

CULTURAL MISMATCH: FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS,  
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND MENTAL HEALTH

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
FGCS	First-Generation College Students

## **ABSTRACT**

The present achievement gap amid first-generation college students (FGCS) and their peers continues to increase as FGCS experience unique barriers that reflect their socioeconomic and cultural background. Additionally, FGCS are traditionally from underrepresented groups and lack vital resources to promote their academic success before and after attending college. This combination of barriers creates a cultural mismatch for FGCS because they are unable to meet the middle- and upper-class norms present in institutions of higher education. This qualitative analysis examines the academic performance, mental health, help-seeking, and coping behavior of FGCS through the lens of cultural mismatch theory. To further understand their experience, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with undergraduate FGCS at Texas State University. It was revealed that FGCS do experience several challenges that prevent them from fully meeting the demands of college, which ultimately creates a cultural mismatch for them. The participants' cultural mismatch directly affected their academic performance and mental health. Consequently, the FGCS learned to help-seek and cope with their struggles to remain afloat and resilient.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although enrollment of first-generation college students (FGCS) at college universities is at an all-time high, FGCS continue to have significantly lower retention rates than their continuing generation peers (Manzoni and Streib 2018). One reason for this is that FGCS enter college with unique needs that affect their overall experience in academia (Stebbleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014). These unique needs can range from a lack of financial support, lack of belonging on campus, or achievement guilt (Stebbleton, et al. 2014). Additionally, many FGCS hold a minority status and come from low-income backgrounds (Azmitia, Syed, and Radmacher 2013).

Consequently, it is important that their experiences in higher education are investigated because most FGCS enter college with the goal of upward mobility, the hopes of providing financial support for their family, or giving back to their community (Covarrubias and Fryberg 2012). Unfortunately, the unique needs exhibited by FGCS ultimately affects their success while they are enrolled in college. This disconnect, or cultural mismatch (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, and Phillips 2012-2), is something FGCS face because they cannot meet the norms of middle- and upper-class institutions of higher education. These issues not only affect retention rates, but also the academic performance and mental health of FGCS. In addition, FGCS may hesitate to seek help or cope with their struggles due to their cultural background (Manzoni et al. 2018). Therefore, investigating the experiences of FGCS is necessary and beneficial on a societal level. It is also important that universities understand the lived experiences of their students, so they can provide support and resources that improve retention and graduation rates.

Specifically, the purpose of this study is to further examine undergraduate FGCS academic performance, mental health, coping and help seeking behavior informed by cultural mismatch theory. The research questions for this study are: 1) Do first-generation college students experience cultural mismatch at Texas State University, and if so, how? 2) Does cultural mismatch affect FGCS's academic performance and mental health? 3) Are FGCS able to seek help and cope with their academic and mental health struggles without feeling stigmatized.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attaining a post-secondary education for students from underrepresented backgrounds creates the potential for an improved financial situation, upward mobility, and a reduction of racial/ethnic disparities (Billingsley and Hurd 2018; Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014). These traditionally underrepresented groups include racial/ethnic minorities, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, immigrant groups, and FGCS (Becker, Schelbe, Romano, and Spinelli 2017; Billingsley et al. 2018; Stebleton et al. 2014). FGCS are described in the Higher Education Act of 1965 by The US Department of Education as individuals whose parents or guardians did not complete a four-year college or an individual raised by a single parent or guardian who did not complete a four-year degree. FGCS comprise approximately 20.6% of the first-year incoming classes at institutions of higher education, which means that more than 4.5 million FGCS are enrolled in colleges in the United States (Stebleton et al. 2014). Additionally, FGCS are more likely to be older, have a disability, and to be non-native English speakers, single parents, or financially independent from their parents (Stebleton et al. 2014).

FGCS regularly experience struggles that continuing generation students - those whose parents or guardians did complete a four-year college degree - do not face (Stephens et al. 2012a). Research shows that FGCS have lower GPAs than continuing generation students and register for fewer courses each semester (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2015; Manzoni et al. 2018). Additionally, FGCS have significantly lower rates of retention when compared to continuing generation students during their first year of college (Manzoni et al. 2018; Stephens et al. 2012a; Wheeler 2016). A longitudinal study on those beginning postsecondary study by The National Center for Education Statistics

found that low-income FGCS were nearly 4 times more likely to leave higher education after their first year of college than continuing generation students (Engle and Tinto 2008). Likewise, FGCS struggle connecting with peers, developing relationships, and asking for help from faculty members (Manzoni et al. 2018 and Stephens et al. 2012a). This is possibly due to delayed entry into college, living off campus, attending school closer to home, enrolling part time, and being employed full time or working more hours per week (Azmitia, Syed, and Radmacher 2013; Becker et al. 2017; Stebleton, et al. 2014). The non-traditional backgrounds of FGCS introduce unique experiences such as a lack of belonging on college campuses, achievement guilt, and interdependence, each of which play a significant role in academic performance and mental health.

#### *Achievement Gap*

The present social class achievement gap in American higher education and the socioeconomic status of FGCS must also be considered when discussing the struggles these students face when compared to continuing generation students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias 2012b). Most FGCS come from working-class backgrounds because their parents or guardians have not attained a four-year degree from a college or university (Stephens et al. 2012b). This potential lack of financial resources, or resource deficiency as explained by Stephens et al. (2012a), creates additional barriers that FGCS face. FGCS often work multiple jobs to pay for tuition fees and living expenses (Manzoni et al. 2019; Stephens et al. 2012b). This inhibits their ability to devote more time to their studies, become involved in extracurricular activities, take on internships, or study abroad (Manzoni et al. 2019; Stephens et al. 2012b). In addition, lower-class and minority FGCS may have received inferior high school educations

compared to their continuing generation peers, due to lower quality, under resourced schools (Azmitia et al. 2013; Stephens et al. 2012a). Becker et al. (2017) suggested that FGCS who receive less preparation during high school are less likely to understand the expectations and norms associated with succeeding at institutions of higher education (Becker et al. 2017). Due to this, some FGCS may need additional tutoring, mentoring, and social support systems while in college because they lack economic or academic resources that ease their transition into college environments (Stephens et al. 2012b).

### *Belonging*

Many FGCS students experience additional stress because their parents or guardians are lacking first-hand knowledge of university systems (Dennis et al. 2005). Having at least one parent with a four-year degree can help with the application process and the overall navigation of college (Dennis et al. 2005; Manzoni et al. 2019; Wheeler 2016). Students transitioning to college, or considering a major or career path, may have questions their parents cannot answer, which complicates the adjustment period (Wheeler 2016). These unique challenges may cause an increase of uncertainty among FGCS students that allows them to question their sense of belonging on university campuses (Stebbleton, et al. 2011).

