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An Ecological and Strengths Based Approach to Understanding School Connectedness among First Generation College Students

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AN ECOLOGICAL AND STRENGTHS BASED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

KARIE A. GASKA

Under the Direction of Lisa P. Armistead, PhD

ABSTRACT

As the United States focuses on its commitment to opportunity and access to education for all, universities have turned their attention to increasing graduation and retention rates of highly diverse student bodies. One group of students with challenging recruitment, retention, and graduation outcomes is first generation college students; those students whose parents have not completed a college education. Researchers and academic officials are making persistent efforts at understanding what will improve these students' academic outcomes, with numerous interventions being implemented across the country. A factor consistently associated with better outcomes in adolescence is school connectedness, the degree to which students feel supported

and part of their school environment. Research focused on school connectedness at the K-12 level proliferates, however, its role in college students' lives remains neglected, despite the potential for connectedness to be a vital predictor of school success. School connectedness may be especially important among first generation college students as they are more likely to feel estranged in the unfamiliar university environment. The current study took an ecological and strengths-based approach to understanding school connectedness among first generation college students focusing on three research questions: 1) What do first generation college students believe contribute to school connectedness? 2) What strengths can be further nurtured to enhance success for first generation college students? 3) What changes to the university environment do first generation students believe would enhance their success? Qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 first generation college students representing a diverse range of ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and major courses of study at a large public university in the southern United States. Findings uncovered high feelings of school connectedness across the sample, which were tied to belonging to campus clubs and organizations, appreciation for a diverse and friendly student body, and a sense of caring on campus. Participant individual and ecological strengths were highlighted, along with obstacles to feeling more connected and accessing resources. Participant responses illuminated the need to address the ways in which university culture necessarily means first generation college students are at a disadvantage. Implications for policy, practice, and future lines of research are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: School connectedness, first generation college students, strengths

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by

KARIE A. GASKA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful participants and all first generation college students trying to close the education gap. I hope I have done you justice.

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1 INTRODUCTION

With education being one of the greatest predictors of wealth and positive health outcomes into adulthood (Lleras-Muney, 2005), the U.S. has committed to increasing opportunities in higher education for all of its citizens (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nichols, 2011). Many initiatives include a focus on previously underrepresented groups in higher education, resulting in an increase in the number of first generation college students, or those students where neither parent or guardian has earned a bachelor's degree. Increasing not only opportunity, but also success, in higher education has become a local, state, and national priority (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nichols, 2011)

Although access to higher education for previously underrepresented groups is expanding; the participation, success, and graduation rates of students from underrepresented backgrounds remain markedly lower than for students whose parents have a four year degree. This most often includes low-income, ethnic minority and first generation college students (Davis, 2012; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite widespread effort to improve outcomes, graduation rates remain largely unchanged for university students over the past 25 years (Tinto, 2006), and large disparities exist in educational attainment (Pell Institute, 2015). School connectedness, a factor highly predictive of K-12 student success and a major focus of intervention efforts, is understudied among the college-aged population.

School connectedness, the degree to which students feel they belong and that teachers and peers care personally about them, is widely promoted as an essential developmental asset for student success (U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 2010 ; "Wingspread Declaration on School Connections.," 2004). Despite its limited examination in the college-aged population, evidence suggests school connectedness is an important factor in school success through adulthood

(Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Early studies demonstrate a positive connection between school connectedness and both academic and psychological outcomes for college students (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007), however, these studies largely concentrate on traditional students, with limited examination of school connectedness among first generation college students who are often in circumstances that might make connection to school more challenging.

Although all students must grapple with multiple aspects of adjusting to college life in order to be successful, first generation college students often face numerous challenges beyond those of more traditional students. First generation college students are more likely to be older, working outside of school, transferring from community colleges, and from lower income communities (Engle et al., 2006). They also tend to be academically underprepared and need remedial classes (Davis, 2012). Finally, first generation students must integrate into the culture of higher education without preparation from parents and often coming from backgrounds with distinctly different cultural norms and values than the universities in which they find themselves (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Despite these challenging circumstances, many first generation students succeed in college. However, the strengths that first generation college students bring to the college experience are less of a focal point in the research literature (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Tinto, 2006). Much of the research on first generation college students focuses on their deficits and challenges, to the neglect of aspects of their lives that help students persist and thrive (Stuber, 2011; Tinto, 2006).

School connectedness offers an opportunity to build on strengths for first generation college students and is one of the strongest predictors of student success in adolescence (Resnick et al., 1997). Individual factors predict school connectedness for college students; however,

environmental influences can also be altered to impact this internal sense of connection. For example, within institutions using inclusive language that promotes communal values, first generation college students perform better and report a deeper connection to their college (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). School connectedness, therefore, may be an area to concentrate intervention efforts among first generation college students that has yet to be fully understood.

To date, a number of interventions designed to promote the success of first generation college students may influence school connectedness. However, these interventions are limited by sparse information about students' perceptions of factors that enhance a sense of connectedness and belonging at their institutions. Further, many programs target individuals, without addressing the broader ecological context of the school. The current study aimed to bridge a gap in the literature by taking an ecological and strengths-based approach to examining school connectedness for first generation college students at a large public, urban university. Taking a qualitative approach to the research, I examined the lived experiences of first generation college students with an emphasis on their strengths, environmental influences on their success, and their college experience. The current study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What do first generation college students believe contribute to their sense of school connectedness?
2. What strengths can be further nurtured to enhance success for first generation college students?
3. What changes to the university environment do first generation students believe would enhance their success?

A review of school connectedness is next presented followed by a review of the literature on first generation college students, frameworks for understanding the first generation college student experience, and justification for the proposed study.

1.1 School connectedness defined

School connectedness is widely defined as a sense of belongingness to a school community and the belief that adults in the school care both about student learning and about them personally (Waters & Cross, 2010; “Wingspread Declaration on School Connections,” 2004). However, school connectedness is used in numerous ways in the psychological research literature; from general concepts such as how much a student feels they are part of their school to more specific definitions such as quantifying the students’ perceived quality of relationships with teachers, peers, and school staff members (Libbey, 2004). School connectedness is also sometimes used interchangeably with concepts such as *school attachment*, *school belonging*, and *school bonding* (Libbey, 2004). Among the research on college-aged students the concept of *school belonging* is more commonly examined (Freeman et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007) and sometimes discussed under the umbrella of school connectedness or school engagement. School belonging is commonly defined as an individuals’ perception of fitting in and belonging with others at the same institution. In the absence of a common definition, across the literature there is general agreement that *school connectedness* encapsulates the broad themes of 1) a sense of belonging at school, 2) positive relations with teachers and peers, and 3) perceptions of care and safety in the school environment (Libbey, 2004; O’Brennan & Furlong, 2010; Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006). I use this conceptualization of school connectedness, considering these three concepts as the essential elements. As such,

studies that use both the terms *school belonging* and *school connectedness* are examined when considering the background literature.

1.2 School connectedness as a developmental asset

As delineated above, school connectedness is a concept that is studied widely in K-12 education, with limited inquiry into its impact among college-aged students (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Higher school connectedness is associated with higher academic achievement (Anderman, 2002), greater school retention (Bond et al., 2007), better emotional well-being (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009), decreased emotional problems (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006), and reduced participation in risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Resnick, et al, 1997) for adolescents. Because of its association with positive outcomes in adolescence, school connectedness is widely promoted as a developmental asset when taking a positive youth development approach to understanding outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Researchers that use a Positive Youth Development (PYD) theoretical framework view youth as having unlimited potential to learn, grow, and thrive, rather than seeing them as potential problems that must be straightened out before they can do serious harm to themselves or to others (Damon, 2004). In a school context, Positive Youth Development seeks to create the optimal conditions for learning and maximize diverse opportunities for student success, learning and development. Developmentally, students continue to grow and change throughout their academic careers, so this sense of creating optimal learning conditions should remain important through late adolescence and into adulthood.

While emerging and young adults in the U.S. face specific developmental tasks that are different from adolescents, such as the appearance of work and romantic relationships,

researchers propose that some of the developmental tasks of youth wax and wane across the lifespan as opposed to becoming irrelevant after that developmental period has passed (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). Further the need for connectedness is a concept that is supported as essential throughout the lifespan (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Therefore, there is reason to believe that school connectedness continues to be important as students adjust to college and continue to grow as young adults, making it a growing area for further research. For example, Pittmann and Richmond (2005) investigated the impact of school belonging among a sample of late adolescent aged college students and found higher school belonging was associated with better academic outcomes, competence, and feelings of self-worth in the freshmen year of college. Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen (2007) found associations between higher school belonging and academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation for college freshman. Even more specifically, Engle & Tinto (2008) contend that school belonging and engagement is most critical during the first year of college in order to prevent early school withdrawal.

There is also evidence that school connectedness is experienced differently for first generation college students, but is no less important to healthy adjustment. Pittman and Richmond (2007) found that first generation college students reported relatively lower levels of school belonging compared to peers with at least one parent who had attended college. Prior research has also suggested that first generation student status may exacerbate the relationship between psychological variables and academic adjustment (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012), making a construct such as school connectedness important to consider among this specific population. Among first generation college students, those who have higher involvement in college activities report higher levels of peer support and adjustment (Hertel,

2002). However, because first generation college students are less likely to be involved in traditional activities that may promote school connectedness (e.g., clubs, sports, extra-curricular activities), it may be especially important to examine the meaning of school connectedness for them. While traditional models of what contributes to school connectedness may be more prohibitive to first generation college students, this does not mean that they cannot experience a sense of belonging at the university, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and a sense of care in the university environment. To date, no known studies have explored how school connectedness is experienced for first generation colleges students, warranting qualitative inquiry into this construct. Next the unique characteristics of first generation college students are explored.

1.3 First generation college students

For the purposes of this study first generation college students are defined as students with no parent or guardian that has completed a four year degree. There is debate about whether having a parent with some college or a two-year degree is beneficial to student success, however the findings are very mixed depending on the specific area of inquiry (Davis, 2012). Using the definition of not having a parent or guardian with a four-year degree is often preferred because it is the one most commonly used among academics and the one easiest for colleges to track demographically (Davis, 2012). Growing awareness of the specific issues of this community and even considering first generation students a unique group has gained momentum across U. S. college campuses over the past three decades (Davis, 2012). Given this rapidly growing community, it is important to consider who these students are and their unique learning needs and life circumstances.

In 1989 first generation college students made up about 43% of all beginning postsecondary students and subsequent reports validate or estimate this percentage as growing over the past two decades (Davis, 2012). These numbers are even higher at two year and for-profit institutions (Choy, 2001). At traditional four year institutions, first generation students make up about one-third of the student body (Choy, 2001; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Increasingly it is becoming clear that universities need to consider the face of their student bodies is changing and that middle class, second generation, Caucasian students can no longer be assumed to be the norm.

First generation college students tend to have numerous demographic characteristics that are associated with more challenging outcomes in terms of postsecondary academic success (Engle et al., 2006). First generation students are more likely to be from lower income backgrounds, from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, have lower levels of previous academic preparation for college, are older, less likely to receive financial support from parents and more likely to have multiple obligations outside of school like work and family (Engle et al., 2006; Martinez et al., 2009; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). They are also more likely to be female and have dependent children. Additionally, first generation students are more likely to delay entry into college, begin their post-secondary education at two-year institutions, commute to campus, stop in and out of college, and need remedial coursework (Engle et al., 2006). Beyond these characteristics, first generation students also tend to experience a number of other factors associated with their parental educational attainment that affect their post-secondary success, including lower academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support from parents, less knowledge about the college application process, and fewer resources to pay for college (Engle et al., 2006).

Even after controlling for these pre-existing factors which make college more difficult for first generation students, they are still more likely to struggle academically and less likely to persist to graduation compared to peers with parents who have a college education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This suggests that the experience first generation college students have while attending school is also influencing their academic outcomes, emphasizing the potential role of the university in developing measures to promote college success. First generation students report more difficulty navigating the bureaucracy of universities and have less confidence in their abilities compared to peers (Shields, 2002). They also report being less likely to engage in the social and academic aspects of college that are associated with success such as living on campus, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities and study groups, and using support services (Engle et al., 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Additionally, while first generation students are more likely to exhibit these described characteristics, there are many first generation students who do not fit into these broad categories. First generation student status is sometimes used synonymously with having a low income background and/or racial/ethnic minority status in the literature (Davis, 2012). However, this masks the heterogeneity of this very diverse group of students. Studies that fail to address the many students that fit into first generation status may be doing a disservice to uncovering the keys to academic success and persistence for numerous students. Further, interventions that do not consider the ways in which these risk factors are interrelated may fall short. To date, no studies have examined what school connectedness means from the perspective of first generation college students as a group, with an emphasis on understanding this diverse body of students qualitatively. Next, considerations for improving the outcomes of first generation college students are examined.

1.4 Interventions for first generation college students

As a result of the increased research on first generation college students and the pressure for universities to increase academic success, numerous recommendations exist for this group of learners. Enhancing school connectedness may be an area that is especially important for first generation college students as traditional means of engaging in university life may be more prohibitive for them. A number of interventions recommended in the academic literature may enhance school connectedness, though the connection between these recommendations and the impact on school connectedness is often unexamined. Additionally, the natural resources and assets that first generation students bring are underemphasized in conceptualizing how to optimize school outcomes for this group.

An example of a widely researched and promoted recommendation for universities to address first generation student achievement is implementing learning communities, particularly during the first years of school (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Learning communities are small groups of students who take a core group of classes together with the same instructors. This type of interaction is thought to facilitate deeper personal relationships with faculty and peers that are critical for student success and enhance feelings of belonging. Recommendations also exist around acclimating first generation students culturally and socially to the university environment, which also could impact school connectedness. This includes recommendations for an extended orientation process, more involvement in campus life, and more unstructured public spaces on college campuses (Davis, 2012). While these types of interventions may impact school connectedness, research has not examined these connections and rarely asked first generation students what they thought would be helpful in terms of

increasing their connectedness to the school environment. Asking such questions was a focus of the current study.

Further, despite what we know about culture and environment, a very small number of recommendations for addressing first generation college student success call for major changes to the university culture and much of the research may imply that the “problem” lies within the individual student. For example, many call for increasing the skill set of first generation students who are more likely to be academically underprepared compared to their counterparts. This often includes recommendations for formal training in study skills, public speaking, and in basic academic skills, particularly in writing and math (Davis, 2012). Things like specialized advising are also recommended to help first generation students navigate the bureaucracy of the university and assist with life and curricular choices for which they may lack assistance from family and peers (Davis, 2012). While these measures are helpful, student achievement occurs within a context, and the ecological impact of the school may be a neglected factor influencing student success. In the current study, I took an ecological approach to conceptualizing the experience of first generation college students, inquiring about the individual, communal, and cultural influences that affect their development.

Two other potential concerns with interventions for first generation college students are that the implementation of many support programs could serve to further isolate them from the university community and many programs designed for first generation college students can be difficult to access or remain unknown to many students (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Although the first generation college student experience has received increased attention, a number of questions remain, particularly when it comes to the implementation of interventions to address their needs. Efforts that focus solely on changing students may ignore other ecological

influences on school outcomes. Further, while some interventions are conceptualized to enhance school connectedness, continued investigation into other ways to do this is warranted. Since many first generation students experience multiple obstacles to becoming more involved in the school community it is important to not look at increasing involvement alone, but also understanding factors like school connectedness and what may influence this developmental asset as understood by the students themselves.

1.5 The ecological context of school connectedness

As discussed above, taking an ecological approach to understanding first generation student outcomes is an underemphasized piece in the psychological and intervention literature, yet ecological factors and environment of the university undoubtedly influence the success of first generation students. School connectedness is an asset that can be influenced by the individual, but also enhanced through efforts on the part of the institution. One aspect of the school ecology thought to affect connectedness for first generation college students is the culture of the school: those rules, norms, and standards of behavior that are often implicit and go unnoticed by those inside the culture. First generation students often have to straddle two vastly different cultural worlds; understanding the new climate of their college environment while maintaining their connection to their home culture. There is frequently a mismatch in these circumstances where most U.S. universities reflect cultural norms and values that highlight individualism and middle and upper-class norms while many first generation college students come from communities that tend to uphold values that highlight interdependence (Engle et al., 2006; Stephens et al., 2012). First generation college students frequently report that they were unprepared for the alienation and isolation they experienced in their new academic and cultural environment at college (Engle et al., 2006). Oftentimes, how well students are able to straddle

two (or more) different cultural worlds largely impacts their ability to be successful in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Although universities strive to enable the success of all students, the implicit norms embedded in the culture may leave first generation college students at a disadvantage. The transition from high school to university marks a negotiation for all students, however, the norms and values of the university are largely aligned with middle and upper class students. First generation college students often have greater difficulty as the norms and values of their home communities are often not in alignment. Stephens et al. (2012) experimentally evaluated this theory and found that first generation students did perform worse when they received messages from the university that emphasized individual values and becoming independent learners, while they performed better and more similarly to second generation students when messages from the university emphasized interdependence and learning how to be part of a research community. This cultural mismatch highlights the developmental task many first generation college students face in negotiating between cultural spaces.

Despite the ways in which first generation students may be at a disadvantage when it comes to the social and cultural capital linked to college success, they do bring various strengths to the university experience. While the majority of studies on first generation college students emphasize their deficits, a handful of studies examine the positive cultural capital that first generation students bring to the university experience (Gofen, 2009; Stuber, 2011). For example, Gofen (2009) examined the ways in which family capital could support the success of first generation students. Despite their lack of familiarity with the college going process, families of first generation students often were the driving force behind many first generation student successes. Stuber (2011) emphasizes that while many first generation students have

difficulty adjusting to the university setting the majority do persist and qualitatively examines the experience of White first generation college students. Findings like these move researchers to rethink prior assumptions and look for the ways in which first generation students bring assets into the college environment. My study moves this line of inquiry further by examining what strengths and assets first generation college students bring to the university environment that can be enhanced to increase success and influence school connectedness.

1.5.1 Family

One important ecological consideration is the current and influential role of family in the lives of first generation college students. While families are often seen as a source of strength and support for individuals, the literature on first generation college students often depicts family involvement as an obstacle to overcome, rather than an asset (Pascarella et. al., 2004). As parents have not completed a college degree, they are often seen as lacking the cultural capital to pass down to their children (Pascarella et al., 2004). Families are often depicted as not understanding, not encouraging, and not supporting students while they are in college. Further, family obligations are often cited as a reason why first generation college students are less engaged in campus life, and thus seen as a burden rather than an asset.

As discussed earlier, first generation college students are more likely to be from families and communities that value interdependence over independence (Stephens et, al ; Williams, Karahalios & Ferrari, 2014). When involvement and integration into the school community is seen as an essential element for student success (Tinto, 2012; Pittman & Richmond, 2007), scholars sometimes pit spending time with family against school integration. This makes it seem as if first generation students are forced to choose between their family and school success. Despite this depiction of family in the lives of first generation students, some studies have shown

that families can also be a source of strength and support that motivate first generation students to do well in school (McCoy, 2014; Gofen, 2012). McCoy found that many first generation students of color were motivated to enroll in college from their parents, however their parents high expectations could also be a burden to them (McCoy, 2014). The current study builds on this research by inquiring into the specific ways parents/family can contribute to first generation student success and probing the role of family from the perspective of first generation college students.

1.6 Justification for the Current Study

Despite what is known about first generation college students and school connectedness there are many unanswered questions. First, while school connectedness remains important through the transition to college (Pittman & Richmond, 2007) little research looks at this concept beyond K-12 education. Further, those studies that do look at school connectedness in the college population tend to focus on traditional students, potentially missing the ways in which this may be experienced differently for first generation college students. The current study addressed this gap by specifically focusing on first generation college students and probing their understanding of connectedness from an ecological and strengths based perspective.

