

Is First-Gen an Identity? How First-Generation College Students Make Meaning of Institutional and Familial Constructions of Self

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Abstract

Institutions increasingly use first-generation categorizations to provide support to students. In this study, we sought to understand how students make meaning of their first-generation status by conducting a series of focus groups with 54 participants. Our findings reveal that students saw first-generation status as an organizational and familial identity rather than social identities. This status was connected to alterity and social distance that was most salient in comparison to continuing-generation peers. Our recommendations include reexamining the role of first-generation-specific programming on campus, creating opportunities for meaning-making, supporting students within changing family dynamics, and exploring the interaction between first-generation status and other marginalized identities.

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While the proportion of first-generation students has become smaller overtime, first-generation students still comprise approximately 30% of total postsecondary enrollments in the United States (Cataldi et al., 2018). However, no clear consensus exists on how to define first-generation status (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Most commonly, first-generation status has been defined based on whether one or more of a student's parent(s) or legal guardian (s) completed a 4-year undergraduate degree (Inkelas et al., 2007), but virtually any permutation of familial degree attainment can be justified on theoretical grounds as all are associated with suppressed success trajectories for the first-generation students so identified (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Researchers have posited multiple explanations for these negative outcomes but most often describe a host of social, financial, and educational barriers as impeding success (Cataldi et al., 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996).

While the empirical literature on their success trajectories is relatively well-established, far fewer studies have sought to understand first-generation status as a form of identity integral to a student's meaning-making (McCoy, 2014; Mehta et al., 2011). Work that does so is vital to understanding first-generation status as part of a broader, intersectional treatment of student identity—particularly given the strength of documented associations between first-generation status, race, and class (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). In short, it is clear that first-generation college students have different postsecondary experiences and outcomes than their continuing-generation peers, but little is known of how their differential pathways shape how they make meaning of their first-generation status.

First-generation students are not a monolith, and their needs are as diverse as their backgrounds and experiences. A key first step toward the generation of a truly intersectional approach to first-generation status capable of representing this diversity is an intracategorical analysis of how they make meaning of first-generation status as a possible identity (McCall, 2005; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). To help meet this need for research about the meaning-making of first-generation college students, this study utilized a series of focus groups at a single public flagship research university (RU) to answer the following research questions: (a) How do first-generation college students make meaning of their first-generation status? and (b) How does this meaning-making relate to student identity construction in both institutional and familial contexts? Findings generated by addressing these research questions have the potential to inform institutional efforts to support both identity

development work broadly and success initiatives for first-generation college students specifically.

Literature Review

Extensive literature exists on the college-going trajectories, within-college experiences, and postsecondary outcomes of first-generation college students (summarized in Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Prior research has established strong associations between first-generation status, minoritized identities, and academic factors that place students at-risk in postsecondary education environments (Pascarella et al., 2004; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Explanations for the success gap between first-generation and continuing-generation students have long focused on differential access to social and cultural capital (Pascarella et al., 2004). Typically, first-generation college students must overcome barriers associated with a lack of parental knowledge of the college-going process or within-college experiences and must navigate institutional environments as “educational pioneers” (London, 1996, p. 11). The result of this simultaneous attempt to develop social, cultural, and navigational capital while also coming to understand their oft-minoritized social identities within campus learning environments is an intensive meaning-making process (Inkelas et al., 2007; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). While we know a great deal about the postsecondary trajectories of first-generation college students, far less is known about how first-generation college students make meaning of their first-generation status in the context of other social and institutional identities (e.g., socioeconomic status, racial identity, and transfer status).

Postsecondary Trajectories of First-Generation College Students

Across their pathways to and through higher education, first-generation students encounter barriers and obstacles that impact their success. First-generation students are less likely to enroll in college; those that do enroll largely attend less selective institutions, including a disproportionate representation in 2-year institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004). Academically, first-generation students often have lower grades, complete fewer credit hours, and are less likely to complete an academically focused curriculum (Cataldi et al., 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, first-generation students report reduced academic expectations and less faculty interaction (Kim & Sax, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017), at least in part due to more extensive work and familial obligations (Martin, 2015). Parents provide both support and challenge to first-generation students, with approaches to college ranging from emotional encouragement to doubting their child’s choice to attend higher education (Gibbons et al., 2016).

