2. Literature Review

2.1. First-Generation College Students as At-Risk Student Population

While some researchers define first-generation college students (FGCs) as those whose parents did not graduate college (Ishitani, 2003), many expand the definition to include those whose parents did not attend or have access to higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018). Sometimes referred to as "first-in-family" (Wainwright & Watts, 2021), first-generation college students are one of several groups considered to be at-risk (Ishitani, 2006; Wainwright & Watts, 2021). First-generation students often face barriers before their first semester even starts, with self-reported frustration with financial aid, options of majors, and course scheduling (Evans et al., 2020). Once in college, first-generation college students are known to experience difficulties in successfully fulfilling their role as students, or as Collier & Morgan (2008) put it, to "do the college student role" (p. 441). Research has shown that first-generation college students struggle with understanding the expectations of their instructors (Collier & Morgan, 2008), are less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities (Pascarella et al., 2004), and lack social connections with peers (Evans et al., 2020).

After graduation, there is little difference between first-generation and non-first-generation college students who complete their degree. No statistically significant difference was found in the rate of full-time employment or median annualized salaries 4 years after students completed their degrees between first-generation college students, students whose parents attended college, and students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). However, while there may not be a difference after graduation, the problem lies in getting to graduation. Ishitani (2003) found that first-generation college students had a 71% higher risk of attrition. A later study by Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation college students were 51% less likely to graduate in the fourth year and 32% less likely to graduate in the fifth year than students whose parents graduated. In addition to a higher rate of attrition, first-generation college students have been found to complete significantly fewer credit hours,

while also working significantly more hours per week than non-first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Support systems are an important factor in the success of all students in higher education. Familial support and encouragement can positively impact first-generation college student success (Evans et al., 2020); however, first-generation college students are less likely to have support from their families (Ishitani, 2003). Participants in Evans et al.'s (2020) phenomenological study reported that even parents who wanted to express support did not know or understand what support was needed. For this reason, first-generation college students who typically do not have the necessary college student expertise cannot obtain this expertise from their families (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Evans et al., 2020). Additionally, families can become a barrier themselves when students feel pressure to make their families proud because of their first-generation status (Evans et al., 2020).

In addition to familial support, institutional support is intended to guide students to graduation. However, first-generation college students frequently are hesitant to locate institutional assistance and may be entirely unaware that such assistance is available (Whitley et al., 2018). Participants in one study noted that while the institution may say they have resources, they do not necessarily help first-generation college students find and use those resources (Evans et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies suggest that first-generation college students encounter significantly more environmental barriers than non-first-generation counterparts in successfully navigating college life and completing degrees.

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