Additionally, few scholars have examined how first generation college students perceive school connectedness and how the ecological context of the university contributes to their feelings of belonging. While many programs aim to increase students' sense of connectedness, other new and innovative strategies, driven by student input, need to be explored. Despite what is known theoretically and in the research, the translation to practice and impacting outcomes for first generation college students lags behind (Tinto, 2006). The current study takes an ecological perspective to inquiring about school connectedness among first generation college students

drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theory of ecological development by probing the individual, group, and societal context of students and the transactions between each of these.

Further, a majority of the literature on first generation college students focuses on their deficits and then recommendations for interventions focused on filling in these gaps. While many of these challenging circumstances contribute to student dropout and academic difficulties, there are students in the same situation that persist and thrive. Researchers often ignore those students with similar backgrounds, rather than considering what makes some first generation students successful (Tinto, 2006). The natural resources and assets that first generation students bring are underemphasized in conceptualizing how to increase school connectedness and belonging for this group. I address this gap in the current study by focusing on identifying the natural strengths that first generation students bring to the university.

Finally, a majority of the research on first generation college students has used quantitative methods and make generalizations about this very heterogeneous group (Orbe, 2008). While first generation students are more likely to be ethnic minorities and/ or from lower income backgrounds there is a tendency to use first generation and low income status synonymously which is problematic and may serve to lump students together (Davis, 2012). Studies that fail to address the many students that fit into first generation status may be doing a disservice to uncovering the keys to success.

To address these gaps in the literature I take a qualitative approach to answering the following research questions:

1. What do first generation college students believe contribute to their sense of school connectedness?

2. What strengths can be further nurtured to enhance success for first generation college students?
3. What do first generation students identify as gaps between what exists at the university and what they believe would help them succeed?

Figure 1 provides a conceptual model that guided this study. My aim was to understand the individual and ecological influences on school connectedness for first generation college students with a particular emphasis on the microsystem and mesosystem level influences.

Ecological Influences on School Connectedness

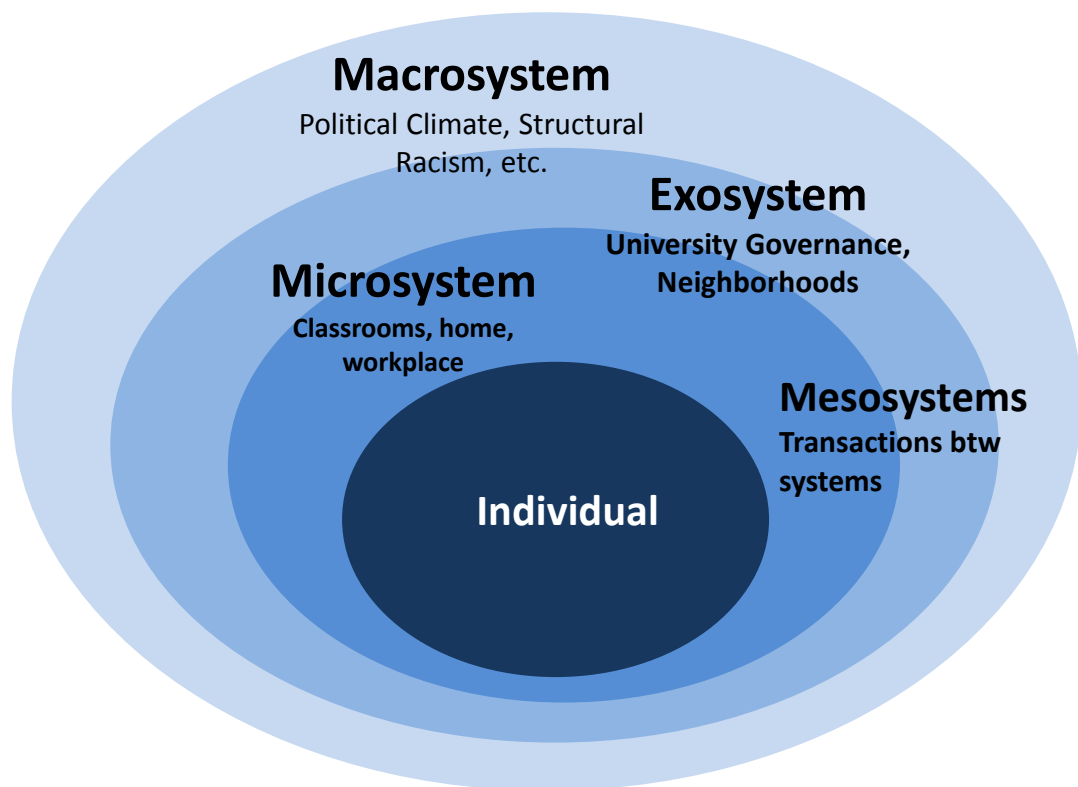


Figure 1 Guiding conceptual model

Similarly, I followed this ecological model to conceptualize student strengths in question 2, probing strengths within the individual and strengths they draw from their environment. Figure 2 provides a conceptual model that takes the familiar ecological model and teases apart specific influences that are associated with school connectedness.

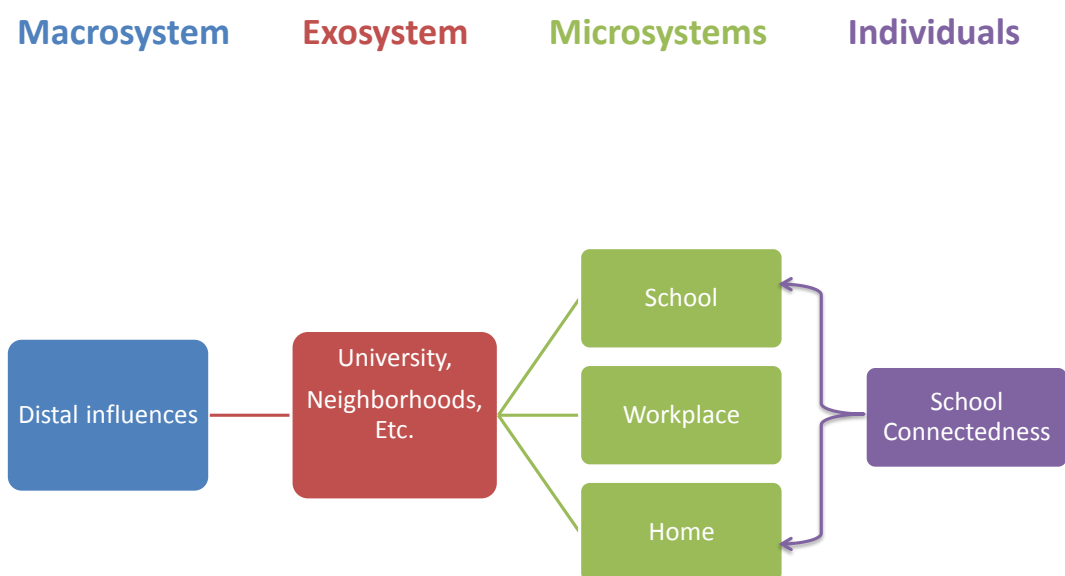


Figure 2 Conceptual model focusing on student strengths

2 METHODS

In this study, I employed a social constructivist approach to qualitative research, assuming multiple subjective meanings would produce a broader understanding of the research questions. Previous research on school connectedness is mainly quantitative in nature, leaving a

large gap in understanding the basic meaning of this construct from the perspective of students. Since the purpose of this study is to understand school connectedness from the point of view of participants, a social constructivist perspective was warranted. The social constructivist perspective allowed for the experience of participants to arise from the data, as opposed to approaching the study with pre-conceived assumptions.

2.1 Setting

Georgia State University (GSU) is a large public, urban university located in Atlanta, Georgia. GSU is home to over 32,000 students, 75% of whom are undergraduates (GSU, 2013). The campus is highly diverse with students from every county in the state, every state in the nation, and international students from more than 150 countries. The racial ethnic breakdown of the student body is 13% Asian, 37% Black, 8% Latino, 4% Multiracial, 6% Other/Not Reported, and 40% White. Approximately 30% of the undergraduate student body is composed of first generation college students. GSU has implemented a number of changes to address the needs of first generation college students, including making freshmen learning communities, providing broad financial assistance, increasing opportunities for service learning, and implementing federally funded student support services for low income and first generation students.

2.2 Participants

A total of 18 participants were recruited for the study, based on previous research that used a similar sample size to uncover the experience of a specific student body (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Since analysis was continuous, I was able to gauge whether saturation had been reached as data was being collected. No new themes were generated after 15 participant interviews were conducted. Participants from a broad range of racial/ethnic, degree of study, and family backgrounds were recruited. Participants ranged in age

from 19-42 years old, though the majority were in their early 20s; 56% were female (n=10) and 44% (n=8) were male. Participants were asked to self-identify their racial/ethnic or cultural group; however, using researcher-imposed categories they were 50% (n=9) Black/African American, 28% (n=5) Asian/Asian American, 11% (n=2) Hispanic/Latina, 11% (n=2) White/Caucasian. Several students began their college career at GSU, and 5 transferred to GSU from other institutions. A summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Racial/ Ethnic Background* | Major | Parent(s) Country of Origin | Participant's Employment Status |
|------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Maria | 20 | F | Latina | Public Policy | Mexico | Part-time |
| Nancy | 20 | F | Caucasian | Nursing | Romania | Part-time |
| Janice | 20 | F | Black/African American | Pre-Nursing | USA | Part time |
| Lynn | 20 | F | Asian | Biology | Hong Kong (China) | Part-time |
| Adjoa | 21 | F | Black American | Psychology Pre-Med | Ghana | Full-time |
| Caroline | 20 | F | Hispanic | Mathematics | Mexico | Not working |
| Whitney | 20 | F | Black American | Nursing | USA | Not working |
| Tina | 20 | F | Chinese | Environmental Science | Macau (China) | Part-time |
| Earl | 20 | M | African American | English | USA | Part-time |
| Kelly | 28 | F | African American | Psychology Pre-Med | Nigeria | Part-time |
| Brandon | 22 | M | African American | Public Policy | USA | Part-time |
| Shipra | 24 | F | Asian (Bangladeshi) | Biology | Bangladesh | Part-time |
| David | 19 | M | White | Neuroscience | USA | Part-time |
| Richard | 42 | M | Black | Information Systems | USA | Full-time |
| Kedrick | | M | Black American | Criminal Justice | USA | Full-time |
| Raj | 22 | M | South Asian | Biology & Chemistry | India | Part-time |

| | | | | | | |
|----------|----|---|------------------|------------------|-------|-----------|
| Terrence | 19 | M | African American | Biology | USA | Part-time |
| Xavier | 26 | M | Asian (Korean) | Exercise Science | Korea | Part-time |

2.2.1 Recruitment

Participants were first drawn from a larger quantitative study investigating the efficacy of service-learning and its impact on academic outcomes. The larger study recruited a representative sample from all incoming freshman during the 2012-2013 school year.

Participants who identified as not having a parent or guardian with a 4-year degree were invited to participate in the current study via e-mail. A total of 186 students were contacted this way, 14 responded to the e-mail, and 8 participants completed the study. When efforts to recruit from the larger sample yielded no further participants, but saturation had not yet been reached, I used the Psychology Department's research recruitment pool. Students enrolled in introductory Psychology classes are part of this participant pool and receive credit for participating in research studies conducted in the department. Students who were at least sophomores and were first generation college students were recruited through this mechanism. The remaining 10 participants came from this pool.

2.3 Procedures

Prior to the beginning of data collection, approval was obtained from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board. Participants were interviewed in private rooms in the Psychology Department at Georgia State University. Upon arrival, I greeted participants in the waiting area and then escorted them to a private room where I obtained informed consent. Participants were fully briefed on their rights and the voluntary nature of the research project. Further, I obtained consent to audio record interviews and described the process of member

checking. Participants separately consented both to be interviewed that day and to be contacted later to ensure the accuracy of the representation of their statements or probe for further clarification (member checking). All participants consented for both aspects of the study. One-on-one interviews followed consent, using the interview protocol in Appendix A. Upon completion of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were either compensated with a \$15 gift card or with course credit needed for their Psychology class. All interviews took place between July and December of 2014.

2.3.1 Member Checking

After preliminary results were obtained, I conducted member checking. Each participant was given excerpts from the preliminary results and asked to validate the accuracy of the depiction of their statements and experience. Any requested changes were made to the participant's data. These clarified responses are reflected in the results presented below.

2.4 Measures

2.4.1 Individual Interview protocol

An interview protocol was developed with the goal of eliciting the lived experience of first generation college students. Research protocols were written at an 8th grade reading level or lower. Prior to the interviews, the protocol was pilot tested with an undergraduate research assistant who was also a first generation college student. Minor changes were made to address difficulties with clarity, meaning, and other barriers to accomplishing the aims of the study. The interview protocol consisted of several semi-structured and open ended questions designed to explore meaning. Initial themes identified in early interviews were further probed during later one-on-one interviews. Topics explored included: academics, sources of social support,

barriers/facilitators of integration into the school community, feelings of school connectedness, family and work commitments. A full protocol can be found in Appendix A.

2.4.2 *Demographic Questionnaire*

Participants completed a short demographic questionnaire at the conclusion of the interview, which included questions about their current major, expected graduation date, self-described race or ethnic group, gender, marital status, and employment status. The demographic questionnaire is in Appendix B.

2.4.3 *Modified School Connectedness Subscale*

The original school connectedness subscale (SCS) is a 5-item scale originally designed for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (McNeely et al., 2002b; Resnick et al., 1997) to specifically measure the psychological bond students feel toward school. Responses are anchored on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Students are asked “How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school” and presented with the following statements: I feel close to people at this school; I am happy to be at this school; I feel like I am part of this school; The teachers at this school treat students fairly; and I feel safe in my school. Previous research provides data supporting the validity and reliability of the SCS across sociocultural groups (Furlong et al., 2010). The current study modified the wording of the SCS to reflect a college experience. For example, the word “teachers” was replaced by “professors”. The modified SCS is found in Appendix C.

2.5 Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach which allows for the experience of participants to arise from the data, but also describes and captures investigator assumptions

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). This theoretical approach calls for analysis to be continuous as data are being collected, allowing for themes to arise and then be further probed in subsequent interviews.

In keeping with the process set forth by Braun & Clarke (2006), I familiarized myself with the data through the transcription process and re-reading transcripts as they became available. After the first three interviews were completed and transcribed, two trained undergraduate research assistants and I looked for initial themes. After reading these three transcripts several times and making notes in the margins, we sat together and discussed emergent themes, identified areas for further probing in subsequent interviews, and discussed problems with clarity. For example, after reading these three interviews we realized that communication with family was an area we wanted to probe further in subsequent interviews. Additionally, participants had difficulty understanding the difference between individual strengths and how things in their environment could be a strength, so we reworded these questions for clarity. During data collection, the two research assistants and I were also transcribing the interviews. This allowed us to meet periodically and discuss emergent themes continuously throughout the data collection process.

At the conclusion of initial data collection, I read all transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Next, using Nvivo9 software, transcripts were structurally coded so that all answers that pertained to one question or subject matter could be viewed together. Structurally coding data is suggested by Guest & McLellan (2003) to make large sets of data easier to manage. For example, structural codes included: school connectedness, relationship with family, and gaps in services. This allowed me to examine information that pertained to each research question. Next individual coding schemes for each structural node were created, reflecting broad themes in the data. Finally, codes that merged thematic information across

nodes were created to reflect themes that were present across structural content areas. After the preliminary coding scheme was created, two undergraduate research assistants reviewed it with me to resolve any uncertainties around coding and meaning making. Further, we engaged in a form of imaginative variation where we tried to generate as many potential explanations as possible to interpret the meaning of some of the data as necessary. For example, one participant discussed difficulty communicating about school with her parents. I coded this passage as being attached to language, whereas one of the undergraduate research assistants focused on the cultural meaning of college as a barrier. We then imagined all of the possible meanings and ways to interpret “difficulty with communication” to minimize interpretation of the data based on one person’s biases or assumptions. I then refined themes to reflect any agreed upon changes.

Once preliminary findings were available, I engaged in member checking with participants to ensure I had accurately reflected their experiences. Participants were contacted via phone and/or e-mail to share preliminary findings, which included broad themes they endorsed, and specific quotes they made. Participants then had the opportunity to comment on findings, clarify answers, affirm accurate reflection of their experience, and/or correct any misinterpretations. These changes are reflected in the results presented.

2.6 Researcher Stance

Actively considering researcher biases, prior experiences, and my approach to the study was critical to this analysis. In particular, taking a Black feminist approach to research and using thematic analysis it is imperative to examine the interaction between the research and the researcher throughout all phases of the process. As a former first generation college student, a woman of color, and a current Psychology graduate student at the institution the participants

were drawn from, there were several biases and social identities to consider. Having been a first generation college student, my past experiences might be similar to the current participants, but their experiences might also be quite different. I tried to remain mindful of this throughout the process, and, in particular, I searched for evidence that countered my assumptions when I found myself identifying with a particular participant's experience. I also identify as a Black woman and current graduate student. Being a person of color, and seeing my cultural identity as critical to my experience, I might be more inclined to recognize this stance in other students of color. As a current graduate student, I might have a shared student experience with participants, however being in PhD program also isolates me from the undergraduate world. While my multiple social identities and experiences create biases, they also helped me relate to the participants. I decided to disclose my first generation student status to participants if they asked, and many of them did. This helped us co-create the interview with feelings of empathy and mutual understanding. In many cases this may have helped students feel understood and more likely to share experiences with me as the interviewer.

I also brought knowledge and opinions about students at Georgia State University prior to beginning data collection. For five years prior to the beginning of data collection, I served as a teaching assistant, lab instructor, or course instructor for undergraduates at Georgia State. Additionally, as a student clinician in the GSU psychology clinic I had seen several undergraduate students as clients in individual therapy. Seeing many students who wanted to achieve, but struggled with knowing the culture of academia and how to advance their studies and future careers partially inspired me to begin this study. At the same time, I tried to be aware of this bias in belief and was careful not to weight the importance of data that confirmed these beliefs.

Prior to beginning data collection, I also informally interviewed the director of Student Support Services (SSS) and the Assistant Vice President for Student Retention. These were informal information gathering meetings, where I found out more about the services available to students and what university officials saw as first generation student retention priorities. This allowed me to be familiar with some of the terminology and available programs that participants brought up during their interviews. It also allowed me to be a resource for participants, as I believe in research being mutually beneficial for researcher and participant. Several students asked for advice or had questions at the end of interviews about what they could do to address challenges. I was better equipped to direct them to resources having conducted those informational interviews.

In addition to my stance, I had my research assistants think about how their experience might color their view of the data. Neither of them were first generation college students, but both of them were first generation Americans with foreign-born parents. They related to many of the participant narratives. We actively tried to ensure we did not over emphasize stories we could relate to by looking for evidence of contrary information. For example, we all related to having difficulty explaining what we did day to day as students to our parents, and it was easy to select stories that confirmed this viewpoint; therefore, we actively looked in the data for counter-narratives of people who had an easy time sharing their lives as a student with their parents.

3 RESULTS

Results are presented by each of the three research question. Additionally, a figure accompanies each research question that maps the corresponding structural codes and emergent themes for ease of interpretation.