The cumulative impact of these barriers is that first-generation students are more likely to leave college without a credential compared with their continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). Notably, first-generation status is also experienced intersectionally; as a result, first-generation students who report having one or more additional minoritized identities complete their degrees at lower rates than first-generation peers with majoritarian identities (Toutkoushian et al., 2018).

Minoritized Social Identities and First-Generation College Students

One of the main ways that existing research has begun to address the meaning-making of first-generation college students is through the examination of variation in experience across social identities. Although this research is not always framed as meaning-making, the treatment of first-generation status as a potentially intersectional influence on experience posits that first-generation students will have divergent experiences from one another and will need to construct new navigational strategies in response (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018), which is itself the foundation for meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2009). To date, most of this research has explored the intersection of first-generation status with social class and racial identities (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McCoy, 2014).

Studies focused on the social class identities of first-generation college students have typically focused on low-income students (Martin, 2015; Thayer, 2000). For example, Martin's (2015) exploration of how White, low-income, first-generation students experienced social class on campus compared them with "tightly wound rubber bands" (p. 280) and suggested that the extensive time that they spent working constrained their capacity for within-college involvement. As a result, they understood themselves primarily through their social class identities rather than their race or first-generation status. This finding echoes earlier research that social class functions as a superordinate identity for some first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000) and that it does so by fundamentally altering the way that low-income first-generation college students experience postsecondary learning environments as compared with more financially advantaged first- and continuing-generation peers.

This finding appears to primarily describe the experience of White first-generation college students (Martin, 2015; Stuber, 2011; Wilkins, 2014). When an intersectional analysis is undertaken or when research focuses on the experiences of racially minoritized students, racial identities appear to explain more of the variation in student experience (Cho et al., 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Lundberg et al., 2007). The most likely explanation for the discrepant experiences of racially minoritized and majoritarian students is the juxtaposition of racially homogenous high schools with the White-norming of many colleges and universities (Brunsma et al., 2013; Feagin et al., 2014; Whitehurst et al., 2017).

Supporting this contention, qualitative studies focused on the racialized experiences of first-generation college students have shown that the social and navigational strategies learned by White students prior to college-going transfer easily to the postsecondary learning environment (Wilkins, 2014). In contrast, studies exploring the experiences of first-generation students of color generally (McCoy, 2014) and Black first-generation students specifically (Wilkins, 2014) have shown that they typically must develop entirely new strategies for navigating higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda (2009) described the process of meaning-making as one of moving from following external formulas to relying on one's internal voice in a process of self-authorship. The transition is often spurred by a crossroads in which individuals' beliefs are brought into question, forcing them to renegotiate assumptions inherited from external authorities to construct their own internal voice. While meaning-making has been applied to students' overall development and minoritized identities such as ethnicity and sexual orientation, few studies focused specifically on social class meaning-making or the different factors that comprise one's social class (e.g., parental education, income, parental occupation; Bettencourt, forthcoming). For first-generation students, meaning-making related to social class is particularly important as these students may have more familial and outside obligations that shape their college experience (Martin, 2015; Mehta et al., 2011). Moreover, holding multiple minoritized identities can amplify the transition that first-generation students experience upon their arrival to campus. For example, first-generation students of color who attend extremely predominantly White institutions experience a greater transition to higher education as they navigate obstacles rooted in race and class simultaneously (McCoy, 2014). Here, we utilize the concept of meaning-making to examine how students understand their first-generation status as shaped by institutional and familial contexts.

Research Design

Our research questions asked (a) How do first-generation college students make-meaning of their first-generation status? and (b) How does this meaning-making relate to student identity construction in both institutional and familial contexts? We utilized an exploratory qualitative study design to answer these questions, which is a common educational research design used to understand "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). We collected data through focus groups to understand how individual attitudes and understandings develop through engagement with others

(Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By creating a more natural conversation than one-on-one interviews, focus groups illuminate group norms and processes, opinions and perspectives, reactions and responses, and brainstorming (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Collection Process

This study took place at RU, a large public research institution in the north-eastern United States of approximately 24,000 undergraduate students. In the fall of 2018, the research team worked with the RU registrar to acquire a list of all undergraduate students that had identified as first-generation students at the time of their application (approximately one fourth of the student population). We invited a randomly selected 25% of those students to complete an initial screening survey that ascertained first-generation status, collected demographic information, and requested student availability. A total of 214 students completed the screening survey.

