related to being able to succeed in college may be inaccurate.

First-generation college students may feel empowered by their abilities to implement the skills they learn through CBT in order to strengthen their social supports and build confidence. Specifically, learning how to engage in self-reflection, receiving emotional support, and serving as role models for other first-generation college students may provide further evidence for the developing theory that emotional and social support are important forms of coping, whereas instrumental and practical forms of support were not identified as uniquely or particularly helpful during their college experiences.

Additionally, first-generation college students may benefit from motivational interviewing in order to elicit change by exploring any unresolved emotions or ambivalence they may be experiencing because they are identified as first-generation students. This may lead to the incorporation of additional CBT strategies, such as realistic goal setting and keeping track of their negative thoughts in order to increase their motivation levels.

Advocacy

To advocate for this population, it is hoped that the results from this research project emphasize the need for pre-college programs to help students identify the importance of attending college and the necessary steps that will help them get there. By

doing so, this may help raise first-generation college students' aspirations for attending college and provide them with support systems that will allow them to find programs that are suitable for their specific needs and ambitions. For example, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program provides students with opportunities to learn the necessary skills and behaviors to succeed academically. It promotes environments that foster strong student-teacher relationships and creates positive peer groups for students. Overall, the program's purpose is to provide students with a sense of hope for their futures by emphasizing that hard work and determination can result in personal achievements. This relates to the importance of positive support systems that can allow students to recognize their full potentials, including college readiness, thereby closing the achievement gap. Additionally, implementing educational and career goal objectives into the high school curriculum will help explain economic benefits of obtaining a college degree. Once on campus, the advertisement of support groups and services will allow first-generation college students explore their fears of attending college, develop time management skills, and implement strategies for making their transitions and adjustments to college positive experiences.

References

- Aldea, M. A., & Rice, K. G. (2006). The role of emotional dysregulation in perfectionism and psychological distress. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*(4), 498-510. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.53.4.498
- Aspelmeier, J. E., Love, M. M., McGill, L. A., Elliott, A. N., & Pierce, T. W. (2012). Self-esteem, locus of control, college adjustment, and GPA among first-and continuing-generation students: A moderator model of generational status. *Research in higher education, 53*(7), 755-781. doi: 10.1007/s11162-011-9252-1
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: Freeman.
- Barry, L. M., Hudley, C., Kelly, M., & Cho, S. (2009). Differences in self-reported disclosure of college experiences by first-generation college student status. *Adolescence, 44*(173), 55-68.
- Berg, B. L., Lune, H., & Lune, H. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (Vol. 5). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Brougham, R. R., Zail, C. M., Mendoza, C. M., & Miller, J. R. (2009). Stress, sex differences, and coping strategies among college students. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues, 28*(2), 85-97. doi:10.1007/s12144-009-9047-0
- Burck, C. (2005). Comparing qualitative research methodologies for systemic research: The use of grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. *Journal of Family Therapy, 27*(3), 237-262. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6427.2005.00314.x

- Burns, L. R., Dittmann, K., Nguyen, N., & Mitchelson, J. K. (2000). Academic procrastination, perfectionism, and control: Associations with vigilant and avoidant coping. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality, 15*(5), 35-46.
- Chemers, M. M., Hu, L. T., & Garcia, B. F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational psychology, 93*(1), 55-64.
- Choy, S. (2001). Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. Findings from the Condition of Education, 2001.
- Cohen, S (1988). Perceived stress in a probability sample of the United States. In S. Spacapan, S. Oskamp, S. Spacapan, S. Oskamp (Eds.), *The social psychology of health* (pp. 31-67). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Constantine, M. G., & Barón, A. (1997). Assessing and counseling Chicano(a) college students: A conceptual and practical framework. In C. C. Lee (Ed.), *Multicultural issues in counseling: New approaches to diversity* (2nd ed., pp. 295–314). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Cruce, T. M., Kinzie, J. L., Williams, J. M., Morelon, C. L., & Yu, X. (2005, November). The relationship between first-generation status and academic self-efficacy among entering college students. In *30th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)*, Philadelphia, PA.
- Demeuse, K. P. (1985). The life events stress-performance linkage: An exploratory study. *Journal of Human Stress, 35*-40. doi: 10.1080/0097840X.1985.9936747