3.1 School Connectedness

The first research question asked: What do first generation college students believe contribute to their sense of school connectedness? To answer this, I explored each of the three components of school connectedness (sense of belonging at school, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and a sense of safety and care in the school environment) as relayed by the participants. Relationships with peers were explored separately from relationships with professors and instructors in this analysis. Figure 3 provides a map of the coding scheme for this question; structural codes are in red, thematic codes are in blue. In summary, most participants reported high feelings of belongingness that were equated with campus involvement, connection to peers, and involvement in racial/ethnic or cultural group affiliated organizations. Feelings of belongingness were challenged by being in the downtown area of a major city and long commutes. High connectedness to peers was equated with a friendly environment, diversity within the student body, and a shared sense of purpose. Connectedness was high to professors that demonstrated care and competence, but many students were also challenged by how to create relationships with instructors. Participants reported a general sense of caring on campus, however, some reported that crime on campus was a threat to perceptions of safety.

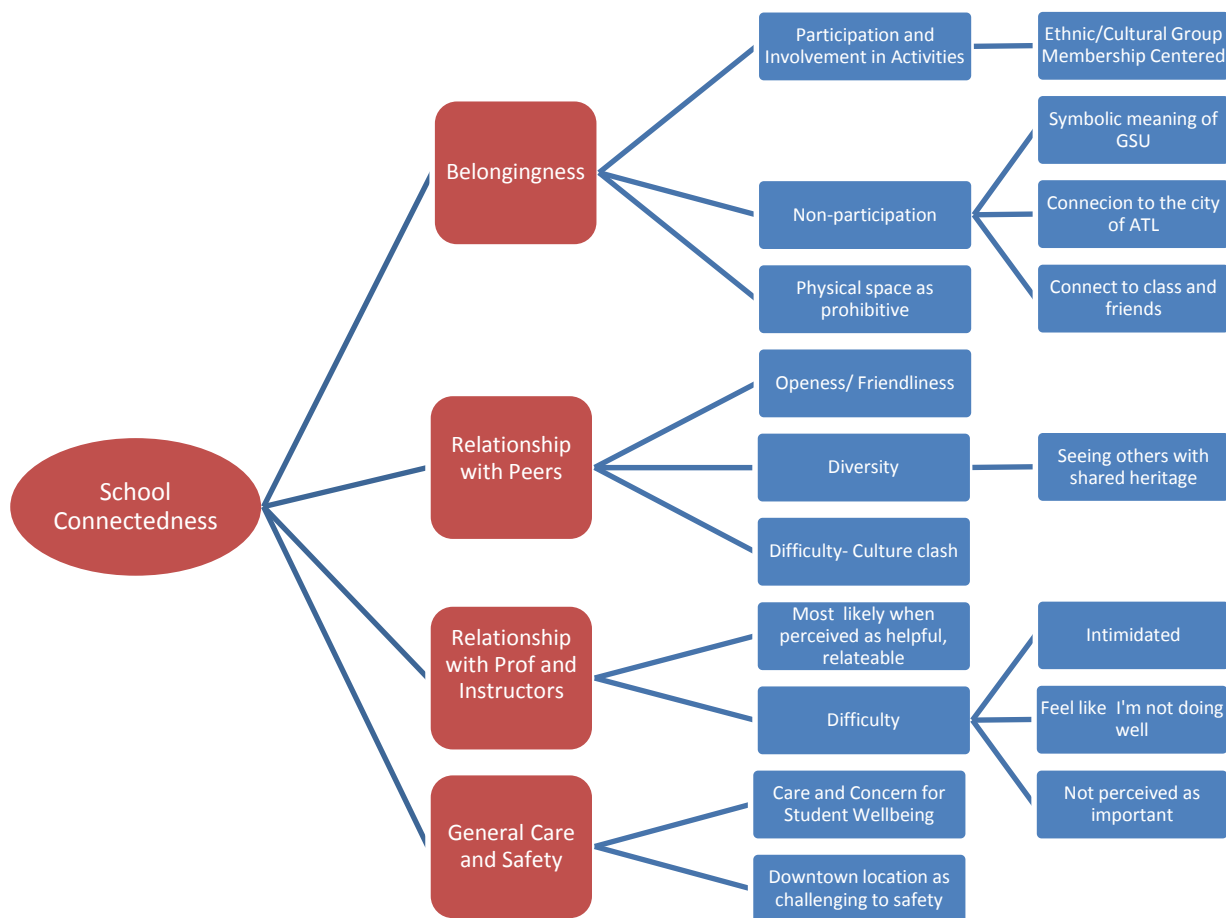


Figure 3 Results map for research question 1.

3.1.2 Sense of Belonging

I gauged sense of belonging directly through asking participants, “How much to you feel like you belong at GSU?” and through structurally coding content related to a sense of belonging discussed by participants throughout their interviews. Among participants, sense of belonging was generally strong, with just 2 students describing broad feelings of not belonging (a total modified school connectedness subscale score of less than 15 and thematic codes that included feelings of non-attachment to GSU). Most students described feeling they belonged at GSU and elaborated on different ways they felt a part of the school. Many students equated belongingness

with participation in school activities, although this meaning was not suggested by the interviewer.

3.1.2.2 Participation

As previous literature suggests, becoming involved in school activities such as clubs, sports, and organizations, was important for many participants' sense of belonging. Participants described being part of clubs, fraternities, cultural organizations, as well as volunteering in the community through Georgia State. Kelly*, a 28 year old African American post-bachelors student who completed her degree at GSU and returned to work on a second degree, stressed the importance of joining a club or organization to be connected to the campus throughout her interview. Her early experiences at college left her feeling lonely, but she began feeling connected to GSU after joining a sorority and several campus clubs. She reflected this in the following excerpt:

It is imperative...In order to feel like you belong, you have to join something. You have to join a club...something. Because it will ruin your experience if you don't. Because that's part of...I mean just like in high school, you have your social groups. And in corporate you have your social groups as well. It's the same thing, but with college it's even more so important because that's really a time where you're figuring out who you are. And that's kind of molding and defining while you're here. And I have a friend who literally lived at home and didn't join anything and they...she ended up graduating but she did take like 2 or 3 years off. And she had no pull. She had no support system.

Janice, a 20 year old, African American nursing major described becoming involved with campus activities as the primary factor that helped her adjust to being in this new college environment.

I think getting involved in campus helped me adjust; helped me to meet a lot of new people, and join campus events...community service and also different events that cater to students, as well as faculty...like the distinguished speaker series and everything like that. And I also joined the National Council of Negro Women. They also do a lot of community service. I think all of the organizations I joined are really community service

* All names are pseudonyms to protect participant privacy

based and just kinda helping your community. But I think those helped, as well as the FLC [Freshman Learning Community], I think helped me adjust.

Throughout Janice's description of becoming involved on campus, she heavily emphasized her connection to the National Council of Negro Women. Becoming involved in campus activities that involved racial/ethnic or cultural group membership was particularly helpful for a number of students to feel like they belonged on campus. Lynn, a 20 year old biology major reflected on participation in cultural group activities as a primary way of feeling like she belonged on campus.

And I met a bunch of other [friends] during clubs at school. I'm in Hong Kong Student Association. We're pretty small because you know Hong Kong is so tiny. But it's great that we get to spread knowledge about our food, and how we are different from China. We're not completely different, but we are different....Do you know what ISAC is?...it's like International Student Association Committee. It's the umbrella that all the international groups fall under. And we're all connected. We all collaborate on our events. So that's how I feel connected to the school community.

For some, being in the college environment was the first time they consciously engaged in aspects of their ethnic or cultural identity, or had a new opportunity to connect to others who shared their particular ethnic or cultural heritage. This was important for a number of students, and they believed it increased their sense of belongingness. Raj, a 21 year old biology and chemistry major related being at GSU as the first time he consciously sought out members of his ethnic community and described becoming part of a South Asian fraternity during his first year.

So I'm in a fraternity called Delta Epsilon Psi. It's a South Asian fraternity...we...essentially we're established to create a voice for the South Asian community. Um, but, I joined it like out of the blue. I did not know anyone brown, or Asian, South Asian prior to coming in here. Like, you know, I hung out with like everybody in high school, I wasn't just like restricted or anything. I mean, I'm still not restricted in any manner...

Coming to GSU and connecting with organizations that emphasized racial/ethnic or cultural group members on campus was recurrent as important across several participant interviews. This shared identity helped give students the sense that they belonged on campus.

3.1.2.3 Belongingness without activity involvement

Many first generation college students find it difficult to become involved in campus clubs and activities for a variety of reasons including long commutes, family responsibilities, and working. Despite this, many participants still reported high belongingness at GSU. One way some participants felt a sense of belonging was through their connection to what GSU symbolized for them as Atlanta residents. For some participants that grew up in Atlanta, Georgia State represented status and achievement throughout their youth. Kedrick is a transfer student and married father of two, who grew up in some of Atlanta's more impoverished neighborhoods. He faced multiple ecological barriers to educational attainment and described this connection to the symbolic nature of GSU.

Georgia State was always in the back of my mind, like the Harvard of my world...and it was right around the corner. I always rode past it coming downtown and being young and from the city, you always see Georgia State. Everywhere. Everybody wanted that... experience. I think that's a lot of the reason why I'm here. It was that goal that sat in the back of my head, like if you could do anything with your life what would you want to do? You can make it through somewhere, I would want to go through Georgia State to do it.

Many participants felt a sense of belongingness at GSU through the connection to the city of Atlanta itself, and being on a downtown campus. Raj described this connection to Atlanta throughout his interview. First, he gushed, "I love it here. It's, I love the city of Atlanta. I mean ever since I was a kid I've been coming here and it's my city, ya know?" He later goes on to describe his connection to the city of Atlanta and GSU:

I think when you look at Atlanta, when I came to Incept [First year orientation], and I was taken around everywhere. My dad came with me. And he was like, "this is

awesome”. You can experience...it’s a whole different experience than it is in a typical college town. You can experience all of that, but it’s just the fact that it’s not a college town. That’s what’s so...that’s like what’s drawing about it...it’s different. Like I said, unique. It’s unique to any other school. I don’t know if they have some more...like anywhere else; but college towns are generally what happens. This isn’t *just* a college town. This is the city. Like there’s so much going on, other than just college. So I think that’s what the most alluring fact about Georgia State.

In addition to connecting to what GSU symbolizes or the city of Atlanta, some students believed that taking classes and making friends was all they needed to feel that they belonged. They did not necessarily think participation beyond that was necessary for them to be successful. Nancy, a 20 year old Caucasian, nursing major conveyed that she did not feel she needed to join activities to be successful at college.

Like I belong...from a scale of 1-10, I would probably say a 5. Well 5 points there because I take classes here and I know my professors but I’m missing the other 5 points because I don’t really get involved in any of the activities here going on. Or any of...like sports. Or I’m not in any clubs or organizations here. So in that way I feel like I don’t kinda belong.

When I asked about participation in clubs or activities, she further went on.

I think I’m indifferent about it. If I did have the time. I don’t think I would either. Because I don’t feel as if they are really necessary for me. I don’t know. I mean I like the social aspect of school. Like getting to know people. But for some reason I just don’t feel like it’s something I really wanna do.

Despite this indifference to becoming more involved on campus, Nancy rated herself as “agreeing” to the statement, “I feel like I belong at GSU.” She also maintains a 4.0 grade point average and is on track to meet graduation milestones. For some, participation does not equal belongingness, and there are many other ways participants described feeling connected to GSU without heavy extra-curricular involvement.

3.1.2.4 Challenges to sense of belonging

There were a couple of recurrent ways that students felt a disconnection from the school. Some students find the physical space of GSU and its location downtown to be prohibitive to a

sense of belongingness. Because the campus is in the middle of a busy city, many students commented on the lack of green space and/or collective campus space to feel that they were connected to a college experience. Additionally, the difficulty of getting downtown due to long commutes, traffic, limited public transportation, and limited parking on campus repeatedly arose as inhibiting students from becoming more involved. Tina, a 20 year old Chinese environmental science major, discussed having mixed feelings about the physical space and location of GSU. She was pleased by the accessibility of downtown Atlanta's attributes, but at the same time, having visited other friends on campuses that had more green space, she missed that at Georgia State.

Tina : I mean, the campus isn't really like a campus, so it was like, just going downtown every day.

Interviewer: Do you, think that's a good thing, or...?

Tina: it's kind of, I don't know half, and half is like good 'cause everything is close by. You don't have to like, drive or anything; but then it's kind of like, they're having fun, and like, in the green space and stuff, 'cause my friend she used to go to a school like that and I was like, "Oh that's kind of cool." But then it's kind of bad because the nearest restaurant...you had to walk like, a really long time in the middle of nowhere.

The physical space and large number of people can also be overwhelming to students and impede their sense of belonging. Whitney, a 20 year old Black American female student and nursing major, described being overwhelmed with a sense of frustration when I asked her about what her first year on campus was like.

Whitney: I mean it was overwhelming because there was like so many people and there's always so many people the first few weeks of school, and I don't know I was standing. I was outside...I didn't even go inside yet and there was like so many people outside walking around, and I actually saw a few people that I knew, and I mean but it was overwhelming, it was overwhelming.

Interviewer: Mhm. Yeah that's a lot of people.

Whitney: And I didn't, like I didn't know where some places were at to ask, and I was so disoriented because I didn't know where the places were at yet, so I would get lost really easily.

Although being inside a major city is alluring to many students, the physical space and positioning of Georgia State can inhibit students' feelings of belongingness on campus. Long commutes, limited parking, limited green space, and the overwhelming size of the university were cited as interfering with a sense of belonging.

3.1.3 Relationships with Peers

Accompanying belonging, positive relationships with peers were described as promoting school connectedness. Most participants spoke fondly of their peers at Georgia State. Across participants, there was a common theme of the general friendliness and openness of the student body contributing to their positive experience at GSU. Students related to peers in the classroom and through campus clubs and events. Most participants described a close relationship with at least one peer on campus. Nancy, a commuter student, discussed the importance of making friends when I asked her about her first year on campus.

Nancy: My first year? Um, I don't know how to describe it. Well it was definitely different. I feel like I really came out of my shell freshmen year because you're forced to be in a different environment with different people. And I made a lot of friends. Learning to put yourself in a different environment and seeing like...what you can do... You get to be in a new place and see where you can go, and what you can do with the new, new stuff you have.

Interviewer: What things helped you...feel like the adjustment wasn't so hard?

Nancy: definitely meeting people that you had common interests and people in your classes that you got to meet and talk to them and making new friends, and having my siblings there made it made everything feel more comfortable

Further, when I asked Nancy what advice she would give to other students she stressed the importance of making social connections.

Definitely make friends in your classes. Get to know each other. Learn...figure out the best way to study. Study with other people. Really the social aspect of college is really...I find that it is more important than you think.

Several students talked about the diversity of the student body as a positive aspect of GSU that helped them feel connected to school. Kedrick describes how he was initially worried about being a non-traditional aged student, but came to experience the campus as accepting of many different types of people.

Coming in, I always looked at my age, I'm like, "Oh, I'm an old man. I've been through so much. Why am I even in school anymore?" And you know it kinda makes you feel like you really don't belong here. But then you look around and you see how diverse Georgia State is and how open minded the students are to different reasons as to why... it's just accepting of the fact that you're here and that you want more.

For many students, having peers that share aspects of their racial/ethnic or cultural background helped motivate them to persist in school. Maria, a 21 year old Mexican American student, described this several times throughout her interview. When asked about things that helped her adjust to college she relayed the following.

I would say my friends. Because most of the friends that I...well all of my friends that I have are on the same page that I am. They're all, most of them are first-generation college students and they are either the first, the very first person, or they have a sibling that's already in college. So I feel that we really connected in that way and we really helped each other, just with, just being here and not being lonely and stuff, and having somebody to talk to.

She later discussed the importance of having peers of the same ethnic background around her.

I guess it motivates us as well. We all came from the same backgrounds too, and growing up... like there's not a lot of Hispanic students that are actually going to college. And so when we were in high school, we were... we were usually like the nerds from our Hispanic friends (*laughs*). So you know having that experience with them really just like motivate us too and keep going then... yeah... keeps us I guess closer together.

Maria also discussed the general diversity of the student body and having other students of color to relate to on campus, in addition to her Hispanic friends.

Maria: I feel like I belong. I don't feel like uncomfortable or anything...I definitely feel more comfortable than I did like in my high school sometimes. Because in my high school it was like...I guess Georgia State's really diverse, and my high school wasn't as diverse and sometimes I didn't, I wasn't as confident because other people were, I was

different from, the rest of the people so, yeah, I didn't open up myself as much, and then here I, I feel like, I, I can be myself basically.

Interviewer: What kind of thing helped reassure you that you, could be yourself and, open up? I think I know one thing is the diversity, but...

Maria: I guess when I see students that are... from the same background or, even minority students you know... I see them doing their own thing and that reassures me that I can do my own thing... Definitely people like encouraging you to... just do other things and...not being judged.

The general friendliness of the student body, respect for diversity, and the presence of racial/ethnic or cultural group peers were cited as contributing to enhancing the quality of participants' relationship to peers. Despite this, some challenges with peers were noted and are discussed next.

3.1.3.2 Challenges connecting with peers

A couple of participants reported difficulty connecting with some of their peers. Some participants described a general culture that values individualism which was off-putting at times, and in contrast to the communal background with which they were more familiar. Although Kedrick describes the diversity and acceptance of the GSU student body as enhancing his feelings of belonging on campus, he also struggled with some of the norms of social interaction with peers on campus. He described this in the following excerpt.

Um, that whole, like, sitting at a table. Like how we're sitting at a table right now and no one knows no one...and no one's gonna say nothing to anyone. And you speak to someone, they kinda think you're trying to harass, like you feel like you're harassing them sort of. So you don't even wanna say "hi" or "what's going on?" "what are you doing?" "what's your major?" Metro [a community college] was like we're all in here together. We're trying to make it to the next level. The other next level. We're not at that level so we're gonna try to get as many connections as we can. Hopefully you can help me before I even make it...and even then, I could help pull you up with me. And it's like everybody here, I guess they're in the mindset that we've already made it passed a lot of other people. And now we're just here to, I guess to further our own advancement, our own life, and...we're just gonna stay right here....That's not me, I'm used to interacting with people....I can't not talk to people. (*laughs*)

Caroline, a Latina math major similarly struggled to make friends at GSU and described a comparable difference in cultural norms. She expressed that making friends was difficult, and I continued to probe her around this.

Caroline: yeah definitely, like most of the friends that I have are from high school and I don't, haven't made any friends here.

Interviewer: Do you want to?

Caroline: Um, I guess like one or two

I later asked Caroline to describe her relationships with students on campus, and she relayed the following story.

Well one way that I could describe that is like, I'll be walking down the street, you know walking and walking. I'll be walking and like for 5, 10 minutes, I was standing somewhere and then eventually, someone will tell me that my book bag was opened, right? But I've been walking for like... so long and nobody has told me anything and there were so many people behind me and nobody had said anything. But whenever I saw somebody's bag opened, I always tell them. So I feel like I'm nicer than most people because they don't tell me and they don't help out, that's the thing, it's that they should help one another and help me...so that's how I feel about that. People here, they're not really that helpful.

Related, Brandon a 22 year old African American public policy major who transferred to GSU from a small historically Black college described difficulty relating to peers. He first compares students from the two institutions, citing a difference in the cultural norms of interacting.

It's a different type of vibe here. I could tell that the people here are...sometimes to me...the people are more materialistic. As coming from an HBCU, where we don't have anything, we just have each other. I saw that a lot and it kind of made me stay away from people. I don't know...again I don't know their intentions so I come from that. So...it was very difficult for me to open up to people when I first got here because I don't know you.