A sense of belonging is “the extent to which students feel connected to their academic institutions and the people with those institutions” (Gillen-O’Neel: 2). Stephens et al. (2012) find that FGCS question their sense of belonging, their ability to succeed, and their doubt about the “right” way to act as a college student. Conflicts arises through this uncertainty because it emphasizes economic and cultural discrepancies between the working-class home environment and the middle-class university environment

(Covarrubias and Fryberg 2015). FGCS ability to effectively navigate and benefit from the opportunities present on college campuses have to offer may be hindered due to their self-doubt (Stephens et al. 2012a).

Previous literature suggests that students who have a stronger sense of belonging are more confident and motivated academically (Stebbleton et al. 2014). For example, additional obligations such as work, or family responsibilities may not allow FGCS to focus on their academics or participate in extracurricular activities. A lack of participation can make FGCS feel isolated from their peers, which affects their sense of belonging on campus (O'Neel 2019). Wheeler (2016) says that having a sense of belonging is imperative for the success of FGCS. In fact, FGCS often report a lower sense of belonging (O'Neel 2019). A greater sense of belonging to the college community impacts retention and graduation rates in FGCS (O'Neel 2019; Stebleton et al. 2014). Essentially, a sense of belonging plays a vital role in the mental health of FGCS (Wheeler 2016). It was reported by Wheeler (2016) that a study on FGCS determined that FGCS who reported higher ratings in sense of belonging also reported fewer instances of depression, stress, and being upset. Due to the challenges that some FGCS experience, the effect of sense of belonging may benefit them more with positive outcomes (O'Neel 2019).

### *Family*

When discussing FGCS, it is important to consider the impacts family culture has on matriculation and academics performance. FGCS are more likely to value and spend additional time with their family than continuing generation students (Covarrubias et al. 2019; Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli 2015). Specifically, students from minority or

immigrant families (Asian Pacific American and Latino youth) are expected to prioritize family and provide emotional and financial support for the family (Covarrubias et al. 2015; Tseng 2004). Consequently, the transition to college can cause guilt due to the physical separation and potential emotional detachment from family members (Covarrubias et al. 2015). This can cause conflict between students and their families when time spent on academic demands increases (Tseng 2004).

FGCS with minority backgrounds may also experience interdependence due to the strong cultural demands of their upbringing (Dennis et al. 2005; Tseng 2004).

Interdependence is fostered through low-income communities because fewer financial resources are available, which requires family members to work together for support and survival (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc, and Azamitia 2019). These cultural demands conflict with transitions into adulthood in college because American ideology stresses physical and emotional independence from families (Tseng 2004). Minority FGCS who balance their cultural interdependence with their newfound collegiate independence negotiate both identities (Covarrubias et al. 2019; Tseng 2004). Subsequently, minority FGCS who balance these cultural stressors with their academic responsibilities may be at risk for increased mental health symptoms (Corona et al. 2019).

London (1992) says that FGCS transitioning into college often renegotiate relationships with family, friends, and themselves. This can be seen when FGCS experience guilt for going off to college. FGCS, specifically minority students (Covarrubias et al. 2015), may experience achievement guilt for going off to college, because members in their family did not have the same opportunity to pursue a career in higher education (Covarrubias et al. 2015). In a study that investigated FGCS's

experiences with family achievement guilt, Covarrubias and Fryeberg (2014) found that FGCS's and ethnic minority students reported more guilt than continuing generation students and white college students. In addition to that, students who reported more achievement guilt also reported more perceived family struggles, suggesting that the guilt stems from leaving family members in difficult financial situations (Covarrubias et al. 2014). Some FGCS feel guilty while pursuing their education and personal goals due to their family's sacrifices to send them to college (Wheeler 2016). FGCS's who experience family achievement guilt may feel uncomfortable talking about college at home, avoid sharing accomplishments, or feel as if there is no one within the family who can relate to their experiences (Covarrubias et al. 2015; Wheeler 2016).

### *Mental Health*

The adjustment period to a new college environment is an indicator for stress among all incoming college students (Becker et al. 2017). In addition to that, the age of onset for most mental health disorders occurs during early adulthood (Eisenberg, Hunt, and Speer 2012). Consequently, there is a prevalence of mental health problems among college students (Pedrelli et al. 2015). In fact, in 2014, the National Survey of College Counseling Centers reported that 94% of college counseling directors perceived an increase in severe mental health concerns amongst college students (Choi and Miller 2018).

The adjustment period and stressors may affect FGCS more significantly. For example, FGCS are amongst the those who report high levels of distress (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalango, Ziemer, and Utley 2017), lower self-esteem, lower perceived support from family and friends, increased rates of posttraumatic stress disorder

symptoms, lowered life satisfaction, and increased rates of single-event traumatic stress than continuing generation students (Becker et al. 2017; Wheeler 2016). Specifically, minority FGCS experience discrimination, cultural isolation, achievement guilt, and an absent sense of belonging that increases their risk of mental health issues (Becker et al. 2017; Corona et al. 2017). Potential perceived discrimination is harmful to one's mental health and is likely to affect the academic performance of FGCS (Billingsley et al. 2019). In addition, increased rates of depressive symptoms occurred when FGCS experienced high levels of achievement guilt when compared to continuing generation students (Becker et al. 2017).

Due to the unique experiences that FGCS face, they require unique counseling needs that reflect their background, academic needs, adjustment to college life, and family issues (Pedrelli et al. 2015; Stebleton et al. 2014). Despite that fact, many college students who live with mental health disorders are not receiving the treatment they need (Eisenberg et al. 2012). It was reported that FGCS have a lower use of psychological services when compared to continuing generation peers (Garriot et al. 2017). A Healthy Minds Study showed that reasons reported for a lack of mental health treatment among students include that they believe that stress is normal in college and that their problems will improve on their own, assume their problems are not that severe, do not have time to seek treatment, and prefer to handle things independently (Eisenberg et al. 2012). Additionally, the data suggest that students are very aware of their mental health needs but believe that seeking help may not be critical to them (Eisenberg et al. 2012).

### *Stigma and Help Seeking*

There are many barriers that can hinder FGCS from seeking help regarding their

mental health. Moreover, some FGCS are reluctant to seek treatment due to negative attitudes and beliefs they harbor (Eisenberg et al. 2012). There are two types of stigma that college student experience. Firstly, self-stigma, which is negative attitudes toward oneself, and secondly, public stigma, which is the negative attitudes held by others (Eisenberg et al. 2012). FGCS experience public stigma, which influences self-stigma, and then inhibits help-seeking behavior (Eisenberg et al. 2012; Garriott et al. 2017). FGCS who question their sense of belonging and doubt their capabilities may view reaching out for help as a negative evaluation of themselves (Garriott et al. 2017). FGCS report feeling self-imposed pressures to succeed in college for themselves, their family, and their community (Garriott et al. 2017). It is very common for FGCS to be the source of pride for families (Wheeler 2016). The thought of letting family members down may deter FGCS from admitting they need to seek help.

Research has identified that social class is an important cultural factor that indicates help seeking behavior and attitudes (Choi et al. 2018). This is alarming due to considerable number of FGCS that come from low-income homes, lack financial resources, and have overall less access to mental health resources. For example, the Healthy Minds Study reported that help seeking was lower in men, Asians, and those who identified growing up in a poor family (Eisenberg et al. 2012).