- Dunkley, D. M., Zuroff, D. C., & Blankstein, K. R. (2003). Self-critical perfectionism and daily affect: dispositional and situational influences on stress and coping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(1), 234-252.
- Engle, J., Bermeo, A., & O'Brien, C. (2006). Straight from the source: What works for first-generation college students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*.
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*.
- Enns, M. W., Cox, B. J., & Clara, I. (2002). Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism: Developmental origins and association with depression proneness. *Personality and Individual Differences, 33*(6), 921-935. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(1)00202-1
- Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Gruen, R. J., & DeLongis, A. (1986). Appraisal, coping, health status, and psychological symptoms. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology, 50*(3), 571-579. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.50.3.571
- Fouad, N. A., & Smith, P. L. (1996). A test of a social cognitive model for middle school students: Math and science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 43*(3), 338-346. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.43.3.338
- Frost, R. O., Heimberg, R. G., Holt, C. S., Mattia, J. I., & Neubauer, A. L. (1993). A comparison of two measures of perfectionism. *Personality and Individual Differences, 14*, 119-126. doi:10.1016/0191-8869(93)90181-2

- Giancola, J. K., Grawitch, M. J., & Borchert, D. (2009). Dealing with the stress of college: A model for adult students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(3), 246-263.
doi: 10.1177/0741713609331479
- Gibbons, M. M., & Borders, L. D. (2010). Prospective first-generation college students: A social-cognitive perspective. *Career Development Quarterly*, 58(3), 194-208.
doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2010.tb00186.x
- Gibbons, M. M., & Shoffner, M. F. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: Meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counseling*, 91-97. Retrieved from: <http://www.pcom.edu:2048/stable/42732419>
- Gloria, A. M., & Castellanos, J. (2012). Desafíos y bendiciones: A multiperspective examination of the educational experiences and coping responses of first-generation college Latina students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 11(1), 82-99. doi:1538192711430382
- Gnilka, P. B., Ashby, J. S., & Noble, C. M. (2012). Multidimensional perfectionism and anxiety: Differences among individuals with perfectionism and tests of a coping mediation model. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 90(4), 427-436.
doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00054.x
- Gore, P. A. (2006). Academic self-efficacy as a predictor of college outcomes: Two incremental validity studies. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 14(1), 92-115.
doi:10.1177/1069072705281367
- Halgin, R. P., & Leahy, P. M. (1989). Understanding and treating perfectionistic college students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 68(2), 222-225.
doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.1989.tb01362.x

- Hand, C., & Payne, E. M. (2008). First-generation college students: A study of Appalachian student success. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 32(1), 4-15.
- Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychopathology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(3), 456-470. doi:10.1037/00223514603456
- Inman, W. E., & Mayes, L. (1999). The importance of being first: Unique characteristics of first generation community college students. *Community College Review*, 26(4), 3-22. doi:10.1177/009155219902600402
- Ishitani, T. T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first-generation college students in the United States. *Journal of Higher Education*, 861-885. doi:10.1080/2f00221546.2006.11778947
- Jenkins, S. R., Belanger, A., Connally, M. L., Boals, A., & Durón, K. M. (2013). First generation undergraduate students' social support, depression, and life satisfaction. *Journal Of College Counseling*, 16(2), 129-142. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-1882.2013.00032.x
- Krohne, H.W. (1993). Vigilance and cognitive avoidance as concepts in coping research. In H.W. Krohne (Ed.), *Attention and avoidance: Strategies in coping with aversiveness* (pp. 19–50). Seattle, WA: Hogrefe & Huber.
- Knutson, N. M. (2014). Applying the Rasch model to measure and compare first-generation and continuing-generation college students' academic self-efficacy. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A*, 1-93.
- Kuh, G. D. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for effective educational practices. *Change: The Magazine of Higher*

Learning, 35(2), 24-32. doi:10.1080/00091380309604090

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. New York, NY:

Springer Publishing.

Lombardi, D. N., Florentino, M., & Lombardi, A. J. (1998). Perfectionism and abnormal

behavior. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 54(1), 61-71.

