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THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN
ACADEMIA

by

Christopher J. Smith

A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
the College of Education and Human Sciences
and the School of Education
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. First-generation students are the first ones in their immediate family to attend college. Non-traditional students usually are students over the age of 25 years old who have financial independence and possibly have dependents to take care of. There has been previous research done on the experiences of first-generation traditional students, but there have not been any studies done on first-generation non-traditional students. This qualitative study targeted to add more data to the higher education field by interviewing five first-generation non-traditional students who have already received their bachelor's degree to discuss their lived experiences in academia. The findings of this study answered the following two research questions: 1). What barriers, if any, did first-generation non-traditional students encounter during their college experience? 2). How did first-generation non-traditional students navigate through their college journey? Two significant themes surfaced throughout this study, which included: 1). Experiences of being afraid to ask for help as a first-generation non-traditional student and 2). Experiences of financial and social challenges. In time, the findings from this study can bring more awareness to the struggles that first-generation non-traditional students face returning to college and give the higher education administrators the research they need to make each campus more welcoming for this population of students going forward.

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First, I would like to thank God for being with me on this journey and showing me, that I can accomplish any task set in front of me. Secondly, I would like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Jason K. Wallace for his continual support, patience, and guidance throughout this entire journey! There were times when I was so frustrated and simply felt hopeless and wanted to quit; you reminded me of the bigger picture and my “why”. I am truly blessed and thankful that I had you as my research advisor during my doctoral process.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my cousin Cheryl Smith, my family, and any student who struggled in college as I did. Cheryl, you were my first cousin and one of my biggest supporters. I was looking forward to celebrating my graduation with you. I know you will be there with me in spirit on that day. I love you, my cousin. My sisters - Pamela, Connie, Shanna, and Jessica: thank you all for always believing in me and speaking life into me at the right times. Lastly, my mom and stepdad, thank you for pushing me to be the absolute best at all times. I am truly grateful and blessed to have you two as my parents.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

This research is centered on the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. First-generation students are often discussed among higher education professionals, but not much literature/discussion exist on first-generation non-traditional students. First-generation students are defined as a student whose parent(s) did not complete a two or four-year degree, and the student is the first one in the family to pursue a degree (Checkoway, 2018). Non-traditional students are defined as students who did not attend college after high school, over the age of 25, already working, and possibly have dependents (Orgnero, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

First-generation students are generally less academically prepared for college, likely to be 24 years old or older, and be the first one of the family to attend college (Giancola et al., 2008). First-generation students come from several economic backgrounds and social identities. They tend to be lower-income and minority students of color, often from economically disinvested and racially-segregated areas where schools have scarcer resources than those in higher-income areas (Checkoway, 2018). First-generation students are the first ones in their families to attend college and have been forced to deal with the social structures'’ rhea disparities. They have knowledge that lacks higher-income legacy students who come from families who have attended college for years and whose primary contact with low-income minorities of color has been from understanding them in books (Checkoway, 2018).

Non-traditional students tend to be students who are part-time, working adults, possibly have dependents and are over the age of 25, and have some financial independence already (Orgnero, 2013). Non-traditional students do not have the outside financial support as some of the traditional student, so some rely on financial aid to cover some of their account balance

(Hart, 2003). These students make up a considerable fraction of two and four-year institutions and institutions must understand non-traditional students' needs and assign the required resources to make sure they can graduate (Orgnero, 2013). Non-traditional students would often make changes to their daily customs, relationships, and ways of thinking to be better prepared for returning to college (Karmelita, 2020).

There has been previous research on the experiences of first-generation students and non-traditional students, but there is an existing gap in research missing for first-generation non-traditional students' experiences in higher education. This study seeks to copiously explore the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia to better serve this population of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. The research design of this study is qualitative. The focus will be on first-generation non-traditional students and their experiences navigating through the college environment. There is a significant amount of previous research on first-generation student populations; yet, not much research exists on first-generation non-traditional students. For this study, the researcher will randomly select students who identify as first-generation non-traditional students to participate in the interviews. The interview data would determine the experiences of First-generation non-traditional students while in college and how they navigate through their college journey.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What barriers, if any, did first-generation non-traditional students encounter during their college experience?
2. How did first-generation non-traditional students navigate through their college journey?