### *Gaps in the Literature*

Over the years, more attention has been paid to FGCS. Previous research focused on retention, academic improvement, and success in FGCS (Becker et al. 2017). There have also been quantitative studies that examine FGCS through the lens of cultural mismatch theory which confirms that FGCS's do experience college differently than

continuing generation students, and that university norms undermine the experiences of FGCS (Stephens et al. 2012a). However, even with the array of stressors FGCS face known in the literature, there is a lack of qualitative research on cultural mismatch theory (Stephens et al. 2015). In addition, a gap is still present on examining FGCS's academic performance and mental health through cultural mismatch theory.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural mismatch theory contends that the norms present in institutions of higher education do not match the norms of the underrepresented populations that attend them (Stephens et al. 2012a). These mainstream institutions perpetuate inequality among underrepresented students because they are built and organized to reflect middle- and upper-class cultural norms (Stephens et al. 2012a, Stephens et al. 2012b; Stephens et al. 2015). These norms can consist of “unwritten codes” or “rules of the game” present within universities (Stephens et al. 2012a: 1178). Additionally, these middle- and upper-class cultural norms reflect norms of independence to which underrepresented groups are unaccustomed.

For the college students who were socialized in middle- and upper-class environments, attending college is the ultimate symbol of independence that includes being separate from their parents, finding their self, developing a voice, and recognizing their individual potential (Stephens et al. 2012a). However, the socialization of traditionally lower-class, underrepresented students may rely more on norms of interdependence (Stephens et al. 2012a). Lower-class students who are transitioning from their home to college may have interdependent norms that require them to remain attentive to family members or continue being part of their hometown community (Stephens et al. 2012a, Stephens et al. 2012b). Underrepresented groups may also have interdependent reasons for attending college that do not include gaining independence from their family. For example, this can include going off to college to earn a degree and obtaining a well-paid job to help family members financially or give back to their community and become a role model for others.

Lower-class, underrepresented students do not match the norms present in institutions of higher education, may be unaware of unwritten rules, and have different lived experiences when compared to continuing generation students. These factors combined create a cultural mismatch for FGCS who are enrolled in largely middle-class institutions, which single handily create barriers that inhibit their performance. Therefore, I propose that FGCS at Texas State University experience a cultural mismatch, which affects their academic performance and mental health. Specifically, FGCS cultural background combined with a reduced sense of belonging at Texas State inhibits their ability to cope or seek help regarding their academic performance and mental health.

#### IV. METHODS

The purpose of this study is to further examine undergraduate FGCS at Texas State University. Specifically, I examine their academic performance, mental health, help seeking and coping behaviors within the lens of cultural mismatch theory. To examine the proposed research questions, qualitative data were collected through a series of 12 individual in-depth interviews with undergraduate FGCS, with questions informed by Cultural Mismatch Theory. Conducting in-depth interviews are the most appropriate method to use because they allow for direct, rich responses from the participants regarding these sensitive topics (Lamon and Swidler 2014). The duration of each interview was 25 minutes to one hour. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed, and the transcribed data were thematically analyzed.

The interviews took place between February and March 2020. The participants were undergraduate FGCS enrolled at Texas State University. Table 1 includes pseudonyms for each participant, demographic information, GPA, and employment status. The participants age ranged from 19-42 years old. Each participant met the selection criteria of being a self-identified FGCS, or FGCS as described in the Higher Education Act of 1965 by The US Department of Education as an individual whose parents or guardians did not complete a four-year college, or an individual raised by a single parent or guardian who did not complete a four-year degree.

To recruit participants, I spoke to three undergraduate classes in the Department of Sociology at Texas State University. After the recruitment announcement was made in each class, flyers were handed out to promote the study. The faculty of each class sent out a follow-up email or announcement that was sent directly to the students with

my contact information. The participants were asked to contact me directly through email. After I received emails from the participants who showed interest in the study, I clarified that they met the study’s selection criteria of being a first-generation college student. The interview times were then sent through email. For the scope of this study, the participants were not given any form of compensation and participation was strictly on a volunteer basis.

Table 1. Demographic Information

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>Employment</b>
<b>Steve Jefferson</b>	Male	Hispanic	19	Sophomore	3.35	Full time
<b>Bruce Isley</b>	Male	White	44	Senior	3.0	Part time
<b>Heather Falco</b>	Female	African American	23	Senior	2.0	Full time
<b>John Davidson</b>	Male	White	46	Senior	3.72	Part time
<b>Diana Ramos</b>	Female	Hispanic	21	Senior	3.34	Part time
<b>Linda Smith</b>	Female	African American	24	Senior	2.5	Part time
<b>Rose Davis</b>	Female	Hispanic	22	Senior	3.00	Part time
<b>Alexandria Gustin</b>	Female	Hispanic	21	Senior	2.88	Part time
<b>Fiona Mills</b>	Female	Hispanic	21	Senior	2.81	Unemployed
<b>Madison Bliss</b>	Female	White	21	Senior	2.5	Part time
<b>Maurine Lewis</b>	Female	Asian American	21	Senior	3.35	Full time
<b>Melissa Danvers</b>	Female	Hispanic	21	Senior	3.41	Part time

The in-depth interviews were conducted in the neutral location of Albert Alkek Library, located in the central part of Texas State University’s campus. Specifically, the interviews were held in study rooms out of earshot of others within the library. This

neutral space was comfortable for both the participants and I. The participants were asked a series of questions that included their demographic information, academic performance, mental health status, coping behavior, and perceived stigma (see interview schedule in Appendix A).

At the beginning of each in-depth interview, informed consent was given to each participant to ensure they were fully aware of the purpose and procedures of the study. When the participants gave consent, two copies of the consent forms were signed by both parties. The participants kept one copy, and I kept the second copy for my records. This was also to ensure that the participants had the phone number for the counseling center and my contact information. If the participants had any questions about the nature of the study, they were answered before the consent forms were signed. The participants were also informed that they were able to stop the interview at any time. Due to natural stressors of being a college student, along with the added pressure of being a FGCS, the participants were given an additional handout about local mental health services to use once the interview was complete. This handout included the phone number of the Texas State Counseling Center to help decrease any chances of harm.

An anticipated benefit for the subjects is that more knowledge about FGCS, their academic performance, and mental health can be gained. Information regarding this population can be helpful for institutions of higher education, such as Texas State University, to observe where their students may be struggling, or areas that may need improvement to support a large percentage of their study body. In addition to that, the participants will be able to reflect on their experiences as a FGCS. Students will also

become more aware about on campus resources to help them with any struggles they may have.