Majer, J. M. (2009). Self-efficacy and academic success among ethnically diverse first-

generation community college students. *Journal Of Diversity In Higher*

Education, 2(4), 243-250. doi:10.1037/a0017852

Martin, W.E., Swartz-Kulstad, J.L., & Madson, M. (1999). Psychological factors that

predict the college adjustment of first-year undergraduate students: Implications

for college counselors. *Journal of College Counseling*, 2(2), 121-133.

doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.1999.tb00150.x

McConnell, P. J. (2000). What community colleges should do to assist first-generation

students. *Community College Review*, 28, 75-87

doi:10.1177/009155210002800305

Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative research in*

practice: Examples for discussion and analysis, 1, 1-17.

Miller, S. M. (1996). Monitoring and Blunting of threatening information: Cognitive

interference and facilitation in the coping process. In Sarason, I., Sarason, B., &

Pierce, G. (Eds.), *Cognitive interference: Theories, methods, and findings*.

Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum.

Miville, M., & Constantine, M. (2006). Sociocultural predictors of psychological help-

Seeking attitudes and behavior among Mexican American college students.

Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 12, 420–432.

doi:10.1037/1099-9809.12.3.420

Orbe, M. P. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: an analysis of first-generation college students. *Communication Education*, 53(2), 131-149.

doi:10.1080/03634520410001682401

Pandit, N. R. (1996). The creation of theory: A recent application of the grounded theory method. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(4), 1-15. Retrieved from

<http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol2/iss4/3>

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, 34(5 Pt 2), 1189-1208. Retrieved from:

<http://www.pcom.edu:2048/openurl?sid=google&id=pmid:10591279>

Payne, T. H. (2006). *Perceptions of first-generation college students: Factors that influence graduate school enrollment and perceived barriers to attendance*.

Retrieved from ProQuest.

Phinney, J. S., & Haas, K. (2003). The process of coping among ethnic minority first-generation college freshmen: A narrative approach. *The Journal Of Social Psychology*, 143(6), 707-726. doi:10.1080/00224540309600426

doi:10.1080/00224540309600426

Ramos-Sánchez, L. (2007). Self-efficacy of first-generation and non-first-generation college students: The relationship with academic performance and college

adjustment. *Journal of College Counseling*, 10(1), 6-18.

doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2007.tb00002.x

Rice, K. G., Leever, B. A., Christopher, J., & Porter, J. (2006). Perfectionism, stress, and social (dis)connection: A short-term study of hopelessness, depression, and

- academic adjustment among honors students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(4), 524-534. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.53.4.524
- Ross, S. E., Niebling, B. C., & Heckert, T. M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *Social Psychology*, 61(5), 841-846.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research* (Vol. 15). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 17, 273-85.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Procedures and techniques for developing grounded theory.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 1-22.
doi:10.1007/BF01680039
- Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retention of students from first generation and low income backgrounds. Retrieved from ERIC.
- Torres, V. (2003). Influences on ethnic identity development of Latino college students in the first two years of college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(4), 532-547. doi:10.1353/csd.2003.0044
- Towbes, L. C., & Cohen, L. H. (1996). Chronic stress in the lives of college students: Scale development and prospective prediction of distress. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 25(2), 199-217. doi:10.1007/BF01537344
- Trouillet, R., Gana, K., Lourel, M., & Fort, I. (2009). Predictive value of age for coping:

The role of self-efficacy, social support satisfaction and perceived stress. *Aging & Mental Health*, 13(3), 357-366. doi:10.1080/13607860802626223

Uliaszek, A. A., Zinbarg, R. E., Mineka, S., Craske, M. G., Griffith, J. W., Sutton, J. M., & Hammen, C. (2012). A longitudinal examination of stress generation in depressive and anxiety disorders. *Journal Of Abnormal Psychology*, 121(1), 4-15. doi:10.1037/a0025835

Van Yperen, N. W., & Hagedoorn, M. (2008). Living up to high standards and psychological distress. *European Journal of Personality*, 22(4), 337-346. doi:10.1002/per.681

Wang, C. (2008). The role of generational status, self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and perceived social Support in college students' psychological well-being. *Journal Of College Counseling*, 11(2), 101-118. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00028.x

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form A

Stress, Coping, and Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation College Students

Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study about stress, coping, and academic self-efficacy beliefs in first-generation college students. You were chosen as a possible participant because of your first-generation status. Please read this form. You may ask questions at any time before you decide to participate and at any time during the interview. This study is being conducted by Samantha Fitz-Gerald, M.A; a fourth-year doctoral student at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Purpose - What the Study is About

The purpose of this study is to find out about the different sources of stress that first-generation college students experience and how they cope with them. A first-generation college student is someone whose parents did not receive a bachelor's degree. I am interested in learning about how first-generation college students deal with stress and how they think about themselves as good students.