Based on response and availability, participants were invited to participate in one of a series of focus groups across the fall of 2018 (seven groups) and spring of 2019 (six groups). Focus group questions asked participants about their perceptions and identification with the term *first-generation college student*, their choice of academic major, and their experiences on-campus. A total of 54 participants participated across 13 groups, with an average of 4 participants per group (see Table 1 for participant information). The first author led most of the focus groups (11), although all research team members observed or facilitated at least one group. Focus groups lasted 1 hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. At the end of each session, we provided focus group participants with a \$10 gift card in recognition of their time.

Data Analysis

In our analysis, we drew upon the idea of sensitizing concepts from grounded theory methodology to structure our analysis. Sensitizing concepts “give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and question to raise about their topics” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). As prior research has shown that first-generation status is associated with disparate academic and cocurricular experiences (e.g., Pascarella et al., 2004; Toutkoushian et al., 2018) and connected to other identities (e.g., Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lundberg et al., 2007), we centered these concepts during our initial analysis while exploring the data for inductive themes. During first-level coding, each member of the research team reviewed a subset of the transcripts and coded them based on socialization to college, perceptions of first-generation status, experiences across social identities, academic aspirations, and cocurricular engagement. While coding, each research team member wrote a memo to capture the salience of different concepts, to

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristics	Total (n = 54)	Percentage
Gender		
Women	39	72
Men	15	28
Class year		
Freshmen	14	26
Sophomore	10	19
Junior	12	22
Senior	12	22
Fifth year or beyond	6	11
Transferred to institution		
Yes	11	20
No	43	80
Race/Ethnicity		
Native American/Indian	1	2
Black	2	4
Latinx/Hispanic	7	13
Asian or Southeast Asian	13	24
Multiracial/Multiethnic	10	18
White	21	39

examine outliers in the data, and to capture emerging themes (Saldaña, 2016). The team met regularly to discuss these interpretations and identify salient themes across the data. We then engaged in second-level coding to create axial codes, which link subcategories and relationships, and theoretical coding to begin to form our initial theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Quality and Limitations

We worked to assure trustworthiness for this study through triangulation of data and analysis, peer debriefing within and beyond the research team, and transferability. Triangulation occurred using several sources of data and multiple researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Our research team included both first-generation and continuing-generation backgrounds, which helped to enhance our collective reflexivity through the inclusion of a variety of perspectives. Peer debriefing occurred both within the research team by discussing our emerging findings and analysis with one another as well as beyond the research team by debriefing with institutional researchers studying first-generation students. Finally, in our description of the methods, analysis, and findings, we provide abundant, concrete details to that readers can determine how the results of this study might be applied elsewhere—a technique shown to enhance the transferability of findings (Bochner, 2000).

Despite our efforts to ensure the quality of our findings, our study has several limitations. First, this study had a low response rate during both the initial invitation to the screening survey and the invitation to participate in a scheduled focus group. As a result, participants here may represent a specific subset of the overall population, such as students who regarded first-generation as more central to their experiences. In addition, due to the public nature of focus groups, participants may have chosen not to share the full range of their experiences on campus, particularly related to racism, ableism, or xenophobia. Thus, the findings from this research may not capture the full range of students' experiences. Finally, our study took place at a single RU in the northeastern United States that had recently begun implementing support initiatives focused on first-generation college students. A study conducted at a different type of institution (e.g., community college) or another RU less focused on implementing support for first-generation college students may produce different results.