Definition of Key Terms

The key terms used in this study was to identify one of the population of students that is underrepresented in higher education. These terms were selected because they hold substantial importance to the overall foundation of the study.

First-Generation Student

"First-generation college students are students who enrolled in post-secondary education and whose parents do not have any post-secondary education experience" (Redford et al., 2017).

Non-traditional Student

Non-traditional student can be defined by meeting one of the seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into post-secondary education attends college part-time, works full-time, is financially independent for financial aid purposes, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma (Pelletier, 2010).

Implications and Application to Higher Education

The implications of this study are there could be a lot of valuable information to come from the interviews from the participants. The data from the participants could bring more awareness to administrators in higher education. First-generation students are not the only population that needs the resources to succeed on college campuses, but there is an added need to be added on first-generation non-traditional students. Most of all, the programs on college campuses are more focused on the success of first-generation students. Nonetheless, this study

will bring more awareness to administrators in higher education to look more into the students who identify as first-generation non-traditional students.

Summary

There is a significant gap in the research for first-generation non-traditional students. This population of students is not being discussed and possibly do not have the proper resources to succeed on college campuses. The qualitative research design will be vital to gathering information on the participants and learning more about their experiences within the college environment. However, the literature review will provide a history of first-generation and non-traditional students and their higher education experiences.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

“The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” -Picasso

Checkoway (2018) found that first-generation students are the first in their immediate family to attend college. Although first-generation students come from several economic backgrounds and social identities, they tend to be lower-income and students of color, often from economically-disinvested and racially-segregated areas have scarcer resources than those in higher-income areas (Ishitani, 2006). “First generation” is growing in higher education; student affairs professionals create social services with their happiness in mind (Checkoway, 2018). First-generation students have recognized the importance of higher education and accomplished a great deal to get into college (Checkoway, 2018). They have faced economic problems in their everyday lives and faced obstacles because of what their parents are paid (Gofen, 2009; Jenkins, 2013). First-generation students have knowledge that lacks higher-income legacy students who come from families who have attended college for years and whose primary contact with low-income minorities of color has been from understanding them in books (Checkoway, 2018).

This literature review examines the multifaceted aspect of first-generation college students and non-traditional students in higher education. This literature review will cover first-generation students outside of the classroom, first-generation students in the classroom, low-income first-generation students, first-generation students and imposter syndrome, non-traditional students, non-traditional student experiences transitioning to college, non-traditional students and financing college, and non-traditional first-generation students. These sections play a vital part in first-generation non-traditional students experiences in higher education.

First-Generation Students Outside of the Classroom

Checkoway (2018) found that some first-generation students come into college and experience a cultural shock from entering a new world in higher education. First-generation students are typically unfamiliar with college campuses and ponder how they will find their way around campus (Checkoway, 2018). They feel insecure about their social class and racial-ethnic background and are rarely shocked by the whiteness of the place (Cushman, 2007; DeWalk, 2011). First-generation students often wonder if they are making the right choice by attending college while some of their parents are at home struggling monetarily, and some usually feel guilty. These students regularly worry about affording college and finding their way through college but cannot ask their parents for help financially or for information on college (Banks-Santill, 2014; Coarrubias et al., 2015). Ward et al. (2012) explained that parents of the first generation students who did not attend college usually feel less prepared to provide guidance, intrusion, and proper support for meeting the pre-college's success and the whole college experience (Evans et al., 2020). First-generation students tend to register for less competitive institutions than their peers whose parents attended college (Evans et al., 2020). Coarrubias et al. (2019) found that through life histories, first-generation students felt unsettled in college because of being homesick and felt like college was going to distance them from family. Family support is a vital consideration in first-generation students' matriculation and tenacity in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

First-Generation Students in the Classroom

Evans et al. (2020) found that first-generation students must work more and study less than their non-first-generation peers. (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007) explained that first-generation students work more hours than their peers, resulting in attrition growths (Evans et al., 2020). On the other hand, Evans et al. (2020) found that some first-generation students viewed

the college environment as less supportive and conveyed, making less progress in their learning and academic growth. Many of the first-generation students must work nearly full-time while attending college, some of these students do not have the time to engage in campus activities (D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Due to this, first-generation students would lack the social connection to the campus and their peers, leading to them being less involved in the student organizations and extracurricular activities.