Brandon later talked about sometimes feeling like a social outcast at GSU. His feeling was connected, in part, to class differences and not knowing people who were from a similar upbringing. He related the following when I asked him what made him feel like an outcast or that he didn't belong:

That's a good question. [long pause] sometimes it's the conversations that I have with people that I feel that we're not on the same level. Or I feel like this conversation that the person is trying to condescend me or...like talk down to me. I haven't met anyone yet that came from the same circumstances that I came from. So that's why sometimes I feel like an outcast. Mainly because of that. Sometimes when I'm walking around campus I feel like...no, I know that, people are just staring at me.

The few participants that described difficulty making friends or connecting to peers generally relayed a type of cultural mismatch. They usually described coming from more collective backgrounds where there is a sense of mutual help and found that students on campus could be more individually focused, which could be difficult at times. Similarly, Brandon described being from a lower class background and felt that people on campus did not relate to where he was coming from.

3.1.4 Relationships with Professors and Instructors

Participants were more mixed in their responses about relationships with professors and instructors, as compared to the largely positive attitude toward peers. Most reported positive interactions with at least a few faculty members, and participants generally perceived that more than half of their instructors were dedicated to their students. Participants were most likely to interact with faculty they perceived as knowledgeable, dedicated, and eager to help students. When asked which qualities make students feel either that they could talk to a professor or that they would rather not approach him or her, students most often stated it was the professor's personality. Raj has developed close relationships with several professors and described what he finds most approachable about his favorite professor.

I'm really cool with Dr. X. He is the Organic Chemistry teacher; when I took the course, I always went to his office hours. That is a man...he is the greatest...probably one of the greatest professors I've...No, he *is* the greatest professor I had in college. He is a guy that will never turn you down for help. He will come 7:00 in the morning on his day off, like when he doesn't have to teach classes and stuff, just so he can help you... Like, that is dedication. I think that is amazing. And that's what I really appreciated about him. I was working, so it's like a lot of the times during his office hours I either had class or I had to go to work or something. So he's like, "you know what...what time are you free

tomorrow?” And I would come to him and he like sits down with you... And he'll just sit down with you and he will go and explain everything to you, slowly as possible. Let you ask as many questions. He's a very patient man. He doesn't like it when people cheat, obviously. That makes sense, you know? I don't think anybody should cheat. You're cheating yourself in essence. But, he... I'm getting a letter of recommendation from him. I don't know, like what it is... his persona is so relatable...

In addition to their personalities, several participants discussed professors showing an interest in them or helping them prepare for the future as demonstrating that they care. Kelly discussed what she saw as the common thread between professors that cared about students.

One of the things I remember from all of the professors that I felt were vested is they wanted to know what people wanted to do after their class. What do you want to do with your life? Because essentially, we're like shipping you out to get jobs so they're always kind of like, “If you're interested in this field, here is a way for you to get internships. Or here is a way for you to get jobs, or this company is recruiting.” Like they would tell you resources to expose you to other options. That was one commonality. It was always focused on what happens after this. Not just my class.

Most participants reported similar positive interactions with professors and instructors. However, despite these positive feelings, participants discussed limiting their interactions to discussing class materials. Most participants did not describe talking to professors and instructors about making academic decisions, thinking about career options, or general socializing. Further, several participants described a difficulty or challenge in terms of feeling confident in their ability to have a dialogue with their instructors. One reason participants cited for not wanting to interact with an instructor was not doing well in their class. Nancy explained this when I asked about what makes her feel that she can or cannot go to instructors for help.

I think the personality really helps. Like if they seem like nice people I would go to their office hours. If they're just mean, I would avoid them at all cost. I think the classes where I do really well in I feel like it's easier to approach the professor and be able to talk to them. Because if I'm not doing so hot... I feel. I don't know, I feel self-conscious that the professor might think of me one way.

Maria similarly described feeling intimidated by faculty at times when I asked her about what characteristics made her feel like she cannot approach an instructor.

Definitely in the classroom they're a little more assertive. I think like more assertive...in the sense that they have, I guess like a stronger character. That kind of scared me away from having them; you know talking to them about... just about anything. Well like if they made me feel intimidated... I guess for me if they sound too intellectual then I guess I am a little bit hesitant about approaching them. Because I feel if I ask them something or if I talk about something, I'm not gonna know everything and they might not (*pause*) I don't know...

Positive relationships with faculty and instructors seemed linked to enhanced connectedness among the participants. However, creating positive relationships with faculty was an obstacle to many of the students who have difficulty feeling confident enough to interact with professors or who do not perceive it as important to form relationships with faculty outside of help in a specific class. Growing in this ability to form relationships with professors and instructors over time was a theme that some students struggled with; however, some seemed to learn this skill over the course of their student careers. In particular, most of the transfer or returning students understood that relationships with faculty were important and regretted not attending to this aspect of education earlier in their student careers. Some traditionally aged students were also able to learn the importance of forming relationships with instructors while they were still students. Janice discussed this growth in her thinking about relating to professors and instructors over the years.

I think it's definitely grown. My first year I wasn't too close with any professors except my freshman learning community professor... We had like one-on-ones and everything; but everyone else, I wasn't too close with. But over the years as I've realized that, you know you may need a recommendation from this teacher, or you know, you may need help from this teacher. I've definitely grown closer to making it a point to, stop by office hours or just ask questions if I need to ask questions.

While most participants described positive relationship with professors and instructors, some faculty are perceived as not approachable by participants. Additionally, feeling intimidated

by professors, not doing well in class, or not perceiving having interaction outside of the classroom as important are obstacles to students enhancing relationships with faculty and staff.

3.1.5 General care and safety in the environment

The final component of school connectedness is general feelings of care and safety in the environment. Several participants described Georgia State as a place that generally cared for the wellbeing of students. Many discussed feeling people at Georgia State wanted them to succeed and that they could name several people who cared about them personally. When asked if there were people who cared about her at GSU, Janice reflected this sentiment.

I definitely think so. A lot of people are, very helpful as far as the professors, mentors, even...the student, tutors that they have on campus I think they, make it a point to help you understand and, get integrated into, really like, making you feel like a part of GSU.

Raj reflected this further.

First of all, Georgia State as a university I feel looks to actually help people to get into college. They want you to succeed. It's not just all about the money.... the fact I like is, I've talked to two different deans and they're like. They strive for the success of the students, you know? They just want you to come look for it. You gotta come ask. You can't just expect it to fall in your lap. Which I completely understand.

Adjoa, a 21 year old Black American psychology major, echoed the sentiment that people at Georgia State want students to succeed and related it to the multiple opportunities available.

I really like the campus. Um, I just like that we're in downtown Atlanta, and you can do anything really you want to do. I like that Georgia State does a lot of programs like, a lot of programs for students to come to. I love that because you get to find out about stuff that you never would have known...I feel like I can go to advisors and teachers for anything. I just like being plugged into Georgia State. I feel like, well I don't know because I didn't really tour the schools but, I feel like this is... it's a really good school. People really care and want you to succeed.

In terms of safety, being in a major city where crime is a concern made several students feel somewhat unsafe on campus. However, a majority of participants believed they needed to watch out for crime, but that it did not necessarily make them feel unsafe at GSU.

Lynn discussed the challenge of the location of GSU.

I got lost on the first day even though I toured the campus, even though I came here once with my mom outside of Incept. I got lost, hopelessly lost (*sighs*), gosh. And then I got robbed. Oh no it was an attempted robbery. I was listening to headphones and he unzipped my book bag and he tried to reach in, but I turned around and he walked away, pretending to say hi to somebody else...so I got lucky.

Despite having these early challenging experiences, Lynn said she “agreed” to the statement, “I feel safe at GSU.”

In terms of the three components of school connectedness, participants generally endorsed strong connection to the university. Participants felt connected to the school through participation in activities, participation with racial/ethnic or cultural groups, connecting to peers in the classroom, connecting to professors that were perceived as helpful and knowledgeable, and generally believing people at the university cared for their well-being. Challenges to school connectedness were also revealed in terms of cultural clashes, difficulty or feeling intimidated in connecting with professors, or being in a busy downtown location that interferes with connectedness in several ways.

3.2 Strengths and Resources

The second research question asked: What strengths can be further nurtured to enhance success for first generation college students? I examined the participants’ strengths using an ecological framework; first looking at the individual, followed by microsystem strengths in the family and community. Finally, participants discussed strengths of the university and particular programs they found helpful at Georgia State University. Figures 4 and 5 map out the results of this research question. Figure 4 maps out the structural and thematic codes examining ecological strengths. Because family was such a large and complex part of students’ lives, I separate it out in Figure 5. Although I directly asked students about strengths and resources, obstacles and

challenges were inevitably raised. A source of strength for one student might have been a challenge or remained unknown to other students. Therefore, in this section, I discuss strengths and resources, as well as the obstacles to accessing these resources for some participants.

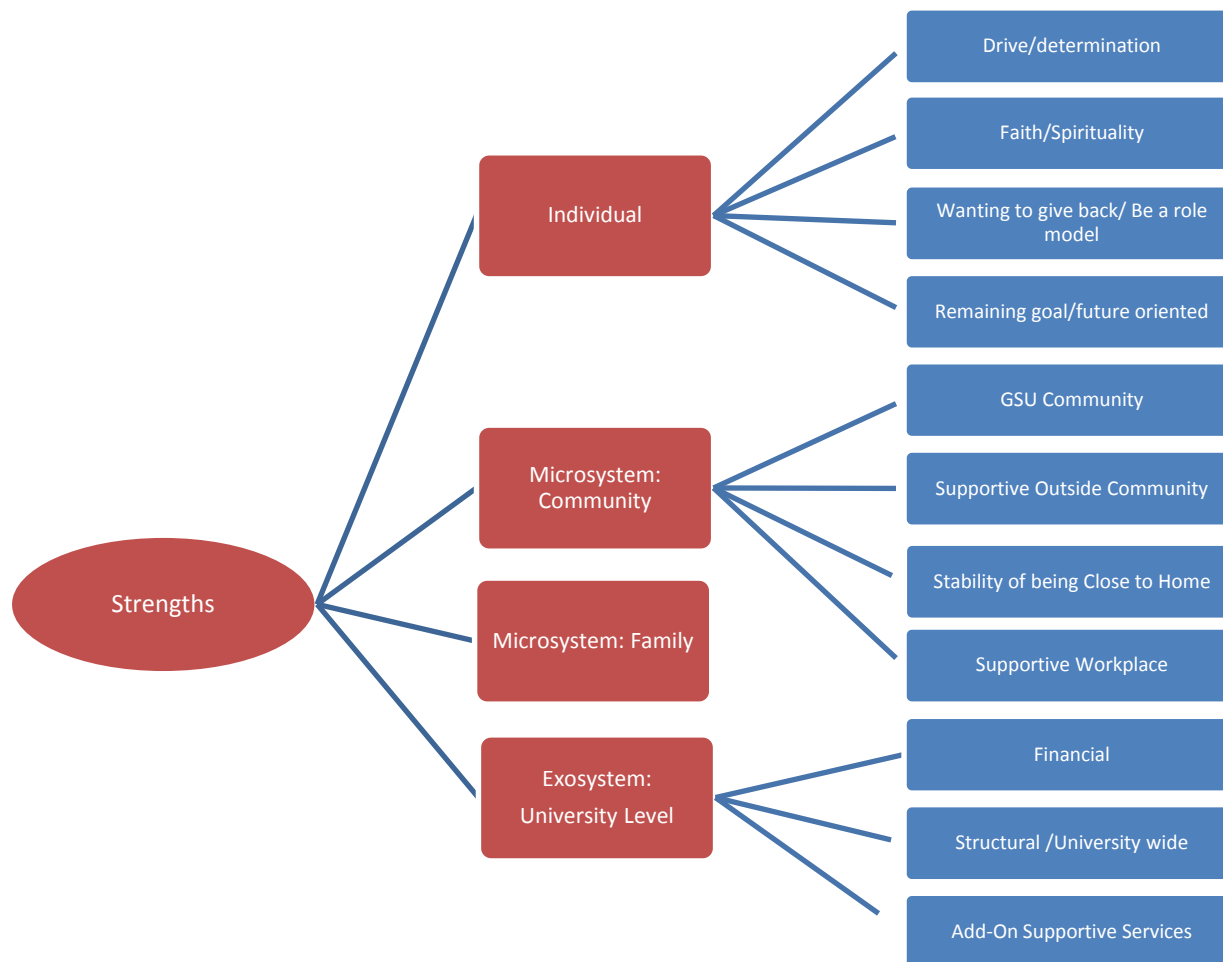


Figure 4 Results map for research question 2: What strengths can be further nurtured to enhance success for first generation college students?

3.2.2 Individual Strengths

When asked what strengths they bring to the university or what keeps students motivated to complete college, most participants initially mentioned the internal strengths they bring to the experience. When probed, participants could later think about ecological strengths and

resources. Participants most often discussed their internal drive and determination to succeed as driving their persistence. This internal drive and determination is described by Raj.

I'm very driven. Like, I don't care, if I put my mind to something, I'm gonna do whatever I can to get it done. I don't like leaving things incomplete. Like, so when I ended up starting for my fraternity...it's a pretty difficult process, let's just put it that way. A lot of the people wanted to, like, drop out and stuff. But there's no way, I..I can't. Like I don't care how hard it gets, I'm gonna finish it. I can't. It bothers me so much if I can't finish something. And I...that's very key, I feel, like when it comes to college. Because I don't ever want to give up on it. It's like I've invested so much time and money. Why waste it now?

Some directly linked their inner drive to wanting to give back to their families or communities, as well as wanting to be a role model for siblings. For example, Kedrick linked finishing his degree to being able to give back through helping other people from his neighborhood get connected to education and resources. He explained:

And by the time I graduate I'll be able to take that knowledge and pass it on. I'm real big on starting a nonprofit to help guys who were in a similar situation. And if it wasn't for Georgia State, I wouldn't feel as though I could do that.

Relatedly, some students described growing up in lower income families as fueling their inner drive and determination to succeed. Being in economically impoverished environments helped these students see that they wanted their lives to be different in the future. They viewed their experiences as building character and fueling their internal drive. Kelly discussed this when I asked what influenced her school performance.

Growing up poor makes you hungry. And I mean granted it gives you a lot of character. But I knew what I did not wanna do because I had seen it...and I knew that was not my option. Just being hungry and knowing that my mom was working so hard for us to be in school. I had no option.

Similarly, Brandon related his experiences as compelling him to succeed.

I always had this just get back up and do what you have to do mentality. A lot of things didn't really get to me when I was younger. And I always dream about living that American dream. Cars and money and all that stuff so that's motivation. Because I know

the other side of it. You know not having anything. I definitely want to have everything I want. And just having the peace of mind at the end of the day. That's really the goal.

In addition to wanting to give back to their families and communities, participants explicitly tied their drive and determination to their religious faith. This was alluded to by a few participants, however, Whitney, a 20 year old Jehovah's Witness, explicitly made this connection when I asked her about what helps motivate her to persist.

Because I'm motivated, I'm self-motivated, because I wanna, and plus I think everything you do should be for the glory of God, so everything I do reflects my love of God, so I try to do the best I can

In addition to an internal drive, having a goal for their lives and the ability to focus on that goal helped keep participants on track in school. Janice talked about future orientation and connected it to wanting to be a role model when I asked what motivated her to continue in school.

I think... just kind of thinking of the future and goals I want to reach, and where I want to be. And I think my, my sisters definitely motivate me, because I want to be the role model...the person they can look up to. And I want to work with kids, be a nurse, so I think, just thinking of, improving the life of, someone else you know, I think that really motivates me.

Caroline, a quiet Math major, echoed these sentiments of thinking about the future. When I asked what helps keep her motivated, she stated, "my dream of becoming a math teacher and having....a really nice and quiet life and you know when I'm at my career everything is gonna be good."

Internal drive, determination, and remaining goal oriented dominated the responses when participants were asked open ended questions about their strengths and what motivates them to succeed. These individual strengths were often tied to wanting to give back to their communities or families, wanting to be a role model, and/or growing up in economically depressed areas and wanting to change their circumstances.

3.2.3 *Microsystems: Community*

Although participants most commonly thought of individual strengths, when probed, they were able to describe aspects of their environment that supported success. These included strengths and supports in their immediate circle at Georgia State and in their outside communities. Several people discussed reliance on peers at GSU as strengths. In addition, a few students reported that simply associating with other motivated students was a source of strength. The common sense of striving among their fellow students helped motivate them to persist in school. For some students of color, seeing other students they perceived as like them was a strength of the environment. In the following excerpt, Kedrick discussed seeing Black students achieving as motivating.

I guess the number of African American students they have here... And you look around and you see a lot of different Black people. To see Black when you're Black in this particular environment or this particular structure or institution. It's like "Yeah, Right on!" It feels...I know a lot of people who...are not here. Like they're like somewhere right now... doing some pretty stupid shit. And I can guarantee this, cause I know these guys first hand. So look around and see someone who looks just like your cousin, just like your sister. Like you look like one of my...right now I could pull out a picture of my cousin...you look just like her. To see you doing something that's positive, to hear that you're a grad student and to be able to take that story back to my kids.

Like Kedrick, several students described having other students that were perceived to be "like them" as a motivator. Participants' immediate circle of friends, classmates, and general motivation of the student body was an environmental strength for many participants.

A strength that came up in several interviews was having a supportive community outside of school. I directly asked participants about peers and family, but several students described being part of another supportive community outside of school. Participants reported that churches or other religious communities, as well as friendship networks outside of school were

beneficial. Janice talked about the importance of her connection to friends outside of Georgia State.

My best friends don't attend this school they're back in South Carolina and I have one in Florida, but I think they're really supportive. Because two of them are twins and they're also nursing students. So they kind of, know the struggle and how hard this class may be. And one wants to be a veterinarian in Florida, so she's really encouraging. She's younger than me but I kind of, look up to her as far as everything she's doing in school and we're just, we motivate each other.

For many commuter students, being close to home was a source of strength and support.

Beyond the support of their family (discussed in the next section), being in a familiar environment, while so many other changes were occurring, helped them feel grounded and stable. For example, many participants were able to remain connected to their church, circle of friends, or employer while they faced the new task of becoming a college student at Georgia State.

For several students having a job or their workplace was a source of strength. The need to work can be a large burden that makes college more challenging for many first generation college students. However, for some students having a job was a source of strength and support. Working part-time was optimal for students who felt pressure on their schedule, which in turn pushed them to stay more focused when they were doing school work. Janice who worked at an on-campus office about 20 hours per week described how she believed working helped her do well in school.

I got a job second semester of freshmen year, just to kinda keep me busy. Actually I think having a job helps me stay focused more. I don't know. A lot of people think that's weird but I think that... I know because I know I have to work this time, it forces me to get my work done at this time and I can, I still do other things you know on campus but I think that really helps.

For those students who worked on campus or in industries related to their future career path, coworkers and bosses were a source of strength and support. For one student working in a local

restaurant was helpful, despite it not being related to his future career field. Raj described what he liked about working and how it is a strength for him.

I mean, yeah you have school. You have your friends. But you need something else. Like just hanging out and studying, hanging out and studying doesn't cut it. Like the fact that I have to work is nice because, like I said I work in the service industry so I get to meet sooo many people, sooo many people. I mean I have met some really weird people, I've met some really cool people. I've gotten jobs...like that's how I met my doctor, that I shadowed. He ate at my restaurant and then he was like, "Oh well, I'm going out later. Once you get off, just come hang out and stuff." I was like, "ok, cool, why not?" And then I went and hung out with him and he was like talking about shadowing and stuff and I just. That's how I ended up shadowing him. It's weird, but... like you can actually increase your networking a lot based on that job and its really cool.