## V. ANALYSES

As Stephens et al. (2012) note, FGCS are often unable to match the middle-class norms present in institutions of higher education. This is likely due to the unique needs FGCS harbor that affect their very first experiences as college students. For example, when the participants were asked how prepared they felt prior to attending college, 7 of the 12 stated not feeling prepared at all. Some participants said they did not feel prepared prior to attending college due to no college advising in high school, their parents being unable to help with homework, or work being valued more than education in their family. This initial lack of preparation can create a ripple effect that impacts FGCS academic performance and mental health throughout their college career.

Four major themes were discovered: 1) FGCS motivation to attend college was collectivistic and attempted to pave the way for themselves and their family; 2) they were blindsided by their new position as college students, and experienced many challenges that resulted in cultural mismatch; 3) they became self-critical, stressed, and experienced mental health challenges; 4) they were able to help-seek, cope, and remain resilient.

### **Paving the Way**

The participants' motivation to attend college incorporated interdependent norms that contrast with the more independent and individualistic pursuits of middle- and upper-class students. This included attending college not only for themselves, but also to pave the way for other family members and leading by example. The participants also expressed obligations to help financially support their family members after graduating college.

When asked about their motivation to attend college, 11 of the 12 participants mentioned they wanted to achieve financial stability for themselves and their families, along with wanting to start a successful career after graduation. This finding is echoed in the research that states underrepresented groups, such as FGCS, may have interdependent intentions for attending college that surround supporting their family and upward mobility (Stephens et al. 2012a). When FGCS Fiona Mills was asked what motivated her to attend college, she spoke of her parents' financial situation: "I kind of saw how my parents struggled financially and because he [her father] didn't have a [degree in] higher education, um, that became my motivation." A current senior, Alexandria Gustin, also shared a similar experience: "Well, my motivation is my mom. Like she's a single mom, so I mean, I really just want to do it to like be able to support her one day."

FGCS motivation to attend college continued to contrast the motivation of their continuing generation peers when they expressed that gaining their education was paving the way for their family members as well. For example, FGCS Madison Bliss described going to college as "setting the tone for the rest of my family." Several other participants explained that their degree was not just for them, but it was also for their siblings, cousins, and other members of their family. Maurine Lewis said, "I have a nephew now and I want him to like see that like college is not impossible. Like you can do it." While others stressed that they owed it to their parents to earn a degree. Pre-physical therapy student, Diana Ramos, who is expected to graduate this spring, spoke of her family:

I've a couple of younger siblings but a lot of younger cousins. And so, like I just want to show them like it can be done. . . Especially with job searching and graduating soon. It's like. . . I'm the

first one in the family to go through all of this. So, everyone's kind of learning together. As expected, carrying this type of weight can cause stress among FGCS. Sociology senior Heather Falco discussed the pressures of being the first person in her family to attend college: "It's kind of intense cause I'm like I want to be the big, the better example for my family, but at the same time, like I can't just do everything." Steve Jefferson shared a similar experience when asked how he felt about being the first person in his family to attend college, "It's definitely like been a stress increase. Um, because I have younger siblings that are like looking up to me."

In the literature, it is suggested that FGCS may have a different set of motivations to attend college than their continuing generation students (Lamont, 2018). The participants entered college carrying burdens of financially supporting their families, being role models, or staying closer to home for other interdependent reasons. Before considering the cultural mismatch that FGCS may experience while in college, it is important to note that their interdependent norms also impact their initial decisions to attend college. The lack of independence FGCS may have while entering college effects their academic success, individualism, and matching the norms present in institutions of higher education (Stephens et al. 2012a).

### **Blindsided**

As the participants entered college with the motivation to improve socioeconomic status and pave the way for younger family members, they also felt unprepared during their transition. This was due to having very little knowledge on what to expect during their college experience. FGCS Fiona Mills described this lack of preparedness as "blinding." Some students also felt very aware of their FGCS status, compared their experiences to their continuing generation peers, and felt no sense of

belonging while on campus. Additionally, the students experienced role conflicts between their new-found college identity and their interdependent family obligations. This often left the students feeling pressured, misunderstood, disconnected from their loved ones.

Although many of the participants entered college with the goal of upward mobility, many of them felt unprepared upon their arrival and “didn't know what to expect at all really once I got here” (Alexandria Gustin). Second-year student, Steve Jefferson, also spoke about his experience while transiting from high school to college:

I was really smart. Um, so I thought, you know, college is going to be a breeze. I got here and I was not ready for the workload. So it kind of was like shaking at first, cause now the professors are like at a different level, so they expect you to be at a different level. So, I feel like my high school didn't prepare me as well as I could've been.

In addition to this, many of the participants acknowledged that they felt unprepared when they arrived at college because their parents were unable to guide them throughout the process. This is one of the many struggles Stephens et al. (2012a) mentioned that FGCS experience that continuing generation students do not. Psychology major Madison Mills stated, “My mom and dad didn't know anything, and my older brother didn't go to college and so I was like, all right, we're just gonna roll with the punches.” All participants stated that they were unable to ask their parents for guidance, and that they often lacked basic knowledge about how the college system worked. FGCS Melissa Danvers provided an example of a barrier she faced due to this: “I really don't have anybody to ask, or know what to do, or things like that. I didn't even understand what a credit hour was when I was going into school. So that was a struggle.” Fiona Mills also talked about how her lack of knowledge about the college system left her with a full workload she was unprepared for:

It was like 18 hours my first semester --- I was like “Oh, it's 18 hours. I mean, I'm used to like going to school every day. So, it was just like, I mean, it should be a piece of cake” --- And when I started doing it, um, at the beginning I was “Okay, I got this,” but then as like test came in and like when it came to studying [and] homework, I was like, “Whoa!” That's when I got overloaded.

Unfortunately, other participants shared similar experiences to the ones of Melissa and Fiona. In fact, all the participants discussed struggling with their coursework, being unable to navigate the college system, struggling with large life decisions such as changing their major or job searching, or being unable to ask family members for help:

I couldn't like just phone back home and be like, “Hey, I'm having trouble. Like what did you do?” So I felt like my first year it kind of did impact, uh, my classes and I think I ended up failing like one of my classes and like it brought my GPA down and then by my sophomore year I kind of got a bit more of a hang of it (Rosie Davis).

Along with feeling unprepared and lacking guidance from their families, many participants compared their experiences to their continuing generation peers. When asked if she ever felt aware of her FGCS status Linda Smith discussed the lack of opportunity she felt: “With me being a business minor now, a lot of people are getting internships with their parents' jobs, you know, it's like, I can't do that.” Engineering student, Fiona, also discussed some of the interactions she had with other students in her department:

Some of them already are like maybe on their second degree and they're way older than you. And then, um, there's also that their parents like talk about their parents and they're like, “Oh yeah, my dad is social engineer.” And like, “yeah, I just asked my dad for help, and then just like well, I don't have that . . . I can't ask my dad for help. He doesn't know what the hell I'm doing.