Findings

Our study offers new insights into the way that first-generation college students make meaning of first-generation status and how this meaning-making shapes their understanding of both institutional and familial relationships. In the section that follows, we organize our discussion around three related themes. First, participants in our study described their first-generation status as a meaningful organizational identity but not an intrinsically meaningful social identity (Theme 1: First-Generation Status as Organizational Identity). Second, participants in our study noted that their organizational identity could be felt more or less acutely based on how the campus environment was structured (Theme 2: First-Generation Status and Feelings of Alterity). Finally, participants described the reinforcement of their first-generation status as something that promoted the feelings of alienation from both the broader campus environment and their families (Theme 3: First-Generation Status and Social Distance). Collectively, these findings can inform institutional efforts to support the meaning-making and within-college success of first-generation college students.

Theme 1: First-Generation Status as Organizational Identity

Participants consistently described first-generation status not as a social identity but as an organizational identity. Many noted that they were unaware of their first-generation status until they were informed of it—sometimes repeatedly—by institutional support efforts. For example, Tori described her slow recognition of her first-generation status, noting “I did not realize I was a first-gen and I kept getting the emails... I just didn't think about it. I never thought about it.” As this example highlights, first-generation status rests on two key recognitions that appear normal on college and university campuses but which

college-going students may be unlikely to encounter elsewhere in American society. First, they must recognize that first-generation status is a form of identity distinct from the other social identities that they hold. Elizabeth described the recognition process as occurring in fits and starts:

I feel like it's an overlap between first-gen and being minority, and also on economic status as well. Since we're first-gen our parents don't have college degrees, so it's harder for them to get high paying jobs. All of my friends want to go out and spend money. I'm like, "let's stay on campus. We have meal plans."

To Elizabeth, it was clear that first-generation status matters but not precisely how. Other students provided primarily economic examples as variations in financial realities had real consequences for how students' experienced the campus, which constituted the second major insight required for the recognition of first-generation status as identity. It was only when first-generation college students both realized that they were first-generation and that they had different experiences as a result that the categorization became a meaningful representation of identity. In another group, Lila encapsulated these ideas nicely:

Honestly, the term first-generation didn't come up. I didn't think much about of it until the latter two years of my college experience and I realized that because I'm a first-generation student I struggle with things that other students whose parents have a college education, they don't experience.

Lila described her first-generation status not just as something that became apparent only in higher education but as only meaningful when she could connect it to specific struggles.

The way that participants described institutional support efforts for first-generation status also reinforced its conceptualization as primarily an organizational identity. A few students indicated that they had rarely seen any activities or events that target first-generation students, which reinforced the idea that first-generation status mattered only in a vague, institutional sense. Lana provided a typical example of this framing of first-generation status:

I haven't really seen much in terms of first-generation stuff. I've seen a few flyers on the little poster wall thing outside of my room for get-togethers. But the thing is, it usually happened during my workdays. So then I'm just like, I can't go to that.

Since she had received some messaging related to first-generation status but not enough to have a clear sense of exactly why the institution cared about it, Lana thought of first-generation status as something with organizational but not personal salience. Elsewhere, participants contrasted institutional efforts to support first-generation students with a large, highly visible, and tightly messaged

educational campaign related to racial equity. While messaging related to first-generation students could be missed or misunderstood, they suggested that the racial equity campaign could not. Instead, support for first-generation students was perceived as an extra benefit alongside other institutional efforts even among participants who had directly benefited from such programming. Lisa described the problem as follows: “I just found out about a lot of resources for first-generation students, especially in the [natural sciences]. That was pretty helpful. But it’s just the issue of seeking it out.” First-generation support required students to first recognize that first-generation status was a meaningful organizational identity before they could access meaningful support. Later, Lisa noted,

It kind of sucks that I’m now a sophomore almost a junior and I’m now finding out all these things. It’s annoying but like I get it and I feel bad for people who may not be as outgoing as I am.

Theme 2: First-Generation Status and Feelings of Alterity

For many participants, being a first-generation college student mattered not just because they had different familial and educational backgrounds than their peers but also because they had different experiences in college. Justine contrasted her perceptions of the behaviors of first- and continuing-generation students:

I didn’t realize how different the experience was for first-generation students until I actually got here and saw a bunch of people just putting themselves out there and knowing what they were doing because their parents know how to do it, and mine didn’t, and it’s just hard.