Students drew strength and support from their community in several ways. Relying on their immediate circles at GSU, remaining connected to friends, employers, and stability in their communities, as well as working in supportive environments, helped participants stay motivated to finish school.

3.2.4 Microsystem: Family

Family could be a source of strength and support that was integral to college success. At the same time, family can make college success more challenging for many first generation college students, as family members lack the familiarity with the university environment necessary to be able to relate to their student's experience. I first present the ways family was conceptualized as a source of strength for participants, followed by ways family was described as challenging to student success. Figure 5 focuses on the family component of research question 2 and maps these findings.

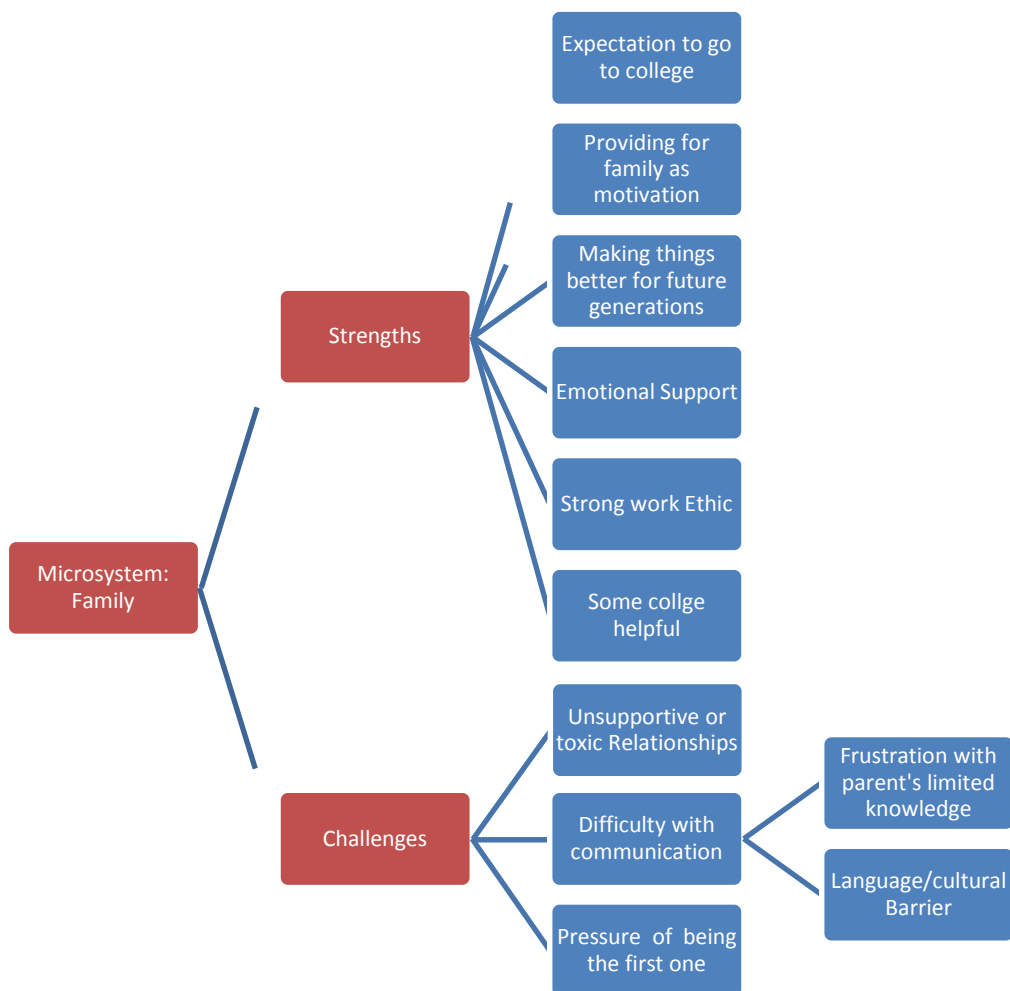


Figure 5 Results map for research question 2. Focus on family

3.2.4.2 Family Strengths

Despite their parents not having completed college, many participants found family to be a source of support. Family was described as a source of encouragement, motivation, financial, and emotional support. Some participants relayed that their parents gave them clear messages from an early age that college was the expectation for them. For students who are also first generation Americans, being able to get an education was often the main impetus for their families leaving their home countries. Additionally, several participants, with parents born in the U.S. as well as abroad, discussed college as the primary reason for their families moving to

Georgia. Although many parents did not understand the intricacies of college life, they let their children know that schooling was important and they were expected to go. Nancy talks about her parents immigrating from Romania and the expectation to go to college.

Because they didn't, they didn't have that opportunity when they were growing up. I mean in Romania back in the day, I think it was before 1990, Romania was a communist country and it was very hard to get into post-secondary school because it was expensive... And yeah they never got that opportunity and when they came to America they never really got a chance to go back to school to learn because they didn't know English. And so now... They wish they could go back to school; they wish they had this opportunity. So they're not forcing us to go, but they're encouraging us to take this kind of path.

Tina described her parents coming to Georgia from Macau in part for the educational opportunities.

Well, me and my parents, we were immigrants, from Macau, like 16-17 years ago... And um, they came to America because of a better education than what they had over there, and more opportunities in the United States...

She continued when I asked her what messages her parents gave her about college.

They said it was important and, just really important, that's the whole reason why we came here. It didn't make any sense if I didn't go to college, and it was free for me so it was a big opportunity.

Participants whose parents were from the U.S. also relayed the importance of college to their children. Earl, a 20 year old African American English major, described one major message he got from his parents about college, "Do it. Just do it. You have to do it." He later went on to explain how his mother's situation motivated him to want to go to college.

My mother dropped out of high school. She really wanted me to go to college because... She never explained to me why she stopped going, but I feel like she regrets it. Because she always says, "I wish I could do more for you but... You have to go to college and focus and make connections and get a good job so you can take care of yourself."

Several participants described the desire to provide for their families as a primary source of motivation to succeed. The promise of economic opportunity that a college degree brings

motivated many students who want to see their families in a more secure financial state. Adjoa discussed being motivated to do well in school as associated with her desire to provide for her family.

I'm not doing as well as I could be but I feel like my family is my biggest motivation. Because of where I come from and where I'm trying to get; not just me but where I want my family to be. I think that's the biggest motivation...

I'm on a mission where my family's okay... I don't want my mom to work anymore. I want to like, build a big house for her in Ghana and she just goes and lives there. I want like, the rest of my family to be ok. Like I want...I have a lot of little cousins; I want them to be able to come to America and go to school and all that stuff. And nobody in my family has really had that so...my biggest motivation is you know going to college, being able to be successful and get the money and help them. And if I'm practicing in the healthcare field I can also go back home and help there. So I think that's my biggest motivation.

When I asked Maria about who most encouraged her to go to college, she spoke about her parents. Seeing her parents work hard and sacrifice for their family compelled her to excel in school.

I would say like indirectly my parents, because...I saw how hard they would work, and how I couldn't get the stuff that I wanted. Because they couldn't provide me those things. Because they didn't have... we had a way better life here than we do in Mexico, obviously, but compared to my other friends, where their parents had a professional career and everything. They had better opportunities to give to their, to my friends. And I didn't have that growing up. And I saw how my parents struggled, learning the language and trying to, just find better opportunities rather than...you know seeing my dad work every day like in construction. Seeing how dangerous it is for him. And my mom having to clean houses, and do all those... jobs that are not that fun, you know? So that really motivated me because I knew they had worked hard to come here to provide a better life for me. So I felt like the best that I could do to reward them with that was to get a college education.

A few participants spoke about the desire not only to provide for their parents, but to make things better for future generations. Kedrick who has a tumultuous relationship with his parents described this desire.

Education right now is my main resource. I work, but I feel like this right here will elevate me to a position where I could change the whole generation... the whole family tree. Like no one in my family ever been close to where I am now. And they don't

understand how hard it is to maintain that level of sanity. But I stay loyal to family. I don't show it, I don't talk to them about this. I haven't had this conversation...that's what I deal with.

Many participants also spoke about their families as a source of emotional support.

Although they might not be able to help with specific challenges of college, they provided emotional stability and support for their children that help them succeed. Further, many participants credit their families with modeling a strong work ethic which helps them do well in school. Tina discussed valuing doing her best as something she learned from her parents.

Tina: I just think you should, like a person should do well in everything they do. Even if they don't like it you know, just keep on doing it. It might lead to other opportunities, and then other things, and then you'd be like "Oh, how'd I get here?!"

Interviewer: Where do you think that value comes from?

Tina: My parents.

Raj described the work ethic he got from his parents and sharing this value with his siblings. He views having to work at an early age as contributing to his success.

I've had a job since I was 13. My parents were like, "We grew up with jobs since we were young. You need to as well. You'll understand what we mean." And I completely do. Because it gives you...you know I'm not trying to rag on anybody or anything. But a lot of these students that like have their parents' cards, and they just keep swiping, and swiping, and swiping. And they're gonna keep doing that. Because they've never...like, if they've never had a job, they don't understand the value of the work that goes behind it. And I think that's very important. That's why, my little sister, she just turned 18. Two years ago I told her to get a job, and she got a job at 16... If she ever needs help with money or something, then she'll come to me. I'll help her out; that's not an issue. It's just she understands I can't just be throwing money left and right. There's a limit, to what you need and what you want. That's the big understanding that my parents try to get across. See, what I *want* to do, is have fun, chill all the time. But, what I *need* to do is go to college, finish my college, finish my schooling, and then it'll just come.

As other researchers suggested, parents having some college (as opposed to none) can be beneficial to students. It was helpful for participants in two ways. First, having a parent with some college meant they had experienced some of what it was like to be a college student and were able to offer that knowledge to participants. Second, some students felt a sense of pride and

respect for their parents having completed some college, which in turn inspired them to do well.

Whitney spoke about her mother encouraging her in school and checking up on her work.

Whitney: Yeah my mom she's always encouraging me. Always telling me...like every day she's like "Did you finish your homework?" (*laughs*) I'm still studying, she's like, "did you finish your homework?" so every day she does that, she reminds me, she literally does it that much so, she's always asking me, about that.

Interviewer: It sounds like even though your mom didn't necessarily go to school she's still able to understand what you're going through, and be supportive of you.

Whitney: Because even though she didn't go to college, she went to technical school, and she also has a CNA as well she's done a lot of schooling even though she didn't go to college.

Although participants' parents do not have the experience of graduating from a 4-year school to offer their children, families were a source of strength and support in several ways. They raised their children with the expectation of going to school, instilled a strong work ethic in their children, and provided emotional support to their children. Additionally, participants were motivated by wanting to give back or take care of their families.

3.2.4.3 Family as a challenge to college success

Families were most often discussed as a source of strength and support for this sample. However, some participants discussed challenges in dealing with family. In extreme situations, a couple of participants described the need to distance themselves from family in order to succeed in school. Kedrick described why he felt this way toward his family of origin.

Like, it's real serious when you're living in an impoverished neighborhood and your family...or they're perfectly fine with it. And you have higher ambitions for yourself and you aspire for more, but...they don't really see that, they don't... only thing they really care about it is like what's going on right now.

Similarly, Earl, who is also from an Atlanta neighborhood, discussed his desire to distance himself from his family. He relayed loving and appreciative feelings for his family, but felt that, in order to succeed, he needed to get away from his family and his neighborhood. He stated, "I

wanted to put at least 30 miles between us.” At the same time, his experiences with his family helped motivate him to work hard at school. When I asked him about what motivates him to do well in school he spoke about these conflicting feelings.

Where I come from is a big factor. Not to say that my dad is a bad person or anything like that. Or was particularly unsuccessful, but my dad feels as if he didn't really do a good job raising me. But at some point I realized...I didn't say anything about it but...I realized that a parent can be a good parent just by showing their child what not to do. And you know, having two parents that were at some point drop outs was impacting me in a big way. And then growing up with my dad that was living in his mother's basement made me...want a whole lot more. And when I decided I wanted this, I found out what I had to do to get that. And one of the things I have to do is to go to college.

Richard, a 42 year old information systems major and married father of two, described not feeling supported by his extended family in returning to complete his bachelor's degree later in life. He felt so unsupported that he made the decision to not discuss school with anyone in his extended family or with his coworkers.

I started telling my family at first. But what I realized was when people don't go to school they could care less about you going to school. When you have generations of people that just don't go to college, they...I had one of my aunts was like, “Oh you're going back to school?” I was like “yeah”. She said, “But you make all that money.” I said, “yeah, but what's wrong with learning some more?” “I don't see why you don't just take that time you're going to school to do something else to make some more money.” That is difficult. So what my wife and I said was...going forward we're not telling anyone. Not even the kids.

More common than needing a complete separation from family, participants discussed difficulty they had communicating with their family about the demands of college. Many participants felt their family “didn't get it.” Maria described the difficulty she has had communicating with her parents about college.

Interviewer: Is it difficult for you to talk about school with your parents?

Maria: Um yeah (*laugh*). Just because...they don't, they never went to school, like they only have like a 6th grade education and the education system is completely different in Mexico than it is here. So like for one...they don't...know how college is and to...the language, the language barrier as well. Um I can't explain, like I know how to speak

Spanish, but there's something that I can't explain in Spanish that...to make it easier for them to understand. So it's very difficult sometimes, because especially when I was trying to apply to go to college, everything to do with it. I had to take my SAT, and like it's a test, and I can't explain to them everything, you know? I can't explain to them how the grading was examined or anything. I said, "It was just a test and the schools need it. And every school wants it, every school sees it, and scores are different." But I'm like, "If I get this score, then I'll be able to get into the school," and explained to them all the types of things, and explained to them what an AP class was. And they would forget everything (*laughs*) and I would have to tell them again. Like, "I'm gonna apply for this scholarship and I have to write this essay," and I'm like, "you know, they want me to do community service and so that's why I needed to do community services." I struggled with it a lot, and I feel like other students struggled with that too. Our parents, they don't know anything about the college process or anything so when I told them that I wanted to ...you know growing up with my friends and my teachers would tell me how you have to get involved, you know you have to do community services, you have to do afterschool activities so the college and the scholarship people can see everything that you have done. So I struggled with my parents like two years for them to actually give me permission to join the sport in high school and to stay after school for a club...it was just, not like a bad thing, but it was like, I had to work with my parents, and I had to convince them and explain to them what it was so important for me to do everything that I was doing. I feel like that was pretty challenging.

Adjoa described a similar frustration communicating with her parents about school, for their lack of empathy or understanding of her experience.

It's frustrating...I know it's not their fault but it's frustrating trying to explain something to your parents, and they don't really understand. Like I'll tell them I got a D on a test. I don't want you to comfort me, but you're saying, "why'd you get that D?" I mean c'mon it's hard. You don't get it, you know? I remember one time I was talking to my dad about medical school and I was telling him, "maybe I want to go to PA school instead...I mean its two years after undergrad, they make good money, and it seems like it would be very interesting to do." My dad's just like, "No, just go to medical school!" I'm just like, "you know what it takes to get into medical school?!" Like, it's just really frustrating trying to communicate something they don't really understand. So I don't really communicate that. If something good happens I go, "Hey, I got 'this', you know." They don't really get what 'this' is but I still tell them. But something bad, I just don't tell them because they're just going to beat me up about it not understanding why so, I don't really talk about bad news with my parents.

More specifically, participants were often frustrated by their parent's limited knowledge of career opportunities. This led to difficulty for many students choosing a major and receiving approval from their family. Several participants described parents who pushed them to be a

doctor, nurse, or lawyer and having to advocate for themselves to pursue other career paths. For several first generation American students, the communication difficulty was complicated by a language barrier as well. Tina, an environmental science major, described this when I asked her if her parents were interested in hearing about how school is going.

Tina: Not – ‘cause they don’t really understand what it is, like I don’t know how to translate it, to what I’m doing in school to Cantonese, the language I speak.

Interviewer: Is it because it’s difficult to translate to Cantonese or is it difficult, for them to *get it*. Does that make sense?

Tina: Yeah ‘cause, when I try to like translate they’re like, “I don’t really understand.” I don’t know it’s just kind of hard to translate and for them to understand because they don’t really know a lot of jobs out there, it might be like weird jobs, all they know is like doctors and nurses and you know like the general stuff.

Participants commonly discussed wanting to be the first in their family to finish college as a factor that motivated them to succeed. At the same time, this can also put pressure on students. Some felt like the weight of the family was on their shoulders, and the pressure to succeed was sometimes a big burden. Earl revealed this feeling in his interview.

I feel like it puts a lot of pressure on me. I feel like because I am the first one that will graduate... I’m claiming that...it kind of just puts on pressure. Because if you don’t make it then it’s like you let everybody down. Or you’ve let some people down, or you’ve continued another generation of college dropouts.

Parents not having the experience of going to college generally did affect participants in several ways. Their experience of not having the cultural capital to pass down to their children or current understanding to relate to their children’s life created frustration and difficulty in communication for some. In some extreme situations, participants found it necessary to distance themselves from family in order to focus on school.

3.2.5 Exosystem: University wide programs

In addition to individual, family, and community strengths, all participants discussed at least one program available at GSU that they viewed as helping them succeed. These programs fell under three general categories: financial assistance, extra support, and structural changes to the general curriculum or university itself. Whereas many participants found these programs helpful, obstacles to accessing these resources were also discussed by participants and are presented here. In terms of obstacles, most commonly, programs remained unknown to participants or were seen as unhelpful.

3.2.5.2 Financial Support

Almost all participants mentioned the HOPE scholarship at some point in their interview. They were either scholarship recipients, were working to get it back, or related it as integral to other students' experience in some way. The HOPE scholarship provides tuition assistance to in-state residents of Georgia who maintain a certain grade point average. For one participant, the HOPE scholarship prompted her family to move to Georgia from out of state. In addition, GSU has implemented a program called Keep Hope Alive which provides temporary assistance to students who lose the scholarship when their grade point average drops below the threshold. Keep Hope Alive was mentioned by a few participants as aiding them to be able to stay in school. Xavier, a 26 year old Korean exercise science major, mentioned HOPE as a primary motivating factor to coming to college and to a Georgia school in particular. I asked Xavier what pushed him to complete college applications, despite his limited enthusiasm as relayed in the following:

All my friends and stuff going to school. All the talk about getting HOPE scholarship. And what an opportunity that is to be able to go to school for free. That was really like what motivated me to go to school. And also everybody was going to school so you don't want to be the person not going to school either.

Being able to finance college was a major concern for participants. Having access to unique financial options available at GSU was a notable component of almost all participants' narratives.

3.2.5.3 Structural and university-wide changes

Several structural changes to the university or opportunities that are open to all students were mentioned by participants including freshmen learning communities, advisement, and Incept (first year orientation). All incoming first year students have the option to join a freshman learning community (FLC). At Georgia State, freshman learning communities are organized around a particular field of interest. Each FLC consists of 25 students enrolled in 5 courses centered on the same academic theme during their first year. The connection to peers and advisors provided through FLC's laid the groundwork for many participants feeling comfortable at GSU. Maria was part of an FLC linked to a scholarship for Latino/Hispanic student and discussed this connection.

Well I think what really helped me my first year, even my first semester, because through the scholarship that I did get from Georgia State...It's 25 scholars, they all put us together in an FLC, so we all had the same classes. Well, most of the time we had the same classes because some people got credit for some of the classes but, for the most part we had the same classes so... And we stayed at the dorms too so we would walk to class together, and then we would eat at the dining hall together, we would study together. So that, I feel like that really helped me a lot. Because, I also had my advisors which if I had any questions related to my classes... Because at the beginning too I struggled with like... what major to choose; so they pointed me to a lot of like...to the career center, and my academic advisors and even them they would advise me on what to do.