FGCS being unable to use their parents as resources and comparing themselves to their continuing generation peers reflects their inability to match the middle- and upper-class norms present in institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, not having these

resources can create a barrier for the students to develop a sense of belonging and community on campus (Stebbleton et al. 2011). When participants were asked if they had a sense of belonging on campus, 5 of the 12 stated they did. However, it is important to note that these five students started their degrees in STEM fields that are heavily cohort based and that appeared to positively impact their experience. Pre-vet student, Rosie Davis, talked about her experience, “I feel like I was able to find friends my first year and then the fact that they've stayed with me up until now has made me feel more secure, like on campus.” As stated in the literature, a sense of belonging can create confidence among students and enable them to feel academically motivated (Stebbleton et al. 2014).

However, all the participants did not have this experience. Seven students expressed lacking a sense of belonging on campus said they felt the need to prove themselves, felt excluded, or felt like they have no real connections on campus. Communication studies major Maurine Lewis talked about her experience: “I come here and go to school and I leave. Like I don't, I don't see people that look like myself.” Sociology major Steve Jefferson shared similar thoughts: “Um, I feel like the community that we have here is not necessarily like close knit. Um, so it just feels like being a part of a bigger thing, but there's no connection.” Although engineering student Fiona “considered this as home,” she still felt like she had to prove herself to her classmates:

Honestly, just because you're Hispanic and you're a woman and they think you're stupid, you don't know your shit. So like, I mean, and you got to show them that you do so you can get recognized.

While trying to navigate the university system, FGCS may have to juggle academic responsibilities, along with supporting themselves, due to coming from working class backgrounds that lack financial support (Stephens et al. 20120). The data revealed that the participants indeed struggled with time management between

their academic responsibilities, financially supporting themselves, managing a social life, and balancing their interdependent familial obligations. All participants stated they used financial aid (e.g. student loans or grants) to pay their way to college.

Consequently, 11 of the 12 participants worked at least part-time to help cover additional tuition fees, living expenses, or to help support family members back home.

Diana Ramos commented on having to supporting herself:

Well, my freshman year I didn't work, but after that I've always had a job of some kind.

And so, it goes back to like I need to support myself. Um, and so it is hard to balance cause it's like I'm at school and then I'm at work and then I'm like, "Oh but I want to have fun too," and then I'm like, but I have homework, and so it's very hard to balance.

Attempting to balance academic responsibilities, while working, and managing a social life is something several participants addressed:

I feel like I tried a lot to balance my grades, um, having money and then also being social. . . I felt very like disconnected from my friends and like isolated just because I did not see them. (Alexandria Gustin).

In one situation, Diana Ramos's major required that she had observation hours in addition to her weekly coursework. This full schedule was not including her part time job she needed to support herself, along with job searching for post-graduation:

It's literally like just everything all at once right now. . . I feel like maybe if they [non-FGCS] didn't have to work, they had more time to study and more time to like prepare for interviews. Um, so I'm like, in my head I'm like "Oh, they have an advantage over me."

Moreover, other participants explained that they had family obligations as well as their coursework, financially supporting themselves, and managing a social life:

As far as like family goes, like I translate a lot of things from my mom. . . So, I feel like we're in constant contact, so I feel like I have to do all of that on the side as well as work I suppose to school. (Rosie Davis).

Five other participants discussed how the roles in their family remained vital even while away at college. When Maurine Lewis was asked how her cultural background impacted her college experience she said, “My cultural values of like, doing certain things. . . Like putting my family first and like all that extra-curricular activities aside.” Alexandria Gustin also shared the experience she had while trying to balance college life while being away from family:

There were times where I was. . . My mom was stressed out over things and I felt like I couldn't be there for her. . . Just because I'm here [at college], and then just like the pressure. . . Like, I'm going to have to figure something out after this so that I can help her, you know?

These three excerpts reflect the interdependent norms that FGCS hold and exemplify how it can be challenging for the students to balance their academic responsibilities and fulfill their family roles while away at college. Unique situations such as these not only affect the overall college experiences but impact the students' academic performance and eventual mental health. Heather Falco, who is very close to her family, discussed her attempts to gain some independence: “So it's like you're just trying to catch up and also make sure everything's in order at home, but then you also make sure you're okay. I'm learning that I can't put everything that's going on at home.”

Following issues of time management, the participants experienced a disconnect from their families due to their lack of understanding about their workload, responsibilities as college students, and their broadening worldview. In some cases, this created tension between the students and their family. Heather Falco, an A student in high school, explained how her mother responded after expressing the difficulty of her college coursework to her: “She was like, well, you've done all this [make straight A's] all your life. Like how is it that it's so hard now?” Afterwards, Heather disclosed that she was on

academic probation twice and no one in her family knew she had experienced academic struggles because she knew they would not understand. Some participants discussed how their parents did not understand their choice of major or their parents felt as if they should have more free time to talk or spend time with their family.

Others expressed that they experienced challenges with their family due to the academic and cultural growth they experienced while in college. John Davidson talked about how communication with his family shifted after attending college:

Uh, there's just not a lot of, um, when I'm talking about academic stuff, there's just not a lot of commonality. There's not a lot of points of contact to have a conversation. . . . And so, I think those are times when I feel it, you know. . . . There's like a disconnect there.”

Diana Ramos also mentioned that her family made fun of her for doing yoga and explained that her family said, “You do white people stuff.” Lastly, Melissa Danvers stated that new things she learned created “a barrier” between her and her family because she was “the first one to go and therefore they don't really understand what I'm going through or what I'm experiencing and learning and such.” This is not an uncommon experience, as London (1992) says FGCS transitioning to college must renegotiate their relationship with family and friends.

As previously mentioned, FGCS earn their degrees for themselves and for certain members in their family. Additionally, they are often the source of pride for their entire family (Wheeler 2016). Several participants discussed that they felt immense pressure placed on them by their family due to this. However, their families do not fully understand the process of college, internships, and the job search post-graduation. When Fiona Mills was asked how she felt about being the first person in her family to attend college she said, “I'm not gonna lie, it's, it's quite a pressure because they expect so much

from you.” The family members of FGCS failing to understand the experiences their students go through can put added pressure on the students, because their parents do not have realistic expectations:

They are kind of putting all of their like hope in you. Like you are the one that's in college. You are supposed to have like a good paying job when you're done and like you're supposed to be set. . . Like have an awesome job after right after graduation (Diana Ramos).

Lamont (2018), states that FGCS integration process into campus life can be interrupted if they arrive unprepared. This was proven to be true when several of the participants expressed feeling unprepared and not knowing what to expect while transitioning into their new college environment. This barrier became amplified when the participants were unable to ask their parents for help navigating their new university system. These findings contrast those of Stebleton et al. (2011) that suggest it is uncommon for continuing generation students to struggle with navigation while in college. In fact, many of the participants were very aware of these differences between themselves and their peers. Throughout the interviews, the participants compared themselves, their experience, and opportunities to their continuing generation peers and questioned their sense of belonging on campus. Prior research has indicated that students who question their sense of belonging may also question their ability to succeed and doubt the “right” way to act as a college student which may also impact their academic performance and mental health (Stephens et al. 2012).