Justine and most of the other participants in our study predicated their identification as first-generation students on feelings of alterity: They realized that they were first-generation students only when they compared themselves with their continuing-generation peers. Justine later elaborated, “I have so many friends whose parents went to college and they have jobs and...they make everything seem so easy.” For many participants, first-generation status marked them as different from their peers. As a result, identifying as first-generation became a way to communicate that difference to others in an institutionally recognized manner.

These feelings of difference began before college enrollment and were reinforced at regular intervals by institutional processes that seemed to assume prior knowledge of how colleges and universities work. Although these feelings of alterity were described in relation to virtually every major institutional

process—ranging from declaration of major to access to career development to within-college involvement—they were most pronounced around financial aid processes. Ana directly linked her first-generation status to the way that she navigated financial aid applications:

I'm an only child and the first one to go to college in my family. When I had to apply to school, I literally had to figure everything out on my own. The common app, FAFSA, my parents had no clue what any of it was. It wasn't difficult, but I feel like I had to do it all on my own 'cause they couldn't really help me with something they didn't know about.

Ana's example makes clear both how the financial aid process can highlight gaps in the anticipatory socialization for first-generation college students and how that experience might vary depending on whether a first-generation college student has an older sibling who pursued postsecondary education or comes from a high-income family. Justine highlighted this contrast by noting how different their experiences are as a low-income, first-generation student compared with high-income, first-generation peers: "There are people I know who are first-gen, but they also come from wealthy families so they still don't relate to the problems I have with money and stuff." For Justine, social class functions as the superordinate identity, but when intersected with first-generation status, it becomes a form of double disadvantage. Carol encapsulates the precarity of low-income, first-generation college students in her description of anxiety over completing paperwork in a timely fashion: "If I'm not super on top of that, it won't get done, and then I end up getting screwed over."

While participants most frequently described the ways that their first-generation status made them feel different from their peers as an outgrowth of organizational processes, they also noted there were specific instances of alterity exacerbated by or caused by their first-generation status. For example, Lila discussed both the infrequency of conversations about her experiences as a first-generation college student and also how those experiences could leave her with "negative vibes." In one such instance, she described how a peer interjected herself into a conversation among first-generation college students about financial aid: "I think we were talking about the FAFSA deadline, and she [the interloper] kind of smirked and said 'financial aid' kind of ignorantly, I guess. [...] Even though she didn't say much, it spoke a lot. Her body language." Whether accurately or not, Lila perceived the interjecting peer as someone who did not have to worry about financial aid and her efforts to join the conversation as rooted in negative perceptions of first-generation, low-income students.

Participants described these sorts of interactions as part of a broader pattern of microaggressions from their peers directed at their first-generation status, their racial identity, their social class, or some combination thereof. As a

result of these experiences, Elizabeth shared that her experiences with “minor little racism, tiny racism” on campus made her wish that she had “gone to a more diverse school.” Although this participant described racialized microaggressions—or “tiny racism”—she did so within the context of a focus group about first-generation identity. For her and many of our participants, it was not possible to distinguish the source of feelings of alterity; instead, those feelings were muddled mix of continuous messages of difference. While many of these experiences arose from peer interactions, not all did. Sometimes the institution itself was the source of these microaggressions. For example, Beth described how her major seemed to assume that all students had limitless income: “The [department] does a lot of stuff like that, where they’re like, ‘Go to Australia [for this wonderful opportunity] but you have to pay like five grand.’ And . . . they have no financial aid.” Beth went on to note that “I don’t have the money to spend on that.” Students’ feelings that there were academic opportunities that would help them advance their careers were inaccessible added another layer to their sense of isolation compared with continuing-generation peers.

Theme 3: First-Generation Status and Social Distance

As first-generation college students navigated the meaning-making process around their newfound organizational identity and the feelings of alterity that accompanied it on campus, they also came to understand themselves in new ways. Such awareness became a vital form of resilience in organizational spaces that were not built for first-generation college students. Specifically, they framed themselves as exceptional within both institutional and familial contexts and their achievements as exemplary. One such example is provided by Lisa who described first-generation college students as follows:

I feel like we already have that sense of drive and we’re not only doing this for us but our families, we want to make a change in our families so that the next person, for me the next kid who wants to go to college in my family, I’m setting myself up to be there so they don’t have to.