Although FLC's were discussed as helpful by many participants, others were discouraged from participating or did not think they would be helpful. Nancy was discouraged from joining an FLC by her siblings.

Yeah my siblings told me not to 'cause it's a waste of time. But I think looking back I think freshmen communities would have been a good idea if I was...If I didn't know what I was doing and if I was a first generation college student.

Incept, Georgia State's new student orientation, provides an introduction to the campus, policies and procedures, and resources. There are several options offered for incoming students to attend an Incept orientation. Generally, participants found Incept helpful, however many did not attend. Participants found the option to explore campus and learn about different programs to be helpful. A few participants suggested that Incept be revisited again later in the year. In particular, introducing students to programs and services available were thought to be more helpful once students were settled into school a bit more. Several participants opted not to participate in Incept or did not find it very helpful. The cost may also be prohibitive for some students. Tina shared this sentiment.

I just felt like that Incept was kind of pointless, and why would it cost money for us to have orientation at our own school? Like some people might not have like 60 dollars like that, so it was kind of pointless.

Several students discussed academic advisement as helpful. Most students found academic advisors to be especially helpful with the practical aspects of choosing classes and mapping a route to finishing college with a particular major. Nancy discusses how advisement was helpful to her.

I think, um, my advisors definitely, I think they are, a really really really big help. So I try to visit them 2-3 times a semester, and they're really extensive because... When I was thinking about the nursing program but I wasn't sure if I was still a biology major; my advisors, kind of laid everything out, gave me the details of the program, what I have to do to get in, maintaining this GPA, taking this test, to get into the nursing program and kind of what to expect once I get in the program also. So I think they did a really good job of that. And, it's been, my advisor's been changing every semester ever since they got, new advisors and expanded the office, but I still think that it, they're really good.

Participants did not see academic advisement as a place to go to get help with career advice nor did they rely on advisement to discuss internships, volunteering or other outside

activities. Further, while those who went to advisement found it helpful, there was still a notable group of participants who were reluctant to go to advisement. Some of these students were used to figuring things out on their own and did not want to be bothered with advisement. Some cited advisors changing as a deterrent. A couple of students mentioned not wanting to go to advisement when their grades dropped, or they perceived themselves as not doing well.

Caroline, a 20 year old math major, discussed this

I wouldn't... well sometimes I go to the academic advisement place, like every semester. Except for this semester 'cause I was really embarrassed about my summer grades...and so I didn't really want to go...and you know let everybody know that I'm not doing well. Because, since my major is math that's like really important and I'm kinda like embarrassed about it...like the other day I was like, "I don't want to be a failure."

Even among students who found advisement helpful, there was a reluctance to go to advisement.

When I asked Nancy about this she discussed finding advisement helpful, but not seeking it out, or not going more than she has to.

Well the thing is. I don't really go to my advisor unless I really need something unless I have a mandatory meeting or I need help with my financial aid. So I never really see my advisors. But when I am there, they are helpful.

These changes to the structure of the university for all students were seen as critical to school connectedness and success. However, several barriers or obstacles to taking advantage of these opportunities were also uncovered.

3.2.5.4 Supportive Services

Several students mentioned programs that gave additional supports to specific groups of students. These include the Summer Success Academy, Student Support Services, and a multitude of other academic supports. The Summer Success Academy is designed for invited students to come to campus early, during summer semester, to begin to get acquainted with GSU. They participate in a series of activities and course work designed to help ease the transition to

college, teach new study skills, and link students to support on campus. Adjoa described her experience with SSA as critical to her successful transition.

First year on campus was actually pretty good because...remember I said I was accepted in the summer time and it's something called the Summer Success Academy. It's for students with like either high GPA's or low SAT scores, or low GPA's and high SAT scores. I'm not a really a good standardized test taker, but I'm really good in school, so I had a good GPA, I had AP classes, honors, but I didn't do so good on my SAT's, so I fell into that category. So I started school in the summer time, and um, when you're in that program they give you mentors, and you're in a FLC, and it just really helps you a lot. So when I came in the fall, I had mentors I could go to if I had questions and my parents clearly wouldn't know. I had my set friends already because I met them during the summer time, and I knew about organizations because my mentors were student leaders and involved. So when I came here during the fall it wasn't that bad, I knew where everything was, I knew people that were already on campus, like I had help. So my first year was actually not that bad at all. I just really wanted to get involved, like really bad my first year. But, I had a really good first year. If I had to do this, if I had come in the fall and not the summer, I probably wouldn't be where I am to get in college honestly.

Another add-on service is Student Support Services (SSS), a federally funded program run out of Georgia State's Office of Educational Opportunity and TRIO Programs. The goal of SSS is increase the retention of students demonstrating academic need who are either first generation college students, are from low income backgrounds, and/or have a learning disability. Students only need to be in one of these categories to receive services through SSS, however, since funding is limited priority is usually given to students who have greater financial need and qualify based on being members of another category. Services provided include: tutoring, academic advisement, community service learning projects, financial aid assistance, career services, and access to a computer lab with free printing and scanning. Two participants discussed getting services through SSS and found this office extremely helpful. However, equally notable was the number of participants who did not know anything about SSS. At the conclusion of several interviews, I shared information about this resource with participants when it seemed like it might be beneficial. Among the two students who were involved with SSS, one

commented on not knowing about it being available to her until her junior year and promoting its availability as a strategy to help other first generation college students.

Most participants saw GSU as having an abundance of help and support. Many expressed that even though they may not be aware of it, they were certain GSU had resources to help in most situations. Several students mentioned offices specifically designed to improve success for students of color such as the Office of Black Student Achievement or the Office of Latino Student Services. These programs were seen as integral to student achievement in addressing some of the common barriers to school connectedness. Students also discussed several academic supports available at GSU such as tutoring services, the writing center, student instructors and the math lab. When I asked students if there was anything they wished was at the school to help them, most could not identify anything; many expressed that they were sure whatever they needed already existed; they just had to find it. Raj discussed his belief that GSU has everything students need to succeed.

They have unlimited resources. You have counselors that are willing to help you set up your schedule and figure out how you wanna map it out until you graduate. Like the resources are always there for the student when you're at a university. Especially this university. But it's all about the student going to use them.

When I specifically asked if there was anything else he thought would be helpful, he replied:

No. Because you guys have, you know, how to study seminars, note taking... Y'all have so many seminars and stuff like that. You get all these e-mails on...GSU email, like about random seminars, and career fairs, and all that. Like I said, the resources are all here. And I mean, I don't need a gold mine to...figure out what I need. I just need like, the essentials. Like, the bare needs and then you just need to know how to work from there. That's a whole part of learning and growing as a student. Um, but, not really. I mean I have everything I need here. I have counselors that I can talk to. Y'all have a clinic if I was to get hurt. Y'all have these clubs where there's very different people and different clubs. And there's fraternities, there's Greek life. Teachers, everything. There's no need to really go outside. I mean if you want to...they even have tutoring services. Like, what reason are you...nobody at this university is giving you a reason to leave to go outside this university to get anything done. I mean, yeah, obviously like shadowing a doctor and stuff, that makes sense. But like, otherwise, no.

Earl discussed the atmosphere at GSU in general as a motivating factor. When I asked him about specific programs or resources at Georgia State that were helpful, he talked about just being in this type of institution.

It's not really a resource but just the fact that Georgia State is the number one school for graduating minorities. And being that maybe I feel like a lot of African Americans come from that first generation college student area...It's not necessarily a resource but it's comforting. Like, "Ok, this university is based in way to where I can succeed too."

Across participants, feeling that Georgia State was a place where they could succeed and had the resources to help them was highly endorsed. Several obstacles to accessing these resources were also uncovered.

3.3 Gaps to success

The final research question asked: What do first generation students identify as gaps between what exists at the university and what they believe would help them succeed? Most participants saw GSU as a place to which they felt strongly connected and believed they could succeed, however, there were areas where participants thought the university could be more accommodating to their needs as first generation college students. In particular, considering facets of their lives that differed from students whose parents completed college were highlighted throughout their narratives. This included thinking about the needs of specific sub-populations of students, removing obstacles to accessing the many resources at the university, and addressing the ways they may be immediately at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the culture of higher education. A results map can be found in Figure 6.

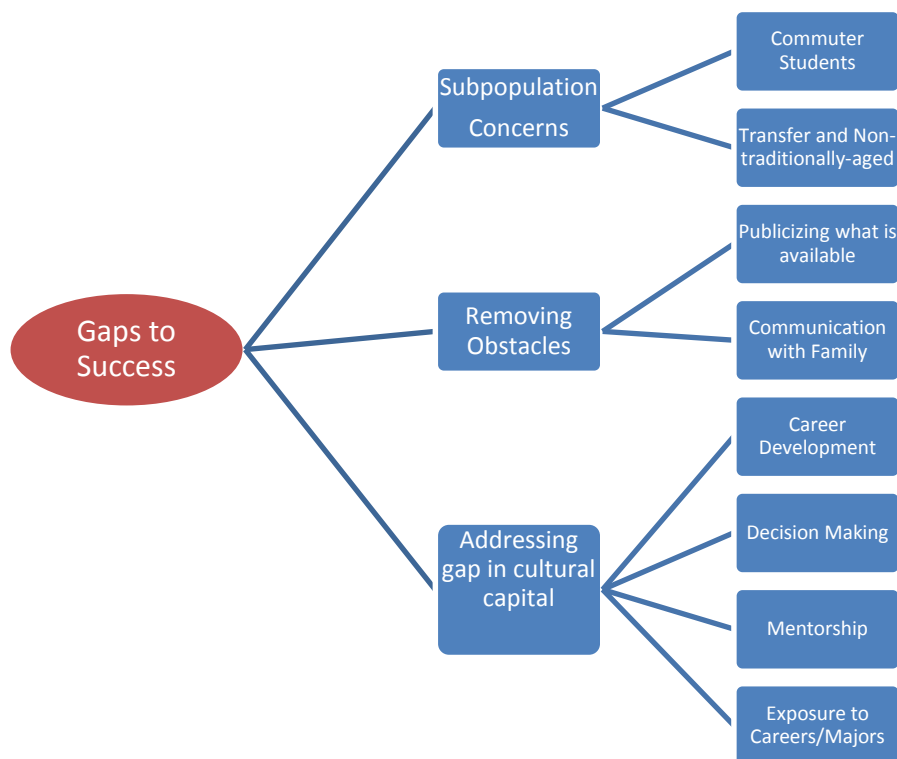


Figure 6 Results map for research question 3: What do first generation students identify as gaps between what exists at the university and what they believe would help them succeed?

3.3.2 Considerations for specific sub-populations

Participants that were either commuter students or transfer students discussed ways they felt the university was not designed for students like them. They each suggested that because they make up a sizable portion of all students, the university should do more to plan things with them in mind. In addition to affecting their general success, being a commuter or transfer student was seen as an obstacle to school connectedness.

There was a notable divide between those students who lived on campus or in nearby Atlanta neighborhoods and those that commute long distances to campus. Because such a large number of students at GSU are commuter students, many participants felt university policies and

practices could be more accommodating. Many students spend long hours in traffic or use several forms of transportation to get to and from school. Logistically these students saw parking options and flexibility in classes as things that could be changed. In terms of connectedness, commuter students felt like they could not participate in on-campus activities or maintain friendships with classmates as a result of commuting. Tina, a 20 year old environmental science major and commuter student lamented, “I hate the traffic, in the morning, and I’m always late to my classes.” When she was later asked about how much she felt like she belonged at GSU she described the ways in which being a commuter deterred her from participating in activities and maintaining friendships on campus.

Tina: I guess, belong as a student I guess, I don’t know. But in terms of like, the parties or like the campus events; I don’t really go to, because I don’t live here, so yeah.

Interviewer: Do you feel like if you lived on campus you would do those things?

Tina: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So do you think being a commuter student limits how much you like join? Join in?

Tina: Yeah. Yeah I would like do a lot of stuff but it’s mostly at night, and I would have to walk all the way back to the train station, and you know it closes at a certain time, stuff like that...I guess if the, if they made the events to more like, suitable time, then I’d go.

Tina’s experience highlights what several students expressed in terms of getting less involved and having more difficulty with classes because of commuting.

Xavier, an exercise science major living at home, felt largely disconnected from the university. He attributed a great deal of this to his commuter student status. He explained:

Like I knew that were ways for me to get more in touch and more involved in the school. But I feel like the whole commuting thing was the biggest difficulty. It was definitely a big obstacle in me getting involved in school and things of that nature...

He continued:

That's the biggest obstacle for me spending any time here really. Always leave after traffic and before traffic. Like I leave in the morning right after traffic and then leave here before traffic. So like what is that? If I'm getting here at like 11:00 and leaving at 3:00 there's not like...its only 4 hours. I can't really spend any of that time...

Xavier and other students felt removed from campus life as a result of their commuting. This disconnection can be linked to student persistence and success.

Students who transferred from two year colleges and non-traditional aged students also expressed a desire to have more at the university tailored to their experience. Most participants expressed that they value the diversity of GSU and see it as a place where lots of different types of students can be successful. However, transfer and non-traditional aged students in the sample felt more could be tailored to their specific needs. Kedrick is a transfer student, a father of two, a husband and works full-time overnight. He explained his frustration with trying to meet rigid class standards that do not seem to take students with a lifestyle like his in mind.

Like, I gotta work, and I got kids, so it's hard for me to schedule a test on my off day. I work overnight. So I'm getting up in the morning, I have a one-year-old at home. I gotta be a little energized. And my babysitter cancels and I can't cancel the thing [test] because it's last minute... You know they give you a window where you have to cancel it in and if I'm not able to cancel, I get a '*No excused*'. It kind of puts me behind. I gotta call my professor, then I gotta go through the whole process of waiting for her to answer...

He later advocated for GSU to create some specific services for students like himself.

I think there should be more of a focus, not necessarily a focus as far as a school-wide focus, but there should be some type of aspect to what Georgia State does that makes it solely for transit students, non-traditional transit students. Because that particular student is non-traditional, so that tells you they didn't go the traditional route. So there's a real reason behind that. Whether its family, kids, death... And we took that time to focus on that particular aspect; I think that right there would benefit a lot of our communities as well. Because that gives us a lot more resources that we didn't have coming in and we didn't know was available. Because we're coming from a two-year institution, with maybe a couple thousand kids, and limited resources, no fraternities, no basketball team, no football team, no clubs, none of that. So you coming into this, and you trying to learn about all these different resources that you do have in this two-year, three-year window that you have to be here. It's gonna be kinda hard if you don't know where to start. So if you could have someone, or some type of open door, like door-to-door policy, where you

could come in here, and you could be in here and we're gonna track your progress and do this. I think that'll be cool. I saw they had something like that down the line, but it wasn't...it was just pretty much like a checklist. Make sure you do this, this, and this, but there's no guideline to what it takes to be a Georgia State student.

Interviewer: So some...like if there was an office for nontraditional student advisement or something like that?

Kedrick: yeah, or not necessarily an office, just a bracket within an office. Just a person or two.

Richard, a 42 year old returning student similarly felt frustrated with some GSU classes and policies. He advocated for better guidance, designing programs to get working adults to be able to finish in a reasonable amount of time, and more night classes offerings.

The programs aren't really designed to get you in and out as an adult. They're designed to get you in...but then if you miss a class or drop a class...To me, something that shouldn't have taken me more than three years.... I mean I talk to students who are like young, they're like 23, 24, 25... "how long you been going here?" Four, five, six years. Seems like the programs should more be guided toward, 'Ok, this is where we start, this is where we're gonna finish,' but these are working people. How can we get these working people to graduate like a kid just out of high school, who can take straight classes? If they don't take any breaks they can finish in about 3 years. How can we do this for the working class? Because what happens is the working class they start and they stop. And then start and they stop and some of them never finish...

He later described the difference he saw between classes offered in the day and those in the evening as a means of describing what GSU could do more of.

At first, I was working nights and taking classes in the day. That wasn't working for me. Then I started taking classes at night and started seeing more people my age. When I saw more people my age, not to say it's a difference, but it seemed the teachers taught differently. It's like during the day you sit in the class with...50, 60, 70 people in a room...it was like just...the teacher just kind of teaching you the subjects. But my night classes...the teachers did more trying to tie in what you are doing in the real world. And they slowed it down for some of us... not that they gave us less work...just more things that tied in what we do every day which made the classes more exciting.

Transfer and non-traditionally aged students across the board felt that getting classes and supports more tailored to them was necessary. This most often included suggestions for more evening and online classes, specialized advisement, and curriculum overhauls to make a degree

obtainable for working adults. Addressing the needs of these specific sub-populations was discussed both as a way students could be more successful and a way that the university could support their becoming more involved in campus life.

3.3.3 Addressing obstacles to accessing what is available.

Many participants thought GSU had a lot of resources, but they did not necessarily know about them, or learned about them too late. Addressing obstacles to students getting the assistance they need was highlighted through analyzing the participant narratives. As discussed with exosystem strengths above, several sources of support remain inaccessible for many students. Programs like FLC, Incept, advisement, and student support services were often discussed as critical for some participants' success, yet remain inaccessible for some students. One explicit suggestion was better publicizing services or more outreach from support offices. A few students commented that, while they might have learned about things at Incept, it would be helpful to have this information provided again a semester later. Maria discussed this in her interview.

I think making...like publicizing their offices more because I feel like some students just don't know the offices that they have. I know there's a lot of students. I know a couple Hispanic students that came here and didn't know what LASSO[Office of Latino Student Services and Outreach] was and I feel like, I guess publicizing...you know advertising more or having bigger events I guess so they can have, the students can be aware of the offices and the services that the university offers. Maybe like reaching them through their emails or something.

A few participants also thought doing more outreach to parents or getting families more involved might be a way to help address both student frustration with communicating with their families and finding out more about what the university has to offer. Maria explained this as well.

Yeah I feel, I'm not sure if they do have like a program like this or not, but I feel like especially for first generation college students having a program or having events that

incorporate our parents. I feel like that really will be helpful. Because through my scholarship they do have, we did have like a dinner where they invite your parents to come to the university and everything but I feel like having events...or just having events that teaches parents what opportunities the students can take, you know, can take advantage of. I feel like that would not only motivate students to keep going to school; I think it will also be helpful in the sense that their parents know what is going on or what's happening at the university.

She further discussed having materials that go home to parents to be more available in different languages.

And I think also having things in different languages as well because if we do have an event for parents, but if it's in English, it's kind of defeating the purpose. There's a lot of things...my parents have lived here for like over 14 years and they still, their language is very, their English is very poor just because they don't have practice...So I feel like having those things available for them in their own languages may be helpful as well

While GSU has many programs and offices designed to assist students, many of them remain unknown or difficult to access. In particular, students discussed learning about supports late in their career or having no awareness of resources that existed. Addressing these obstacles could be an important part of closing the gaps to success for first generation college students.

3.3.4 Addressing student cultural capital disadvantage

Several participants either explicitly discussed the ways in which they felt they were at a disadvantage in terms of being able to benefit from having parents that understood the college process or their narratives were coded for lacking this form of cultural capital. Because first generation college students do not have cultural capital in the form of how to approach the college process, exposure to a variety of professional careers, advice on interacting with faculty, and modeling interactions in a collegiate environment, they are at an immediate disadvantage in the university environment. As one participant stated, "If you don't tell us about it, we don't know." This disadvantage was also uncovered through analyzing my interviewer notes on several participants. Recurrent across a number of interviews were students who were missing

insight into how to leverage their college experience into their future careers. Several students were focused solely on getting good grades and believing that they would move into the career they wanted based on grades alone. They did not discuss the importance of making relationships with faculty and staff, completing internships, networking with peers, or seeking mentorship in their career fields. We commonly engaged in dialogues about professors, the future, or decision-making, and participants were at a loss for how to respond. One student, for example, wanted to become a nurse but was not taking any steps outside of trying to do well in her classes, as noted in the following exchange.