Several participants also experienced complex role conflicts while trying to balance their coursework, financially supporting themselves, maintaining a social life, and meeting their interdependent family demands. As Stephens et al. (2012b) states, barriers such as these inhibit FGCS’s ability to devote more time to their studies and

extracurricular activities. This was shown in the data when the participants had to value working over independence and socializing with their peers. Additionally, the participants' social class and cultural background reflected their interdependent values that made them feel pressured to spend time with their family and provide emotional or financial support even if they had other obligations. This reflects the literature that state FGCS are likely to spend additional time with their families than their continuing generation peers and that family is expected to be prioritized (Covarrubias et al. 2015; Tseng 2004).

The students managed balancing their cultural interdependence and their newfound college independence to the best of their ability, but often felt as if they were neglecting some areas of their lives. Unfortunately, the participants' families did not understand the gravity of their workload, undermined the struggles they expressed, but had very high expectations for their future success. According to Tseng (2004), increased academic demands can cause conflict between students and their families. This was true for the participants who expressed tension and a disconnect between themselves and their families due to their lack of understanding about their new, independent college identity.

These findings also reflect Stephens et al. (2012) cultural mismatch theory, which emphasizes that FGCS socialized in lower-class environments are unable to match the middle- and upper-class norms present in institutions of higher education. The participants faced several challenges that did not reflect the typical college experience of their continuing generation peers.

## **Distress**

As previously discussed, FGCS enter college feeling unprepared, lacking a sense of community on campus, and experiencing role conflict between their college responsibilities, work, and family obligations. These obstacles combined with a lack of understanding about their college experience from their loved ones ultimately creates a cultural mismatch for the participants due to them being unable to match the middle- and upper-class norms present at Texas State University. Following this cultural mismatch, the participants became self-critical, experienced achievement guilt, imposter syndrome, academic related stress, and mental health challenges.

Although many of the participants families held high expectations for them, some of the students doubted their own capabilities. When Alexandria Gustin was asked if she ever felt guilty for the accomplishments she has made she responded, “I don't think I've ever felt guilty.” Surprisingly, she followed up her response with “I don't have that many achievements,” even though she was only weeks away from being the first person in her family to graduate from college. Communication Studies senior, Maurine Lewis, who worked full time and managed a 3.30 GPA shared similar doubts, “Sometimes it's like, I'm very critical over myself because I'm insecure that I'm not good at anything.” FGCS Steve Jefferson, who also works full-time and holds a high GPA talked about standards he sets for himself:

I also hold like a lot of weight on myself. Um, I talked to my parents about it, but I have very high standards. Um, and sometimes I don't even meet my own standards, so I feel like I'm disappointing them.

In addition to some participants questioning their potential, others experienced achievement guilt. Some students did not describe feeling guilty, rather described it as

“feeling bad” for the opportunities they have been given, feeling as if they owe their parents for their financial sacrifices and time they put into raising them, feeling guilty due to being away from their family, or having reduced responsibilities (e.g. less financial stress and social freedom). Melissa Danvers, who attended private school throughout her childhood, discussed her perspective:

I feel that like I owe it to my family. I owe it to my parents for all the work they've put in for my education, and all the money my mother spent on us that I should succeed, and I should do right by her, and my sisters, and everybody.

Other participants talked about going through the college experience for their family:

[My] mom does a lot for me and I know she couldn't like do this [attend college] and it wasn't because of her, it was just her experience. So I feel like she does a lot for me. I just feel bad that I could feel like kind of leaving her behind. (Fiona Mills).

When asked about their mental health, 4 out of the 12 participants said they had been professionally diagnosed with a mental health disorder. This included depression, anxiety, and ADHD. Becker et al. (2017) suggested that the adjustment period to a new college environment can be stressful and Steve Jefferson experienced some of these challenges:

You know, uh, my freshman year here was not good, like mental health wise. Um, I spent, I definitely spent a lot of time just like laying in bed cause I didn't have the strength to like get up and go and do stuff.

Additionally, some students experienced struggles with their mental health due to their interdependent norms: “At the beginning it was very stressful cause I was so far away from my family. I faced a significant amount of depression just for me being apart from everybody” (Heather Falco). The remaining 8 participants had not been professionally diagnosed with a mental health disorder, but many said they experienced symptoms such

as stress, depression, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed or hopeless. As the literature suggests, many students live with mental health disorders that go undiagnosed. Rosie Davis, who has not been professionally diagnosed with a mental health disorder, talked about her experience:

Oh yeah. I feel like certain definitely like good days and bad days. So, like there's just days where I feel like a little bit more tired and not necessarily like physically just like I just want to lay down and not think about anything.

The analysis of cultural mismatch and the effects it had on the participants revealed that they became self-critical and experienced academic related stress which ultimately affected their overall mental health. As Wheeler (2016) states, FGCS report higher levels of distress, lower self-esteem, and lowered life satisfaction than continuing generation students. Undoubtedly, this likely stem from their lower or working-class background that directly contribute to their cultural mismatch (Stephens et al. 2015). Several participants also felt guilty for their achievements or felt as if they were undeserving of the opportunities they had been given. FGCS may feel that their independent academic achievements conflict with their interdependent upbringing which also impacts their mental health (Covarrubias et al. 2015). Naturally, self-critical tendencies such as achievement guilt and imposter syndrome contributed to the participants' mental health. This reinforces Becker et al. (2017) who stated that minority FGCS may experience different forms of guilt and an absent sense of belonging that increase their risk of mental health issues.

### **Getting Though It**

All the participants experienced some form of academic related stress, while others were self-critical or experienced mental health related challenges. Although

showing signs of distress, some of the students were reluctant to seek-help regarding their academic and mental health struggles because they were expected to be self-reliant and did not want to burden others with their problems. Many of the participants used their friends for social support, and others sought out help by using campus resources, such as the counseling center. Help-seeking behaviors such as these benefited the students and allowed them to cope with their academic and mental health related struggles. Lastly, the participants showed resilience by continuing to work toward their degrees despite the many barriers they faced. This was implied as “getting through it” by one of the participants.

When the participants were asked about their help-seeking behavior, 3 of the 12 stated they had gone to the counseling center on campus to receive help regarding their mental health. Steve Jefferson said, “I did seek out, like therapy here, so they like definitely helped.” While Alexandria Gustin said, “I go to the counseling center. . . and I try to talk to my friends about it.” Several of the participants also discussed how they preferred to talk to their friends about their academic and mental health problems but hesitated to share information with their parents. Although the participants seemed to be more comfortable talking to their friends versus their family about their struggles, seeking help still presented a struggle for some. When asked how she shared her academic or mental health struggles with her loved ones Heather Falco said, “I don’t. I suck at that.” Linda Smith had a similar response: “I usually just internalize it and burry it deep, that’s pretty much it.” Rosie Davis used a different approach with her friends:

I always try to do it in like a joking manner. So like let it slide like as like a joke and stuff. . . So they’re like, “Hey, like, but for real you’re okay?” So like I’ll try to do it that way just to kind of avoid the whole... “Let’s sit down and have a talk about it” type of thing. . . I feel like I can only

share so much because at the same time they're not my therapist. So I can't like obviously give them all of my problems all the time, but I do, I do say I feel like more comfortable sharing it with like friends over family.