This framing came relatively naturally to the participants in our focus groups because they were often exceptionally talented students and excellent examples for their family members. In addition, such framing also served to create social distance from their families. Erin described much the same phenomenon— noting that “I feel super proud of being first-generation, just because the hard work that I’ve gone through, and even graduating, the first person in my family, is something to be so admirable about, you know?” Erin described graduating from college as “something that my parents weren’t able to do;” doing so came “with a lot of hardships;” and “it’s really hard doing everything the first time by yourself, but once you do it, it’s amazing.” While such sentiments are

doubtlessly true, they distinguish first-generation college students as distinct from both family and peers. As Erin noted later in the focus group—talking to the other first-generation college students in attendance—“I feel so proud, and I’m sure all of you guys do feel amazing.” In short, as this participant notes, first-generation college students often enter college as institutional outsiders and leave as anomalies within their families.

These feelings of alterity were even more pronounced when a first-generation college student was also the first within that college-going generation. For example, Tori had siblings who had already completed college. She shared that, “I have three brothers and all three of them went to college, or are in college, or finished. I’m also in college. So, I don’t really have that much pressure.” Justin described the underlying reasons for that lack of pressure by discussing how she planned to support her sibling:

My 13-year-old brother isn’t going to have to deal with not knowing, because I want him to know that I can help him with applying to college because at that point I’ve already been through it and he has me and his other two sisters who have been through it. He doesn’t have to just rely on his own brain like all of us had to and just try to figure out what to do based on what your friends are telling you and what teachers are telling you.

In contrast, when first-generation college students did not have older siblings or relatives who had attended college, they often noted how difficult it was to have to “do things on [their] own” and to “take care of all the emails and stuff like that” associated with college-going. In some cases, participants even described a lack of support for going to college or questions about the utility of a college degree. Thus, while first-generation status is predicated on parental education, sibling pathways had a large impact on how participants described their experiences.

As participants considered how these experiences shaped their understandings of themselves relative to their family, they often followed Lana in the belief that “parents don’t necessarily understand what it’s like to be a college student. They’re just like, ‘I don’t see what’s so hard. You’re just going to classes.’” In the same focus group, Justine described a similar experience: “They don’t know what any of it entails . . . my mom’s like, ‘I’m sure you did great.’ And I’m like, ‘no, but I didn’t.’” Justine went on to note that her parents, “don’t know what happens when you get a bad grade. They don’t know any of that.” Participants largely expressed that their families cared for them a great deal, but that they were often unable to understand the college experience without firsthand knowledge. Furthermore, as participants began to think into how different their post-college lives would be from their parents’ lives, their feelings of disconnectedness were amplified. Lana saw her social class as evolving to her parents:

I probably view myself as the person in the family who's going to get any future members of family a leg-up in society, because . . . I'm probably going to be able to get a better paying job than my parents because I don't know how but they somehow raised us on a \$30,000 income a year.

At a very fundamental level, first-generation college students described an altered relationship between themselves and their families that shifted them from a family member to a catalyst for upward economic mobility. Janet captured this best when noting:

I feel like I have pressure coming on . . . my family to do well. They try to be super encouraging, but I don't think they realize how much it weighs on being the one that went to college.

While particularly striking, this quote exemplifies a common perception among participant that the economic future of their families rested on their shoulders.

Discussion

Existing work on the experiences of first-generation college students provides a useful context with which to understand why their postsecondary outcomes might diverge from those of their continuing-generation peers. However, it does not provide a solid foundation for understanding how being a first-generation college student might shape meaning-making processes within college. Our findings offer important insight into meaning-making processes for first-generation college students.

Addressing our first research question—How do first-generation college students make meaning of their first-generation status?—our findings suggest that recent campus efforts to conceptualize first-generation status as a form of social identity and to create support interventions similar to those focused on students with minoritized racial, class, or gender identities may be ill-conceived. Participants in our study described first-generation status primarily as an organizational identity, which institutional support efforts brought into being. Instead, they described racial and class identities as more salient ways that they thought about themselves and which intersected in powerful ways with their first-generation status.