Interviewer: what about other things you might need to do to get into nursing besides classes?

Participant: Um...I don't know like what, what would that be?

Interviewer: I don't know...sometimes you might need letters of recommendation, or...

Participant: Well I'm pretty sure, I don't know for this school...I don't think, 'cause I haven't gotten that far yet so I don't need any of that stuff yet, that's why.

I had a similar exchange with another student who did not know how to respond when I asked about what she was doing beyond coursework to advance her career options.

Interviewer: Do you feel like they're [professors and instructors] helpful in thinking about career decisions, or other things you could do besides just go to classes?

Participant: I don't think so.

Interviewer: What do you think...are there other things you could do besides classes, to kind of prepare you for...?

Participant: Internships.

Interviewer: Have you thought about internships?

Participant: Yeah, but I didn't have a car, so it really wasn't an option.

Interviewer: Ok, is there anything else that you could be doing?

Participant: Um, like being in the lab, asking professors if they need help for something?

Interviewer: I don't know I...I mean is that something that you have thought of...but haven't been doing it?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. Any reason?

Participant: I don't know who to ask.

Interviewer: Ok, ok. What do you think, um, is there anything that you think would be more helpful to you at this point?

Participant: I mean, I'm not really sure.

In contrast, most of the participants that were older and were transfer or returning students discussed the importance of interactions at school beyond the classroom. They looked back on their earlier college years and realized they did not take advantage of GSU to the best of their ability. These participants were now are interacting with professors, getting involved in career exploration, and networking with people in their field. Xavier described this in the following exchange about being ready for college when he first began:

Xavier: The independent thing? I don't know, I was ready for it; I felt like I could do it. But I didn't know that there was so much more involved in going to school other than study and get good grades.

Interviewer: Right. So what are those other things that you didn't know about?

Xavier: You know like getting involved. Doing clubs, getting community service hours at places. Getting a really solid internship. You know, stuff like that.

Of the traditionally-aged participants, there were three that stood out among the sample as being very involved in the activities that might lead to career success. Specifically, they were engaged in internships, community service, networking with faculty and staff, and receiving some type of career specific mentorship (formally or informally). What was common among these three participants was receiving mentorship and guidance from a structured organization on

campus. These represent three successful programs at Georgia State that may be looked to for expansion to more students and are discussed next.

Maria is a 21 year old Mexican American Public Policy major. She received the Goizueta Scholarship designed to attract and retain more Hispanic/Latino students at Georgia State. In addition to financial support, the students receive regular mentorship and guidance through scholarship staff. Scholars also attend an FLC together and have the opportunity to create lasting friendships that help support them throughout their university careers. In the following excerpt Maria talks about her involvement in service and internships.

I'm interning with Pro Georgia; it's like the non-profit organization that works with other organizations to try to motivate people to vote, and do a lot of research and data analysis. And I'm working with Girls Inc. as well. I'm working in their summer camp, and, during the school year I was with them... We went to different schools to give classes to girls about maintaining healthy relationships and motivating them to be independent and go to college. I guess just for the summer right now that's what I'm doing and I'm involved with my church, so I'm a youth leader at my church...

Maria's involvement both on and off campus directly related to her goal of going to law school, and throughout her interview she discussed several ways she was engaging with the college environment beyond the classroom.

A second exemplary participant, Janice, is a 22 year old African American nursing major. She has been a part of the National Council of Negro Women and involved in several service-oriented groups on campus. She discussed people at these organizations providing mentorship and guidance. In the following excerpt she discusses her internship and other opportunities on campus.

Interviewer: You said you were doing an internship this summer?

Janice: It's with Emory Hospital and it's really is... it's not as extensive because I haven't been in the nursing program right now. But it's kind of basic duties around the hospital. I have to maintain the front desk, make sure the patients have everything they need, check in on them, set up some games for the kids and everything. So it's basic, but

I like it because its exposing me to the hospital setting which I had never been in, which I think is a score no matter what.

Interviewer: Okay. You mentioned that you are taking advantage of opportunities now. How did you start doing that; like did someone help you, or when did you start realizing there is a lot in Atlanta that you could do?

Janice: I think that different clubs that I'm in and also visiting different offices on campus that you know other students may not know about...like Student Support Services or the Office of African American Students and different things like that. I actually looked on Georgia State website more, they have a lot of information that you know just in the front page. I was looking at Panther Breakaway which is like during your breaks instead of going home; you'd go somewhere to do community service for that, I thought that was really cool.

Janice recurrently discussed taking advantage of every opportunity she could to advance her career and networking abilities.

Finally, Raj is a graduating senior that is a pre-med chemistry and biology major. He joined a South Asian fraternity that he credits with helping him become involved at school and in the community. I asked him what helped him adjust and become successful at GSU.

Well, I mean, obviously, uh brothers. Mentorship essentially. So like when I first joined the fraternity, we were actually brand new to the Georgia State at that time. So we weren't established with Georgia State yet. But they had, like the older brothers they were a lot older and they were like juniors and stuff. And we had them in like all different kind of majors. And we have a mentorship program in our fraternity. That's when we started it. They were like, "So you have like work and stuff so if you need help with how to approach a topic or how to approach a certain class, just come to us. We don't care, we're gonna help you. We don't want to set you up for failure. We want you to succeed." Like, "yeah the fraternity is important but at the end of the day, it's not gonna give you your career. That's something only you can do, but we can help you get there." And that was awesome because, you know, they helped guide me through everything. Like, two of my older brothers they were like, they were Bio majors...So they were like here's everything we have on Bio and Chemistry.

Throughout Raj's interview he discussed ways he took advantage of every opportunity he had, and noted the major sources of strength and support he had in his environment.

Maria, Raj, and Janice stood out among the sample as being very connected to GSU in addition to successfully balancing multiple responsibilities. They were engaged outside of the

classroom in practical activities that will hopefully advance their career options. Examining what these students are doing may be the key to understanding what programs are working and should be supported or expanded by the university. Cultural capital also came through when analyzing exposure to career options, help with decision making, and the need for mentorship.

3.3.4.2 Exposure to different career options and majors

Several students felt that having to declare a major early sent them down a path of taking longer to complete their degree. Since first generation college students are less likely to have had access to a broad range of career options, many students advocated for there to be some sort of exposure to different fields before students are required to declare a major. Kelly had returned to school after completing her first bachelor's degree at Georgia State in business, to take classes in psychology and counseling and switch careers. I asked her about things she would have done differently the first time.

In terms of academics, I would probably explore a little bit more. I wish I had exposure into other fields. One of the mistakes that I think Georgia State makes, really students make, is having to declare what you want to do when you first get here without exposure. If you're not exposed to it, you don't know it exists. And quite frankly most of the kids who grew up where I grew up...you don't really know what to do. And you end up picking a major because you have to declare one. And you get out and you're not working in it.

What I saw...with students from more affluent families. They had the exposure because they knew people...who, "my dad is a neuroscientist"...or "my mom is a blah blah blah"...My mom cleaned toilets, literally. So I really didn't know. My whole thing was like, "alright, how much do you pay?" and with me it was business

Kelly communicated a struggle that many first generation students face in not having exposure from their families to a variety of career options. When they then come to college and rely on their own research, they often make decisions about career that are not broadly informed.

3.3.4.3 Decision making

Relatedly, although students did not self-identify it as a gap, many participants did not have assistance in terms of decision making. When it came to choosing courses, majors, and career paths, many participants reported being on their own. They relied heavily on the internet and their own research to make these major decisions. These students' initiative and drive are remarkable, at the same time if they had additional guidance, they might have even more successful outcomes. Adjoa discussed how she made decisions about college attendance

Everything I did myself because...my parents don't really know much, to really help me with college. Like they don't know about GPA's, they don't know like, what schools, they don't really know the internet like that so, everything I did myself. I...always had my Georgia 411 college, I would go through the entire, every single school in Georgia on that website, and I would like press and...my disqualifier was if your GPA requirement was below a 3.0, I would not go into that school. So, yeah I did everything myself, I went through, picked up-narrowed down colleges myself, applied to everything myself, God everything was just everything was just me, my parents just like, "Ok, she's got it." They mostly just, they don't really check up on me because they feel like, "ok, yeah, she'll get it; she'll do it."

When I asked Kedrick about making academic decisions, he described his strategy of going about it on his own and feeling that he does not need an advisor.

I just sit home and I kind of strategize based on what I want to be, a Juvenile Probation Counselor. So I know I need a little bit of Sociology to understand the way life works, people interact, and I kind of base it on that. Like I can take this class, this kind of leads...I'm trying to perceive myself from the outside looking in and if I was looking at your resume and I wanted to see what classes you took to lead you up to that particular point, I look at it like... I don't even go to an advisor 'cause I haven't ever, I never met my advisor. And I've been here like a year; a year and a half. I never even met her.

Although becoming independent and making life choices is a part of development and mastering the college experience, it was notable how many students relied exclusively on the internet or peers to make decisions, without any guidance.

3.3.4.4 Mentorship/ Role Models

Tied to the idea of many first generation students feeling that they are on their own in terms of decision making, a few participants mentioned having mentorship or role models that they could work with as desirable. In particular, being first generation college students or students of color, participants mentioned having someone that was “like them” that could help guide or be a role model to them. Adjoa spoke about this desire to have specific mentorship.

I feel like every first-generation student should just get like some type of, just counseling, or college 101. Because I didn't really know about student support services until like this summer; I had no idea. So I feel like letting first-generation college students know, these are the resources that we offer to you. And I know, not every student has a FLC and has a peer mentor and stuff, so they don't know. Like they're just by themselves figuring it out with their friends... and like most first-generation college students that I've encountered, either they're really slacking or really just like unmotivated and don't know what to do, or they're really just on it like, getting scholarships and all this stuff. So, I never really see an in-between first-generation college student. Because I feel like; there's people that are just really, really motivated like 'I wanna help my family all this stuff', and there's some like 'I wanna help my family, but this is hard, like nobody's helping me.' So, I feel like this school focus, put more of a focus, on first-generation college students... I feel like stuff should be more known to first-generation college students 'cause we don't know anything until somebody else tells us.

By virtue of their first generation student status, participants are automatically at disadvantage in the university environment when it comes to the cultural capital and socialization that can be leveraged for student success. Universities largely have not designed systems with these students in mind.

4 DISCUSSION

In this study I took an ecological and strengths based approach to understanding school connectedness among first generation college students. The three major research questions addressed student perspectives on school connectedness, strengths within themselves and in their environment, and gaps between what is currently being done at the university and what could

enhance their success. Findings highlight several overarching themes across research questions including the importance of diversity, addressing ways in which the broader cultural mismatch manifest, and the importance of caring in the lives of first generation college student success. I will discuss each research question, followed by examination of these overarching themes.

4.1 School Connectedness

In summary, most participants reported high feelings of belongingness that were equated with campus involvement, connection to peers, and involvement in racial/ethnic or cultural group affiliated organizations. Feelings of belongingness were challenged by being in the downtown area of a major city and long commutes. High connectedness to peers was equated with a friendly environment, diversity within the student body, and a shared sense of purpose. Connectedness was high to professors that demonstrated care and competence, but many students were also challenged by how to create relationships with instructors. Participants reported a general sense of caring on campus, however, crime on campus sometimes felt like a threat to safety.

Students most often freely associated belongingness with how involved they were on campus. However, it is precisely because school connectedness is inclusive of belongingness, in addition to relationships with teachers and peers, and a sense of caring and safety in the school environment, that I hypothesized it would be a useful construct to explore among first generation college students. The literature on first generation college students includes many studies on engagement as a means to increase student success (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder Jr., 2001; Pike & Kuh, 2005). I hypothesized that looking at school connectedness might be important for two reasons. First, school connectedness encapsulates more than belonging, and the construct may account for ways of feeling connected beyond traditional involvement.

Second, school connectedness is generally conceptualized, not only as a feeling that resides within the individual, but also as an asset that can be altered in the environment. For example, in the K-12 literature, school connectedness is often the target of school-wide efforts to alter the environment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; McNeely et al., 2002; Shochet et al., 2006).

Although participants equated involvement in clubs, fraternities, sports, and other school activities as a means to be connected to the university, many participants who could not become more involved in campus activities still felt strongly connected to GSU in a number of different ways. This challenges the notion that involvement equals engagement and highlights the need to look at affective connection to the university in addition to behavioral measures of involvement. Because spending extra time on campus is more prohibitive to many first generation college students, scholars have begun to emphasize the classroom as the most important site of student engagement (Tinto, 1997). Researchers suggest that in order to retain students, teachers must use instructional methods that engage their classrooms in an interactive and personal manner, as this is often the only site of interaction on campus for busy students (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Tinto, 2006). Findings from the current study support this notion, particularly among the transfer students who tended to be older and more likely to have more work and family responsibilities. Although someone like Kedrick had difficulty with the general individualistic nature of students at GSU, he was able to make friends in his classes and felt a sense of camaraderie among classmates that were working together in a particular class. He also felt valued in classes that allowed him to understand his own experience in terms of the stratification of society and the impact of various systems of oppression. Other researchers have confirmed this connection when coursework reflects students understanding their role in a multicultural

society. For example, Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin (2013) found that when students participated in curricula that was inclusive of student perspectives like their own they fared better in terms of adjustment.

In addition to the importance of the classroom as a site of engagement, this study highlights several other ways universities might support student feelings of connectedness beyond traditional involvement. Participants who grew up in and around Atlanta emphasized their connection to the symbolism of Georgia State in the city. On urban campuses that seek to attract local students and make college accessible to many residents this might be especially relevant. Similarly, the connection to the city itself was important to several participants. These less researched ways of feeling connected may offer new means for the university to enhance school connectedness among the student body.

Bearing in mind that first generation college students are a very heterogeneous group is important when considering the implications of these findings. My sample included students from various ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, ages, and student statuses (ie. transfer, returning, entered college directly from high school). School connectedness might be different based on membership in these groups. For example, transfer and returning students who are less likely to become involved in extracurricular activities, may benefit most from connectedness in the classroom or through GSU's presence in the greater Atlanta community. Similarly, becoming involved in on-campus groups was most likely for traditionally-aged students of color, efforts to enhance connectedness may then look to support this pattern of involvement and pursue increasing participation for other groups of students. For example, the university might seek ways to encourage transfer and commuter students to utilize the Office of Latino Student Services and Outreach (LASSO) or join affinity groups at greater rates.

Considering first generation college students as a priority in planning might also mean examining which members of this varied group benefit from different efforts.

Relationships with peers were highlighted as a large component of connectedness. In addition to the general importance of making friends on campus, participants repeatedly highlighted the significance of diversity and belonging based on social group membership combined with a culture of acceptance among students at the university. Diversity with regard to race/ethnicity, sexuality, religion, culture, age, socioeconomic status was valued by participants, but more importantly than the existence of diversity, participants highlighted that there seemed to be 1) a place to belong for all people (i.e., affinity groups, offices, etc.) and 2) a genuine respect and appreciation among students for diversity that alluded to an underlying institutional commitment to diversity.

In addition to highlighting ways in which students feel connected, exploring challenges to school connectedness is also useful. Being on a downtown campus was a hindrance to some students' sense of connectedness. These barriers included long commutes, limited parking, a sprawling campus, lack of green space, and crime. Identifying these structural barriers is an important first step in being able to alter school connectedness. In addition, examining relationships with instructors brought forth another barrier. Many students struggled with forming meaningful relationships with faculty and staff or did not view it as important. Meaningful relationships with faculty is clearly connected to academic outcomes (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Ullah & Wilson, 2007), however bridging this barrier for students is less understood.

School connectedness may be an emergent concept to use with first generation college students since it includes the affective feeling toward the university experience. These findings

support the notion that school connectedness is a useful construct for first generation college students that can be enhanced through individual and ecological factors.

4.2 Strengths

Participants were able to identify a number of strengths both within themselves and in their environment that aid in school success. Students most often discussed their own determination and drive as leading to persistence in school. This finding seems most linked to the concept of *grit*, first delineated by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly (2007). Grit is conceptualized as a character trait that includes perseverance and passion for long term goals and is the focus of current attention on student persistence (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014). Although grit is characterized as a personality trait, some researchers argue that it can be fostered or taught by schools to help students succeed (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Rather than seeing intelligence as fixed, Hochanadel & Finamore (2015) argue that educators can create learning environments that help students achieve by fostering a “growth mindset”; the belief that intelligence can be improved and changed. By conceptualizing grit as a characteristic that can be fostered, rather than a stagnant personality trait, universities may capitalize on a strength that helps students persist and thrive. Interventions that include fostering grit across the student body may be gaining in popularity and are supported by looking at the responses of participants in the current study

Another contribution of this study is framing family as a strength for first generation college students and for universities as a whole. Oftentimes, family is framed as a burden, the reason students are under-prepared for college, and an obstacle that first generation college students must “move past” (Engle et al., 2006; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). While family involvement can make college success more challenging, families can also be a source of

strength and support for first generation college students and an asset in the university environment (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Gofen, 2009). Participants were inspired by their family to succeed in many different ways. Some students were encouraged to go to college by their parents from an early age, extended family often helped when parents lacked the resources to help students, and families provided the emotional support and stability students needed to succeed. Even for participants who had volatile relationships with their family, they perceived this challenge as motivating them to succeed in college. Living with families and communities with diminished resources motivated them to want to change their prospects for the future. Beyond how families can be a source of strength and support to students, diverse families can be framed as an asset inside university classrooms. Participants delineated many ways in which their upbringing resulted in a strong work ethic, a desire to achieve, and a desire to give back to their families and communities. These assets could be used by the university to promote and reinforce first generation college students' resilience and strengths. The diverse life experiences of students contribute to creating a rich learning environment and can be used by instructors to make courses more meaningful.

Finally, staying close to home benefitted many of the participants, a finding that puts a different lens on college student success research. The transition to college is full of new tasks and marks an important developmental period for students as they forge their own identities and separate from their families (Erikson, 1968, 1994). Orbe (2008) theorized that first generation college students confront a series of dialectical tensions during college as they begin to negotiate their identity. He named one of these tensions independence vs. interdependence, where students begin to construct an individual identity, but may also feel inseparably attached to their families and communities. Participants in the current study demonstrated that students could feel that

staying in their home communities for college was a strength rather than solely being a source of tension. Many participants were able to retain jobs, friendships, and other sources of support that provided them a stable foundation. Further, asserting the idea of individuation may be a more western and individualistic ideal that may not be held as strongly by those who retain more interdependent values. For students from more communal backgrounds, staying connected to their family may not be a source of tension or conflict as they continue to grow and change through their college years.

4.3 Gaps in serving first generation college students

Participants identified a number of gaps at the university that, if addressed, might contribute to their success. Consistent with recommendations found in the literature, accommodations for transfer and non-traditional aged students were identified as an unmet need at GSU. Miller and Erisman (2011), conducting research for the Pell Institute, call for seamless integration into degree programs and specific accommodations, such as extended hours, childcare, and transportation as necessary for increasing transfer student success. Further, they call for universities to consider transfer students in institutional strategic planning rather than as an after-thought which so often occurs at four year institutions (Miller & Erisman, 2011). All of the participants who were transfer students or returned to GSU after some time away discussed this gap. For the most part these are students who feel a sense of connection to GSU, and are not the grumblings of a dissatisfied few. Making classes more available in the evenings and online, creating specialized advisement, and increasing assistance with transportation options were all highly endorsed for their potential to affect student success.