Other participants expressed keeping things bottled up and not talking to their parents unless it was a last resort because they did not want to disappoint or worry them.

Alexandria Gustin talked about her experience “I have a lot of anxiety. . . Um, a lot of it is just like not being able to talk to my mom about it and just wanting to make sure that she's like, I don't disappoint her.” Whereas Diana Ramos tried to put up a strong front for her family rather than have them concerned for her:

A lot of the times I don't just because everyone has another thing, like I don't want people to worry about me over here. Like I want them to know I got it. . . I want them to kind of know that it's not easy, but also like I don't want them to feel bad about it or anything. Um, because it is just something that has to be done.

Outside of loved ones, FGCS also have the opportunity to reach out to their professors at Texas State University if they are struggling with their academic performance or mental health. However, most of the participants said they would not feel too comfortable or too inclined reaching out to faculty members because they would not want to be judged or did not share a close relationship with them:

I wouldn't feel too inclined to, honestly, a lot of my classes are either just really big or it's not like I would just, you know, I'm not really like close with any of my professors. I wouldn't really do that. (Diana Ramos).

Others stated that they felt weird, awkward, or timid about reaching out to faculty with their concerns. Maurine Lewis shared an experience where she reached out to her professor for a mental health day due to the university of her brother's passing.

Unfortunately, her professor would not excuse her absence. A few other participants

wanted to remain professional:

I feel like they're more of like if I were working, I look at them as like a manager type of things. So I wouldn't want to look like less knowledgeable is so, unless I like really can't figure it out on my own, I try not to speak with them. I also get like nervous around like higher up people, so I'm just like, ah (Rosie Davis).

The participants were asked about their coping behaviors regarding the struggles their academic and mental health struggles while in college. Melissa Danvers, who was diagnosed with depression and anxiety prior to attending college, was very aware of the impact her FGCS status, working part time, and helping take care of her siblings had on her mental health. When asked how she coped with these struggles she said:

I don't think I've ever dealt with it. I think I need to deal with it still. I've basically just been pushing it off to the day that I have time to deal with it. . . and that I can't afford to deal with it cause that's definitely going to have to come out of therapy.

Melissa was not alone. Two other participants who were asked the same question, responded in a similar tone.

I feel like I don't have an option to not deal with it, so I just wake up in the morning and . . . I do what I have to do to like get through because I don't have another option (Maurine Lewis).

Linda Smith, who was not professionally diagnosed with a mental health disorder, but experienced symptoms said, "I usually just internalize it and burry it deep, that's pretty much it." Other participants shared self-care coping mechanisms such as emotionally eating, watching TV, or working out to release steam. Steve Jefferson used work to escape his problems:

I really hate to admit it, but it's just like with work, I don't have to worry about what's going on here or at home. It's just like you get to turn off your brain and go on autopilot and just work.

Although several participants encountered challenging times throughout their

college experiences, many of them demonstrated resilience. Steve Jefferson talked about being positive and present while in college: “So if I let like the first-generation stuff cloud my . . . mind all day. . . I'm not really gonna learn anything.” Rosie Davis also showed independence and pride in her coursework: “I’ve become more independent. . . Like, yeah this is my work, this is what I decided to do. So, the only one that can be responsible for it is me.”

Other participants stated that they felt proud for the accomplishments and achievements they have made while in college, including approaching graduation dates. Additionally, many students mentioned improved organization and time management skills, becoming more resourceful, developing self-efficiency, and broadening their perspectives: “When I'm thinking about things. . . You know, saying like “Well, let me put myself in this other side's shoes for a second” (John Davidson). Diana Ramos also shared how opportunities she had in college shaped who she is today:

It's definitely opened my mind up. I've done a lot of like leadership activities, I've volunteered. . . within my major, but also. . . I had a work study job where I was actually a mentor to high schoolers and helped them with college. . . So it's definitely opened my mind to know that I can help people in a lot of different ways. . . There is just so much out there, like so much that I can learn and so many people to interact with that have different perspectives.

These sentiments outline and speak to the resilience that the participants demonstrated throughout their college experience.

When addressing their help-seeking behavior regarding academic and mental health related struggles, the participants were hesitant to reach out to family, friends, and faculty members for many reasons. First, the participants seemed conflicted while wanting to share their struggles with their families but hesitated because they knew their

experience would not be validated. Wheeler (2016), referred to FGCS as the source of pride for their families. Several participants expressed not wanting to tarnish their parents' pride or add stress to them by sharing their personal problems. This finding reiterates Garriott et al. (2017) point that FGCS may view help-seeking as a negative evaluation of themselves due to family and self-imposed pressure. The participants seemed more comfortable talking to their college friends about their struggles due to commonality, but still relied on avoidance behavior if possible.

Very few students used the counseling center on campus to seek-help regarding their mental health. This mirrors the literature that states FGCS reported lower use of psychological services compared to their continuing generation peers (Garriot et al. 2017). Regarding other resources, only 3 of the 12 participants were aware of the federally funded FGCS organizations on campus that provide academic support, goal setting, peer mentoring, and campus resource navigation.

Manzoni et al. (2018) states that FGCS struggle asking for help from faculty members. This was demonstrated when the participants expressed extreme hesitancy to reach out to their professors about academic and mental health related struggles. This is troubling because it has been proven that student-faculty interactions enrich college student's education (Kim and Sax 2009). These unformed bonds between the participants and their faculty not only influence their help-seeking behavior but reflect their absent sense of belonging while on campus. This disconnect reinforces that FGCS do not meet the middle- and upper-class norms present on college campuses (Stephens et al. 2012b). Moreover, the present but somewhat inconsistent coping mechanisms of the participants reflect their need for more social and physiological support while in college.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to further examine undergraduate FGCS academic performance, mental health, coping, and help seeking behavior informed by cultural mismatch theory. The present research questions were: 1) Do first-generation college students experience cultural mismatch at Texas State University, and if so, how? 2) Does cultural mismatch affect FGCS's academic performance and mental health? 3) Are FGCS able to seek help and cope with their academic and mental health struggles without feeling stigmatized? It is timely that the experiences of FGCS continued to be studied because their attendance at four-year universities is at an all-time high. Research regarding FGCS is also valuable for universities, so they can support, retain, and enrich the experiences of their FGCS population.

The data revealed that the participants' reasons for attending college did not match the traditional, independent, individualistic pursuits of continuing generation students. The students also experienced culture shock after they arrived at Texas State University and this was shown through their lack of preparedness and guidance, comparing themselves to their peers, reduced sense of belonging, lack of family understanding, and role conflict. The students also experienced self-imposed pressure to meet their parents' expectations and felt obligated to financially support their families after graduation. All of these barriers combined contrast those of their continuing generation peers and prevented the students from fully meeting the demands of college, which ultimately created a cultural mismatch for the participants.