In this regard, our findings extend past quantitative work showing differential outcomes for first-generation college students based on social identity (Cho et al., 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Lundberg et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Toutkoushian et al., 2018) and past qualitative work showing racialized and classed variations in meaning-making among first-generation college students (McCoy, 2014; Wilkins, 2014). Instead, our findings suggest that first-generation status is primarily a useful construct insofar as it describes how an individual

student's personal and familial history might shape their experiences in post-secondary learning environments. Colleges and universities actively construct first-generation status through focused support efforts and outreach. They would be well-served by considering whether some of the needs of first-generation college students could be met by intentionally designing programs that focus on students' multiple identities (e.g., programs for racially and economically minoritized students) and specific support needs (e.g., summer bridge and academic support programs) to address issues likely to be encountered by first-generation college students. It is unlikely that the needs of first-generation college students could be fully met through intentional (re-)design of campus programs. As a result, colleges and universities should also carefully consider the messages that they send by virtue of these programs.

The findings we generated addressing our second research question—How does this meaning-making relate to student identity construction in both institutional and familial contexts?—provide a mechanism for understanding how these messages can potentially go wrong. Our findings revealed that students experienced significant feelings of alterity concerning their first-generation status and their experiences on campus could exacerbate these feelings (Havlik et al., 2017). This observation echoes past work that has questioned whether first-generation status represents a meaningful way to interrogate differential student outcomes or whether it might reinscribe inequities (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). It is also consistent with prior work that has shown significant variation in how first- and continuing-generation college students describe their campus experiences (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Martin, 2015). College and universities seeking to support first-generation students would be well-served by programs that seek not just to provide navigational capital or to redress skills gaps but which holistically focus on their meaning-making. Programs such as learning communities, writing-intensive courses, and ePortfolios may offer the opportunity to support student meaning-making alongside navigational capital (Conefrey, 2018).

One particularly notable finding related to the way that first-generation college students described feelings of alterity concerned the way that their unique position as “educational pioneers” redefined their relationship to their family (London, 1996, p. 11). Simply put, just as the term *pioneer* is fundamentally intertwined with capitalism by virtue of its connection to settler-colonialism (Verancini, 2010), so too is first-generation status inextricably linked to its economic possibilities in a capitalist society. Participants in our study revealed the way that their aspirations for themselves and their families served to both promote resilience and social distance from their families. This finding was particularly true for those participants who were not just in the first-generation of their family to go to college but also the first or only person in that generation (e.g., eldest sibling) to go to college. In review of the literature, we found no clear evidence that institutions have developed programming that specifically addresses this facet of first-generation college students, but our findings suggest

that doing so would be a vitally important support for their meaning-making and overall persistence.

Finally, our findings collectively make clear the need for more work focused on first-generation college students. While existing work has made clear how success outcomes vary for first-generation college students (summarized in Toutkoushian et al., 2018), too little work has focused on first-generation status as the focus of and catalyst for meaning-making. Our work reveals that additional work of this sort is much needed. Scholars have already begun to recognize that first-generation is a fraught term (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2018) and that social class meaning-making may rely on the interplay between first-generation status with other dimensions of class such as parental occupation and income (Author, forthcoming). Only additional work that addresses first-generation status in all of its complexity can help to resolve this tension in scholarship and practice.

Conclusion

For many participants in this study, being a first-generation student was a salient and important part of their college experience. However, the importance of first-generation status did not manifest itself in the same ways that social identity did. Instead, participants thought about first-generation status as an organizational identity. In this way, first-generation status became salient either in contexts where institutional assumptions about students and their backgrounds reinforced their feelings of alterity or as a result of deliberate messaging from institutional sources (e.g., emails or programs targeted to first-generation students). These feelings were most acute in the context of organizational structures such as financial aid that assumed all students already knew how to navigate them or in the presence of socioeconomic or racial micro-aggressions that students associated with being first-generation. Unfortunately, institutional efforts and peer relationships related to first-generation status also sometimes reinforced feelings of social distance from family members and continuing-generation peers. In sum, our findings highlight the meaning-making in which first-generation college students engage but also suggest the need for additional work to explore how first-generation status intersects with other social identities and how institutional support efforts to influence meaning-making.

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