Nonetheless, Ives & Castillo-Montoya (2020) found that first-generation students tend not to seek academic assistance during the times when they need it. First-generation students lean towards online sources before they turn to ask people on campus for any assistance (Tsai, 2012). Ives & Castillo-Montoya (2020) discussed the struggles and ways first-generation students can excel in their studies:

Olson (2017) found that racially minoritized first-generation students attempted fewer homework strategies and showed less perseverance when faced with difficult class assignments compared with their continuing-generation majority peers. Faulkner and Burdenski (2011) found that teaching low-income, first-generation college students how to do better identify and act on their needs helped increase their academic self-efficacy and success in developmental mathematics. Nosaka and Novak (2014) noted the benefit of learning community programs on first-generation college students' academic and social integration, resulting in statistically higher retention rates than students outside of the program. And, Morales (2014) suggested that faculty can build student's self-efficacy through realistic appraisals of their strengths and weaknesses and encouraging them to seek help. In sum, first-generation college students' academic performance can be

hindered by their interpretation of what it means to use academic resources.

Studies in this group of the literature indicated that specific interventions could help these students expand their understanding and use of available resources to support their academic success (p.155-156).

Low-Income First-Generation Students

Hebert (2018) discovered that first-generation students embody roughly 50% of college students, and 34% of them enrolled in 4-year institutions (Choy, 2002). First generation students are unreasonably students of color and students from low-income families (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Herbert (2018) discussed the background of low-income first-generation students:

They arrive on campus less academically prepared as they are more likely to attend high schools with less rigorous curricula and less likely to enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses than students who have college attendance in their backgrounds. Pascarella, et al., (2004) reported that, compared with students whose parents completed at least a bachelor's degree, first-generation college students enrolled in and earned fewer credit hours, were more inclined to live off campus, worked more hours, participated in fewer extracurricular activities, and earned lower grades. Researchers have found that first-generation college students were more than twice as likely to leave a 4-year institution before their second year than students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006, p.96-97).

Yeh (2010) found that low-income first-generation students whose parents did not attend college are more likely to drop out at institutions at higher rates compared to the middle to upper-class income students with college-educated parents (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002).

According to Yeh (2010) “reasons cited for the disparity in educational attainment range from academic under preparation, discrimination, feelings of alienation, and difficulty adjusting to campus culture, to work and family responsibilities, financial and structural barriers, and lack of support” (pg. 50). Yeh (2010) discussed information obtainable on the characteristics and lower success rates of low-income first-generation students and the barriers they face. Few studies explore the factors that interject to their college achievement (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Pulliam et al. (2017) explained that low-income first-generation students lack the preparation and the information to succeed in a college setting and sometimes not intellectually prepared and require some internal guidance to get their career and academic goals started. According to Engle et al. (2018), “Low-income, first-generation college students are more likely to come from racial and ethnic minority groups and enter college academically underprepared for the rigors of college course work in the content areas of reading, writing, math, and science” (pg. 3).

First-Generation Students and Imposter Syndrome

Whitehead & Wright (2017) described the imposter phenomenon as feelings of unworthiness by a person around colleagues in the workplace. According to Whitehead & Wright (2017), “The imposter phenomenon occurs with great frequency among successful, high achieving people. [...] They’ve done well in school, earned the correct degrees, received awards and praise from their colleagues, and advanced rapidly in their career” (pg. 641). Peteet et al. (2015) discussed the significance of the imposter phenomenon and how it affects first-generation students.