Many of the students desired to balance their academic responsibilities with work, socializing, and their family obligations, but struggled. This directly affected their

academic performance and mental health. The students demonstrated distress through their imposter syndrome, achievement guilt, and academic related stress. Additionally, some of the students were professionally diagnosed with mental health disorders, while others only experienced symptoms.

It was revealed that the students did not feel stigmatized while seeking help and coping with their academic and mental health related struggles. Instead the students were reluctant to seek help because they did not want to burden others with their problems. However, the students showed preference in whom they sought help. Rather than talking to their family, most of the students preferred to talk to their college friends because of commonality. Inherently, a barrier was created between the students and their parents due to their parents' lack of college experience. The students also did not feel comfortable talking to faculty members because of their superior status. Furthermore, few students sought help from the counseling center regarding their mental health and very few knew about the FGCS organizations on campus. The students attempted to cope by engaging in self-care tactics or they indicated avoidance behavior. Lastly, the students' challenges as FGCS exacerbated their college experience, but they remained resilient.

There were some limitations present within the study. First, the study's sample size only represented a very small portion of the FGCS population at Texas State University. However, redundancy was achieved through the participants motivation to attend college, lack of college preparedness, lack of community, role conflict, and academic related stress. Second, only three of the 12 participants identified their race as white. This limitation did not allow for racial comparisons between white and minority FGCS, as those experiences may differ. There were also only three male participants

present within the study.

Third, it is also important to note that selection bias might partially explain the resilience of the study sample. Upperclassmen were recruited for this study because they have more college experience than underclassmen. In fact, 11 of 12 participants were seniors in college, which itself demonstrates resilience as they were able to excel that far in their academic career, in spite of the challenges they had experienced. The experiences of the participants may differ from FGCS in their first year of college or FGCS who have dropped out. Finally, given the use of qualitative methodology, the study findings are not generalizable to all FGCS populations.

Future qualitative research could further explore FGCS's self-critical behavior or their professionally diagnosed mental health struggles through the lens of cultural mismatch theory due redundancy not being achieved in these themes. Future research could also compare the different experiences of white and minority FGCS, FGCS in their first year of college, or FGCS who have dropped out of college. Furthermore, quantitative research could further explore the themes of college motivation and mental health related stress within FGCS populations. These limitations notwithstanding, this qualitative study contributes to the mostly quantitative literature regarding FGCS. This study also provides more insight on the experiences of FGCS concerning their academic performance, mental health, help-seeking, and coping behavior through the lens cultural mismatch theory that has not yet been explored.

When reflecting on cultural mismatch theory, it is apparent that the experiences of FGCS can be complex in many ways. Moreover, it is alarming that several of the participants experienced struggles but were unaware of on-campus FGCS resources or

felt uncomfortable reaching out to their professors if they needed help. It is imperative that FGCS have accessible resources and feel comfortable talking to college faculty regarding their academic and mental health related struggles because those may be their only help-seeking options due to lack of family understanding. Additionally, large universities such as Texas State University must acknowledge the intersectionality of their students' backgrounds. Given that 42% of the incoming freshman class in 2018 were FGCS and Texas State University is a Hispanic Serving Institution, the socioeconomic status and cultural background of their students' needs should be addressed when considering on-campus resources and curriculum. In fact, half of the participants in this study identified as Hispanic but this did not seem to change their experience as a FGCS on campus.

I propose that universities incorporate interdependence into their campus norms to reflect the large percentage of their FGCS population. This includes faculty members understanding the position FGCS hold, and how that may impact their learning experience while in college. Several of the participants stated they preferred to talk to their friends about their problems rather than their family or faculty members. It may be beneficial for universities to create FGCS peer groups so that the students are able to connect with other FGCS that may share a similar experience. Lastly, I think the diversity of student body population at large universities such as Texas State should also be reflected in the faculty members that are teaching at them. Students from underrepresented groups may feel more comfortable reaching out to their professor if they share commonalities such as being FGCS, being a minority, or being a member of any underrepresented group.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic Information

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

University:

Major:

GPA: What is your current GPA? If you are not sure, an estimate is fine.

Do you currently work? What kind of work do you do? And how many hours a week?

#### BACKGROUND

- 1) Where did you grow up (or the different places you grew up)?
  - a. Where is home to you?
- 2) Who was the first person in your family to attend a four-year college, university, or institution?
  - a. Do you consider yourself a first-generation college student?
- 3) While you were growing up, when did you realize you wanted to go to college?
  - a. What was your motivation to go to college?
- 4) What brought you specifically to Texas State University? (Find out if they attended other schools first, like community college or whatever).
- 5) How would you describe the social class you grew up in?
- 6) How are you paying for college?

## FIRST GENERATION/CULTURAL MISTMATCH

- 1) How prepared for college did you feel prior to attending?
- 2) How do you feel about being the first person in your family to attend college?
  - a. Are there any times in your day-to-day life as a college student that you feel very aware of first-generation student status?
- 3) Are there any challenges you experience as a first-generation college student?
  - a. How would you say your personal/cultural/family background impacts any experiences you have as a first-generation college student?
  - b. Are there any other challenges you can think of as a first-generation student?
- 4) How has being in college shaped/changed you?
- 5) While in college, do you feel like you're fully independent?
  - a. Why? Why not?
- 6) Has your college experience shaped how you see your individual potential?
  - a. Why or why not? How? How have you realized your individual potential while in college?

## ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- 1) How do you feel your status as a first-generation student affects your academic performance, positively and negatively?
- 2) Do you know of/Are involved in any first-generation organizations on campus? (TRIO or Student Support Services?)
- 3) Do you have a sense of belonging/community at Texas State University? In what ways?

- 4) In social settings, what type of people are you surrounded by? (Other students/first-generation students)

#### MENTAL HEALTH

- 1) First generation students often balance their academic responsibilities with family, work, and other obligations.
  - a. Is this something you experience? Could you talk a little about that?
  - b. How does balancing these responsibilities make you feel?
- 2) Do you feel this has an impact on your mental health?
  - a. In what way?
- 3) Do you have struggles with your mental health?
  - a. How do you deal/cope with these struggles?
  - b. Do you think this relates to your status as a first-generation student?
  - c. If not, did you experience these struggles prior to coming to college?

#### STIGMA AND HELP SEEKING

- 1) Have you been professionally diagnosed with a mental health disorder?
- 2) Diagnosed or not, do you tell your family/friends/those who are close to you about any mental health struggles you experience?
  - a. How do you share this information?
  - b. How do you feel about sharing this information with them?
- 3) Who all is a part of your support system?
- 4) How have your personal relationships back home been impacted since starting your academic career as a first-generation student?

- 5) How do you feel about asking family/friends/loved one for help regarding your mental health?
- 6) How do you feel about asking your professors/faculty on campus about your mental health?

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