In addressing first generation college student success, Lowery-Hart & Pacheco (2011) call for universities to make specific concerted efforts to outreach to parents. A few participants

endorsed outreaching to parents through having more events on campus that involved parents, sending materials home in other languages as needed, and involving parents more on tours and during orientation. Beyond what was explicitly endorsed, at least half of participants discussed difficulty communicating with their parents about college. Many parents do not understand the demands put on their children at school, how to advise their children, or how they could help or even be a part of their children transitioning successfully to school. While some researchers call for outreach to parents there are few, if any, models in the literature that explicitly suggest how to address this need. Participants in the current study supplied a few concrete suggestions that could be applied at GSU and possibly in similar universities.

While many programs and services exist to address student needs, this study highlighted the many obstacles that exist for first generation college students to access these resources. Many programs remain unknown to students or they may be unlikely to access them for a variety of reasons. This finding may provide support for universities to look at creating institutional change as opposed to solely focusing on creating add-on programs to address the needs of first generation college students. Whereas individual programs are recommended to assist first generation college students such as training in study skills, freshmen learning communities, or specialized advising (Davis, 2012) these will not change the culture of the academic setting as a whole. In order to effectively address the needs of these learners that make up a great portion of higher education environments, the ways in which university culture and structure immediately put them at a deficit should be addressed.

Addressing this gap in cultural capital that is necessarily a part of the first generation college experience is crucial for the future of education. Rather than considering add-on programs for students, which can remain difficult to access, considering ways in which the

culture and structure of the university can be altered should be a priority. One way this can be partially understood is through looking at the examples of highly successful first generation college students interviewed in the present study. Most older participants had learned that the connection from college to career required more than getting good grades in class. They believed that obtaining relevant internships, networking with peers, and developing meaningful relationships with faculty and staff was necessary to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, only a few traditionally aged students had this insight, leaving a knowledge gap for those students who had meaningful goals for their lives, but lacked the insight on how to get there. Those students who were exemplars among their peers had one thing in common, access to mentorship. Specifically, mentorship assisted them with planning a successful path to graduation, encouragement and advice on getting to know faculty, access to networking and career opportunities, and peer support. Each of these students was involved in either a university run program (ex. Goizueta Scholarship) or a student group (ex. a fraternity, the National Council of Negro Women, etc.) that was committed to seeing its members succeed through diverse mentorship. Mentorship is promoted in student affairs circles across the university as well as for first generation college students in particular (Davis, 2012). Universities may need to think about mentorship more specifically for first generation students as they may be less likely to access it through traditional models. Davis (2012) suggests mentorship be mandatory for first generation college students in order to ensure access. In the case of GSU, examining current successful mentorship efforts such as the programs participants discussed and looking at ways of supporting and expanding them would be useful.

Another way this cultural capital gap was delineated was through lack of exposure to a wide variety of career options and majors before students have to declare their course of study.

Many participants either explicitly expressed this need or through the course of their interview expressed limited input and support with choosing a major or career path. This is a recommendation less highlighted in the literature, but seems to follow the need for exposure to the culture of academia and the need for role models for first generation college students. Taken together, the gaps highlighted by participants confirm many of the recommendations put forth in the literature that universities can adopt. Often practice lags behind research and even at universities highly committed to first generation student success, continuous assessment and improvement can be done.

4.4 Unifying themes and considerations

Across the major research questions, several themes were highlighted as integral to first generation student connectedness and ecological strengths at the university. First, diversity was a recurrent theme across research questions and participants. Valuing diversity was tied to peer relationships, supportive programs, and feeling valued at the university. This theme included participants' appreciation of a diverse student body, many university led and student run organizations tied to racial/ethnic, religious, sexual identity and cultural group membership, appreciation of diverse perspectives from other students, and seeing the university as a place where students "like me" can succeed. In many ways, the results indicated that GSU is succeeding as an institution that promotes and values diversity. Campus diversity benefits the learning environment of all students (Bowman, Hurtado, Locks, & Oseguera, 2008; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). However, it is more than just having large numbers of students representing different backgrounds that makes a college successful at a meaningful commitment to diversity. Universities must also address diversity among its faculty and create the structural and institutional support to maintain this commitment (Brown, 2004).

Participants highlighted the ways in which GSU is succeeding at creating a learning environment where diverse perspectives are valued. At the same time, this is always an area of continuous improvement. Universities can look to the vast literature on diversity and inclusion to incorporate recommendations. For example, Smith & Miller (2009), doing research on behalf of the Pell Institute, highlight the need for culturally sensitive leadership that includes staff and faculty role modeling, inclusive strategic planning, and purposeful community outreach. Campuses that are committed to diversity can look to implement recommendations like these.

Related to diversity, students experiencing distress due to cultural mismatches was a theme across topic areas. When students felt disconnected to peers, instructors, or the university as a whole cultural differences often were the root of the tension. The broader context of this study is highlighting a cultural clash: how do students who have not been socialized into academia by their families persist and thrive in a culture that is often foreign to them and one they have little assistance from their usual sources of support? This broader culture clash manifested in several ways across the participants' stories. It caused difficulty with making friends when students were perceived as more individualistic or materialistic. It caused difficulty forming relationships with professors and left many participants generally underprepared for transitioning to careers following graduation. Stephens et al. (2012) highlighted the ways in which many American universities have values of independence steeped in the culture that create a disadvantage for students who hold more interdependent cultural norms. Findings from the present study confirm this cultural mismatch in ways that students could explicitly name. Stephens et al. (2012) also found that when a university makes changes to demonstrate value of interdependent norms, all students benefit. For example, changing the language on university brochures and letters to students that emphasize interdependent values or

having orientation presentations from older students that model fitting in as a first generation college student show positive gains in student outcomes (Stephens et al., 2012, 2013).

Addressing these unwritten rules that remain unknown to first generation students remains a task for higher education to address.

A final unifying theme was the importance of caring. Caring from peers, instructors, families, and the university as a whole influenced how students felt about the university and their college experience. Having caring relationships is a well-documented asset in the child resiliency literature (Henderson, 2002; Jennings, 2003; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Walker & White, 1998), and we might extend this to adult learners as well. When participants felt like instructors cared, they were more likely to forge personal relationships with them. When the student body was seen as accepting, affirming, and caring, participants were able to create meaningful relationships that supported their success. When the university made multiple resources available for students, like financial aid, tutoring, and student success offices, participants felt like the university cared for them. Caring across contexts was highlighted by participants as integral to their success. Because caring is part of the construct of school connectedness it might be especially useful with college students. Further probing into thinking about the ways in which we look at developmental assets for youth and applying them throughout the lifespan is warranted.

4.5 Limitations of the study

Before considering the implications of the current study, some limitations must be explored. The first limitation is the specific context of Georgia State University. As a large, public urban university with a very diverse student body, we might expect that findings are most applicable to similar universities across the country. However, one important aspect of GSU is

the existence of the HOPE scholarship in the state of Georgia. This source of tuition support for Georgia residents ensures many students remain local for college, and it removes, at least in part, the great financial burden of a university education. Financial considerations usually come to the forefront when examining the lives of first generation college students. While financial concerns were expressed by participants of this study, such concerns may have been less emphasized than they would be in contexts without a HOPE-like scholarship. Additionally, the HOPE scholarship likely results in students being more likely to stay close to home for college, a surprising source of strength for many of the participants.

Another limitation to consider is the sampling. A broad range of perspectives were represented across age groups, racial/ethnic backgrounds, course of study, and transfer or continuing student statuses; however examining who was not a part of the study is also important. Because recruitment involved campus e-mail and online recruitment through coursework, participants might be more likely to be students who put their academic careers at the forefront of their lives. Students who struggle the most should also be the focus of research on college success and likely were not recruited into the present study.

4.6 Implications for policy and practice

Despite these limitations, the present study raises a number of implications for policy and practice at universities locally and across the country. Several ecological strengths within the university that promoted feelings of connectedness among participants can be examined for their utility nationally. First, students connected to the diversity on campus and felt that GSU had a place to belong for lots of different types of students. This meaningful commitment to diversity is reflected in the student body and in university supported offices and clubs that provide students access to peer support, mentorship, and belonging. Efforts to diversify universities must

be supported by institutional commitment reflected in policies, offices, and interpersonal interactions (Brown, 2004). Students confirmed that the presence of institutionally supported offices like the Office of Black Student Achievement or the Office of Latino Student Services and Outreach (LASSO) made them feel cared for. Additionally, GSU demonstrates its commitment to diversity by students having the option to join a myriad of student organizations or to create new organizations, such as fraternities, to give voice to members of the South Asian community or the LGBT community as highlighted by study participants. These concrete examples of institutional commitment to diversity can be used as a model for other universities across the country.

Second, students relied on the university providing unique opportunities for financial assistance in addition to traditional financial aid. Commitment to financial assistance for students is partially unique to the state of Georgia and partially a result of concerted efforts to close gaps in financial need for students at GSU. Other states could look to Georgia as an example of investment in college opportunity provided broadly to its residents. At the same time the HOPE scholarship is not without its faults. Critics argue that the merit based scholarship reduces the amount of funds available for need-based scholarships and that concern for retaining the scholarship causes students to make decision that inhibit their progress, such as dropping classes or taking a reduced course load (Cornwell & Mustard, 2002). Regardless of these critiques, what is clear is that students perceived the access to financial assistance as significantly contributing to their success. Finding new ways to invest in first generation college students by easing the financial burden and making four year institutions accessible is a major key to closing the achievement gap.

Finally, the university provides a number of supportive services for first generation college students, and in some cases all students, that participants confirmed as integral to their success. These include freshman learning communities, tutoring, extra help from student instructors, summer learning academies, and mandatory advisement. In particular, GSU could use these results to ensure the continuity of these important programs. At the same time this study revealed a reluctance of many students to reach out for assistance. This particular university and universities nationally can look at their outreach efforts to determine ways in which services may feel inaccessible to students.

Participants also presented unmet needs that have implications for universities across the country in terms of promoting connectedness for first generation college students. In particular concerted efforts to address the needs of transfer, returning, and non-traditionally aged students were called for by participants and are of concern nationally (cite). If GSU implemented any of the recommended changes and evaluated their effectiveness, they could provide useful information for universities around the country. Participants also highlighted other changes that could be made, including the need for mentorship, exposure to careers and majors, outreach to parents, and structural changes for commuter students. The university could carefully review these suggestions and look into addressing these unmet needs. GSU is not unlike other universities across the country, which are trying to evolve to meet the demands of an changing student body.

This study also has implications in terms of the meaning of student connectedness and belonging across universities. Promoting student involvement on campus and finding ways to break down barriers to doing so for first generation college students remains an important task nationally (citation). Simultaneously, there may be ways of promoting connectedness beyond

having students spend long periods of time on campus. Investing in classrooms as a site of connectedness is largely promoted, but capitalizing on connection to the city or symbolism of the university are new and unexpected findings that universities consider.

4.7 Implications and future directions for research

This study is the first to inquire into the utility of examining school connectedness with first generation college students. While related concepts are often used, such as engagement or belongingness, present findings support using a construct that also taps into nontraditional means of belonging and is conceptualized as alterable by the university environment for first generation college students. Because the original school connectedness subscale is so brief, it also lends itself to inclusion in research. Future research should continue to probe this construct with first generation college students, perhaps inquiring into how students anchor their answers or if any means of connectedness are left out of the measure. Quantitative exploration should also be pursued to assess the connection between an adapted version of the school connectedness subscale and outcome variables like graduation rates, retention rates, grade point average, and career success beyond college. These links are well established in the K-12 literature, but may need to be better established for college students before researchers will use it as an outcome indicator. School connectedness might also be examined for its connection to other variables, like campus participation and measures of psychological wellbeing, for first generation college students.

Development and evaluation of specific campus-wide efforts to enhance school connectedness for first generation college students are also aspirational. Several possibilities were raised in the present study in addition to what is in the current research literature. Programs that help remove barriers to campus participation, expand outreach efforts, involve parents on

campus, expand mentorship, and/or create specialized advising are all possibilities. Many recommendations exist for enhancing first generation college student success, but closely evaluating and measuring the link to school connectedness is lacking. Alternatively, instead of creating new programs, current programs might be assessed for their impact on school connectedness so universities can get baseline data before they implement expansion efforts.

Results of the current study also highlight the need for specific work with transfer, returning, and non-traditionally aged students on a traditional 4-year college campuses. Continuing to assess their specific needs and examining which efforts help or hinder their progress is necessary for expanding educational opportunities to more Americans. Finally, diversity was continually highlighted in this study as a source of strength at the university. Researchers might examine specifically which aspects of campus commitment to diversity provide the most benefit to students.

4.8 Conclusion

Taking an ecological and strengths based approach to understanding school connectedness for first generation college students is a departure from the present literature in several ways. Rather than focusing on the deficits of first generation college students, looking at the richness they add to the college experience is a place to start in terms of shifting their long term outcomes. By highlighting the ways in which they feel connected to the campus, we can begin to understand their experience and capitalize on the strengths they draw on for success. By framing their background as an asset rather than a liability, universities might begin to address structural changes that promote inclusivity on their campuses.

The current study aimed to begin this process at one university with implications for similar universities across the country. Findings highlight ways in which students feel connected

to the university through traditional means such as joining clubs and activities, but also recognize that students can still feel connected to the university when they find this involvement more prohibitive. Barriers to connectedness were revealed, such as being on a downtown campus or students having difficulty making meaningful relationships with faculty and staff. Recognizing the strengths that students bring to campus and building on those strengths was also highlighted. For example, students' drive and determination might be fostered by the university through promoting grit in the curriculum. Moreover, unmet needs on campus highlight areas of growth not only for GSU but for universities around the country, such as addressing the needs of transfer and commuter students, providing diverse mentorship and making specific outreach to parents and families. Finding new ways to approach first generation college student success is a national priority. By focusing on school connectedness in the present study, I aimed to uncover a new way of valuing what first generation college students bring to the university and emphasize ways in which universities might make structural changes to address diverse campuses across the country.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Individual Interview Protocol for Administration to Participants

I. Introduction [Interviewer introduces his/herself and asks participant to give only their first names. Thanks participant for coming].

II. Description of confidentiality and interview agenda (5 minutes)

We're working on a project designed to better understand the experience of students like you in college. Today, you will be asked to share your thoughts, ideas, and experiences being a student at GSU. I'll be asking you to describe lots of different aspects of your life, like where you grew up, how you made decisions about college, and what things help you be successful in school. Today's interview should last about an hour and a half. You do not have to answer any question if it makes you uncomfortable, and you can stop the interview at any time without penalty. If you decide to leave the interview, you will still receive the \$xx gift card to pay you for your time. Everything said in here will be kept confidential. This means that whatever is said in here will only be used by project staff and only in ways that protect your identity.

Do you have any questions?

Because you're a current college student and neither of your parents or guardians completed a 4 year degree, we are very interested in your experience. We want to understand how students like you can be successful and what things would make it easier for you to stay in college. Hopefully the results can be used to inform the university about its current structure and we can make recommendations to help other students. Your input can really help us to know more about students like you. You are the expert!

Do you have any questions?

C. Tell me about your current living situation.

Did your family help you make decisions about college?

Who in your family/community encouraged you to attend college?

Probes

Who do you live with?

Who is in your community?

Do you have a partner? (Tell me about them)

Do you have children? (Tell me about

| | |
|---|--|
| | them) |
| <p>IV. College Story (10 minutes)</p> <p>A. Tell me about how you became a student at GSU.</p> | <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>How did you learn about colleges?</p> <p>How did you make decisions about college?</p> <p>Who helped you with the application process and choosing a college?</p> |
| <p>V. College Adjustment/ Current Student Status (15-20min)</p> <p>A. What was it like your first year on campus?</p> | <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>Did you have any difficulties adjusting to college life?</p> <p>Was anything much different than you thought it would be?</p> |

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| <p>B. What is it like being a student at GSU now?</p> | <p>What things helped you adjust to college life?</p> <p>What did you find hard about being in college?</p> <p>What things did you enjoy about being in college?</p> <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>How are you doing in school in terms of grades/ graduating?</p> <p>Is there anything else that is particularly challenging?</p> |
|--|---|

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>C. What other parts of your life affect how well you do in school?</p> <p>D. What do you communicate with your family about school?</p> <p>E. Who helps you with academic or career decisions like choosing classes or thinking about what you will do when you graduate?</p> | <p>How do you handle these challenges?</p> <p>What motivates you to continue in school?</p> <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>Do you have a job?</p> <p>Do you have family responsibilities/ other responsibilities?</p> <p>How much time do you spend on these things?</p> |
| <p>VI. School Connectedness (20-30 min)</p> | <p><u>Probes</u></p> |

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|---|--|
| <p>A. How much do you feel like you belong at GSU?</p> | <p>What things make you feel like you belong here?</p> <p>What things make you think you don't belong here?</p> <p>What things happen at GSU that make you feel included? (or excluded?)</p> |
| <p>B. Describe your relationships with other students?</p> | <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>Do you have close friends at school?</p> <p>How did you make friends at school?</p> <p>How much do you interact with other students in your classes?</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>C. Describe your relationships with your instructors?</p> <p>D. Do you feel like there are people who care about how you do at GSU?</p> | <p>What social activities do you participate in at school?</p> <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>Do you interact with your professors outside of class?</p> <p>What do instructors do that make you feel close (or distant) them?</p> <p>Do you think you could talk to your instructors about classes or your academic career?</p> <p><u>Probes</u></p> <p>Who are they?</p> |
|--|---|

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>Tell me about them.</p> <p>Anyone else?</p> |
| <p>VII. Strengths (20 min)</p> <p>E. Students come to college with lots of strengths.</p> <p>What individual qualities do you have that help you do well in school?</p> <p>F. What other things in your life help you stay motivated at school or do well?</p> | <p>Probe</p> <p>For example: family, community, society</p> |
| | |

VIII. Intervention/Wrap Up (15 min)

How do you think being a First Generation

College Student Affects you?

G. What do you know about programs at GSU for first generation college students?

H. What kinds of things do you think would help you be successful at school?

I. What do you wish there was at this school?

J. What do you think would help other students like you?

Thank you for talking with me today. You have been very helpful.

Before we end, do you have any other things you think would be important for us to know to understand your experience?

Do you have any questions for me?

Thanks again. You have given us a lot of important information that we can use to better understand students like you!

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following questions about yourself:

- 1. What is your age?** _____
- 2. When is your anticipated graduation date?** _____
- 3. What is your current major?** _____
- 4. Which racial or ethnic group do you most closely identify with?**

6. What gender do you identify with (circle one)?

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Male | 2. Female |
| 3. Transgender | 4. Gender Queer |
| 5. Other: _____ | |

7. Please describe your current relationship status (circle all that apply).

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Single, never married | 4. In a relationship, living with partner |
| 2. Married | 5. In a relationship, not living with partner |
| 3. Separated or divorced | 6. Other |

8. Do you have children? 1. Yes 2. No How many? _____

9. Which of the following best describes your current employment status (circle one)?

- 1. Work full-time
- 2. Work part-time
- 3. No outside employment (student-only)

Appendix C: Modified School Connectedness Subscale

How strongly do you Agree or Disagree with the following statements about GSU?

| | (1) Strongly Disagree | (2) Disagree | (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree | (4) Agree | (5) Strongly Agree |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| I feel close to people at GSU | | | | | |
| I am happy to be at GSU | | | | | |
| I feel like I am part of GSU | | | | | |
| The instructors at GSU treat students fairly | | | | | |
| I feel safe at GSU | | | | | |