One factor that may influence the imposter phenomenon perceptions in college students is whether they are a first-gens college student, or the first in their family to

attend college. Research suggest that first-generation students experience the imposter phenomenon more often and at higher levels than other students (Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996). Furthermore, first-generation students often face additional challenges that their non-first-generation counterparts do not experience or experience to a lesser extent, which can lead to a longer-time to degree completion (Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2006) and lower academic aspirations (Terenzini et al., 1996, p.176).

Peteet et al. (2015) explained that first-generation students could not have adequate emotional provision from family members who did not attend college. They, therefore, did not appreciate the demands existing within higher education (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students could also experience distress due to trying to impress self and family (Inman & Mayes, 1999; London, 1992) and feeling unsupported in the college atmosphere (Hurtado, 1994; McGregor et al., 1991). The more issues that first-generation students experience it could lead to them experiencing the imposter phenomenon. However, the other variable that could affect the imposter phenomenon experiences is psychological well-being (Peteet et al., 2015). There is a lot of pressure-related to achieving goals, and this type of pressure can lead to stress and psychological instability (Henning et al., 1998). Since there is a strong association between academic achievement and imposter phenomenon, there could be more to determine the associations between that phenomenon and generational status, ethnic identity, and one's well-being (Peteet et al., 2015).

Non-Traditional Students

Orgnero (2013) discovered in his studies that non-traditional student is a general term used to portray students based on their age (over 25 years old), financial independence, having a job, or having young or elderly dependents in control (Wyatt, 2011). Non-traditional make up a

considerable fraction of two and four-year institutions (Choy, 2002). Orgnero (2013) identified and reported vital data for non-traditional students, “In fact, ‘From 2007 to 2018, NCES projects a rise of 9 percent in enrollments of people under 25, and a rise of 20 percent in enrollments of people 25 and over’”(Snyder & Dillow, 2010, p.165). Some institutions are not fully prepared to meet a diverse adult student population (Fairchild, 2003, Orgnero, 2013). Institutions must understand non-traditional students' needs and assign the required resources to make sure they can graduate (Wyatt, 2011, Orgnero, 2013).

Non-Traditional Student Experiences Transitioning to College

Karmelita (2020) discussed that adult learners face barriers as they attempt to transition to college. Non-traditional students can sometimes be anxious about returning to college because of previous educational involvements, changes in their lives, and their lack of self-confidence (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2003). Non-traditional students would often make changes to their daily customs, relationships, and ways of thinking to be better prepared with returning to college (Anderson et al., 2012; Hardin, 2008). Non-traditional students want to be able to be a role model for their children and other members of the family (McCall et al., 2020). However, Orgnero (2013) discussed the importance of transitions, “First, change is an intrinsic part of being an adult. Second, stability is a necessary condition that provides structure and balance to offset changes. This means that life events and roles may demand some adaptations to fit new life situations” (p. 166). Orgnero (2013) pointed out that transitions confront non-traditional students with new trials and going back to start college is a transition.

Non-Traditional Students and Financing College

Non-traditional students do not have the outside financial support as some of the traditional students, so some rely on financial aid to cover some of their account balance (Hart,

2003). According to Chen & Hossler (2017), “Additionally, access to and quality of information vary with student demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus students lacking college information (e.g., non-traditional students) (Wilson, 2006) are more likely to have erroneous expectations about the costs and benefits of attending college (pg. 43). Occasionally, when non-traditional students come across colleges that devalue the culture they were exposed to, they are likely to withdraw from the college and return to their typical habitus (Thomas, 2002; Chen & Hossler, 2017). Taylor & Bicak (2019) states, “However, longitudinal research focused on adult learners have suggested these students are, often, the neediest students on college campuses, as adult learners usually pay expenses—such as the cost of raising children, paying mortgages, and carrying insurance policies—that traditional, aged 18-24 students do not pay” (p. 95). Non-traditional students are more likely to drop out of college during their third year in an associate degree program. Financial aid was a useful tool to manage dropout rates, but not increase degree completion (Taylor & Bicak, 2019).