Procedures -What You Will Be Asked to Do

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to meet in person with the researcher for an audio-taped interview. After you have agreed to participate in the study, you will be given a brief stress scale. Next, a semi-structured interview will be conducted and audio-recorded for approximately 1 and ½ hours. When the interview is complete, you will be debriefed about the study. You will also be entered into a raffle to win a \$50 Visa gift card.

Risks and Benefits

The risks of participating in this study are considered to be minimal. The main risk would be that participants may be uncomfortable answering certain questions as they may be too personal. Participants are assured that they can skip questions and stop the interview at any time if they feel uncomfortable with the questions. The benefit in this study is that participants might find the experience interesting as they are being asked their opinions and attitudes about being a first-generation college student and related topics. Although you may not directly benefit from this study, other people in the future may benefit from what the researchers learn in the study.

Payment/Rewards

You will not be paid for taking part in the study. However, each participant will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 Visa gift card.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the researchers and members of the Institutional Review Board will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a locked file. Records will be kept for a minimum of three years, then they will be destroyed. Paper records will be shredded and audio recordings will be deleted.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relations with the investigators. It will not affect your relations with the University of Scranton or Marywood University. You may withdraw at

any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. To withdraw, you can tell the investigator and your information will then be destroyed by shredding of paper surveys and the deletion of any audio recording.

Contacts and Questions

The investigator conducting this study is Samantha Fitz-Gerald, M.A. You may ask questions now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at samanthafi@pcom.edu. Additionally, you may contact the principal investigator, Dr. Celine Thompson at (215) 871-6681 who will be available during the entire study. If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact Dr. Tabbi Miller-Scandle, Ph.D; Director of Research and Sponsored Programs at The University of Scranton, at (570) 941-6353 or tabbi.miller-scandle@scranton.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Name of (Authorized) Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Date

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form B

Stress, Coping, and Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation College Students

Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study about stress, coping, and academic self-efficacy beliefs in first-generation college students. You were chosen as a possible participant because of your first-generation status, are between the ages of 18-22, and are currently enrolled as a freshman or sophomore. Please read this form. Ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study. This study is being conducted by Samantha Fitz-Gerald, M.A; a fourth-year doctoral student at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and a Marywood University alumnus.

Purpose - What the Study is About

The purpose of this study is to find out about the different sources of stress that first-generation college students experience and how they cope with them. A first-generation college student is someone whose parents did not receive a bachelor's degree. I am interested in learning about how first-generation college students deal with stress and how they think about themselves as good students.

Procedures -What You Will Be Asked to Do

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to meet in person with the researcher in a private conference room or study room in the library for an audio-taped interview. After you have agreed to participate in the study, you will be given a brief stress scale. Next, a semi-structured interview will be conducted and audio-recorded for approximately 1 and ½ hours. When the interview is complete, you will be debriefed about the study. You will

also be entered into a raffle to win a \$50 Visa gift card.

Risks and Benefits

The risks of participating in this study are considered to be minimal. The main risk would be that participants may be uncomfortable answering certain questions as they may be too personal. Participants are assured that they can skip questions and stop the interview at any time if they feel uncomfortable with the questions. The benefit in this study is that participants might find the experience interesting as they are being asked their opinions and attitudes about being a first-generation college student and related topics. Although you may not directly benefit from this study, other people in the future may benefit from what the researchers learn in the study.

Payment/Rewards

You will not be paid for taking part in the study. However, each participant will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 Visa gift card.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the researchers and members of the Institutional Review Board will have access to the research records.

Records will be kept in a locked file. Records will be kept for a minimum of three years, then they will be destroyed. Paper records will be shredded and audio recordings will be deleted.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relations with the investigators. It will not affect your

relations with Marywood University or the University of Scranton. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. To withdraw, you can tell the investigator and your information will then be destroyed by shredding of paper surveys and the deletion of any audio recording.

Contacts and Questions

The investigator conducting this study is Samantha Fitz-Gerald, M.A. You may ask questions now or later. If you have questions, you may contact the researcher at samanthafi@pcom.edu. Additionally, you may contact the principal investigator, Dr. Celine Thompson at (215) 871-6681 who will be available during the entire study. If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact Dr. Laura Ann Camlet Houser, Director of Research and Sponsored Programs at Marywood University, at (570) 340-6031 or lacamlet@marywood.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of (Authorized) Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

What is your gender? Male Female

How old are you? _____

Which year of college are you in? 1st 2nd 3rd 4th

What is your campus residential status? Commuter Campus Resident

Did either of your parents attend college? Yes No

What is your intended major? _____

What is your employment status?

Full-time

Part-time

Unemployed

Use of Financial Aid for College Education (Please Check All That Apply)

Scholarships

Loans

___ Grants

___ Pay out of pocket

What is your identified race/ethnicity?

___ African-American

___ Asian

___ Native American

___ Hispanic / Latino/a

___ Caucasian / White

___ Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander

___ Arab American / Middle eastern

___ Mixed

___ Other group(s) please be specific _____

Were you born and raised in the United States? _____ Yes _____ No

If no, where were you born and raised? _____

Where were your parents born and raised? _____

Appendix D

Perceived Stress Scale – 10 Item Version (PSS-10)

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling how often you felt or thought a certain way.

0 = Never; **1** = AlmostNever; **2** = Sometimes; **3** = Fairly Often; **4** = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3	4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?	0	1	2	3	4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3	4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	0	1	2	3	4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of	0	1	2	3	4

things that were outside of your control?

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were

piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

0 1 2 3 4

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Script

“I would like to thank you for taking the time out of your day to come and speak with me and to be a part of my research project. Your agreement to participate in my study makes it possible to learn important information about the unique stressors first-generation college students’ experience. It also allows me to gain a better understanding of how first-generation college students cope with these stressors and how this unique stress and coping impacts one’s academic self-efficacy beliefs. With that being said, I hope the information I gain from your honest answers and this research project will help high school guidance counselors and college counselors gain a better understanding of these variables and how they impact the first-generation college student’s performance. I will be audiotaping this interview so I can transcribe and write out the interview later to be able to fully understand your thoughts and feelings related to being a first-generation college student.

Over the course of the next one to one and one-half hours, I will be asking you a series of questions related to the unique stressors and coping mechanisms you experience as a first-generation college student and how they reflect your academic self-efficacy beliefs. Please answer the questions as honest as you can because it is important to gain an understanding of your true thoughts and feelings about the topic. All of the questions will be open-ended in nature which means you can respond openly about your personal thoughts and experiences. Please elaborate as much as you can so I can understand your personal perception of being a first-generation college student. All of the questions being asked will help me gather a clearer understanding of your experiences related to the topic.

You can decline any of the questions that you do not feel comfortable sharing with me at this time for any reason. After I have asked all of my questions, please feel free to provide me with any further information that you believe may be helpful to understanding your experience as a first-generation college student.

At this time, do you have any questions for me? Let's begin."

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

General Overview Questions:

- 1) Tell me about your experience as a first-generation college student.
 - a. What was it like apply to college?
 - b. What made you want to apply?
 - c. How did you decide what college to apply to?
 - d. Did anyone help you? If so, who?
 - e. How did you decide which school to attend?
 - f. What were some of the positive things that helped you when applying to college?
 - g. What were some of the challenges you faced when applying?
 - h. What are some of the challenges you face outside of school?
 - i. How do you deal with these challenges?
- 2) Given your first-generation status, what does that mean to you and your family?
- 3) Tell me what kind of a student you are.
 - a. How did this fit in with your expectations of college?
- 4) What was/has your first year of college like?
 - a. How did you make decisions about what courses to take or if you were

going to live on or off campus?

- b. Are you participating in any groups or organizations?
 - c. What are some of the good things you encountered during your first year?
 - d. What are some of the challenges you've faced during your first year?
 - i. What kind of information or help did you receive that you believed helped you with these challenges?
- 5) How have your ideas about college or yourself as a student changed?
- 6) Any thoughts on what you would like your major to be or plans for the future?
- 7) Are there any questions that you thought I would ask or anything you think I should know about first-generation college students like you?

Appendix F

Codes

The following codes were identified by the researcher and validation team and used to code the data throughout the analytic process:

- 1) Support
- 2) Emotion
- 3) First-generation meaning
- 4) Positive coping
- 5) Negative coping
- 6) Adaptation
- 7) Adjustment
- 8) Stressors
- 9) Application method
- 10) Reasons to apply
- 11) Expectations