Non-Traditional First-Generation Students

Non-traditional students tend to be students who are part-time, working adults, and have dependents; whereas first-generation students are generally less academically prepared for college, likely to be 24 years old or older, and be the first one of the family to attend college (Giancola et al., 2008). First-generation college students, students of color, low-income students tend to want to do everything by themselves and do not take advantage of their services on campuses (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). Smith (2013) reports the various barriers first-generation students must face while in college:

Research shows that show that these students are likely to work more hours for pay, drop out of 4-year institutions at higher rates and earn fewer credits than

students whose parents have attended college (Ishitani, 2006). Research also suggests that the difficulties encountered during the process of social integration into college life may have stronger implications for the educational outcomes of first-gens students as they may encounter more difficulties understanding the culture of college than students whose parents have attended college (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2006, p. 323).

Conclusion

Understanding first-generation non-traditional students are very instrumental as it lays the foundation for understanding their psychological needs in the society. It also explains the actions associated with them and the best strategies of shaping them into the responsible members of the society. Overall, there would need to be more research on first-generation non-traditional students. This study would provide more insight into the population of students who are first-generation non-traditional and show the barriers they face entering college for the first time.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. The qualitative narrative research approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the participant's higher education experiences and provided information for future research. Data collected during this study was intended to bring more awareness to the higher education environment for first-generation non-traditional students. The following sections in this chapter examine the research questions, research design, target population and sample, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and summary.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What barriers, if any, did first-generation non-traditional students encounter during their college experience?
2. How did first-generation non-traditional students navigate through their college journey?

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to collect data. "A qualitative researcher's task often consists of describing and understanding people and groups' particular situations, experiences, and meanings before developing and/or testing more general theories and explanations" (Frankel et al., 2000, p. 253). The qualitative study was performed using the narrative research design to examine the lived experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. "Narrative inquirers study stories because 'narratives are the form of representation that describes the human experience as it unfolds through time'" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 40).

Target Population and Sample

Population

The target population entailed of first-generation non-traditional students.

Sample

A purposive sampling method was used for this study because participants' preferences contributed to the data needed to respond to the research questions and the purpose of the study. This study was an analysis of the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. The criteria for selecting participants to represent the target population and the purpose of this study required the participants to be 18 years or older, identify as a first-generation non-traditional student, and have completed a bachelor's degree. For this research, a sample size of five participants was selected for individual interviews.

Procedures

Participant Recruitment & Selection

Participants in this study were over 18 years old and identified as first-generation non-traditional students during their time as undergraduates. Participants who were ineligible to participate in this study were those who identified as traditional students, students who have not received their bachelor's degree, and students under 18 years old.

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Mississippi, I posted the recruitment flier on my Facebook page to recruit participants. I informed all interested participants to provide their emails via direct message to ensure the privacy of the potential participants. I emailed each participant with information about the study and let them know that their participation is voluntary and that they could stop participating at any point during the study.

After the screening process, I informed the five participants that decided to participate that the interview would be through Zoom and password protected for their privacy. The information about the study was in the English language. I ensured each participant could ask questions before sending the online informed consent form via email. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, I emailed the five participants individually with the online informed consent form. I asked them to review and sign if they planned on participating in the research and send it back to me via email. All five participants willingly signed the form and participated during their scheduled interview time.

Each participant received a payment of \$20 via Cash App at the end of the interview for their time and participation. I advertised the incentive of \$20 in my informed consent form, recruitment flyer, and recruitment email.

Protection of Participants

I interviewed each participant separately in a private Zoom Video conference call for one hour. I informed each participant that they would remain unidentified and be appointed a pseudonym to protect their identity. I also informed the participants that the interviews would be recorded digitally and stored on a laptop, backed up on OneDrive, and password protected. Lastly, I informed the participants if they withdrew from the study, the same procedures to preserve the confidentiality of all participants would be maintained.

Data Collection

In this study, the data collection comprised of semi-structured interviews through Zoom video conference call to better understand the lived experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. I started each interview by asking each participant for permission to record their session using the Zoom recording video option. All participants are

permitted to be recorded. I showed my gratitude to the participants for participating in the study and elaborated to them that they withdrew their participation at any moment. I discussed the purpose of the research and how their experiences will benefit future first-generation non-traditional students. I asked each participant a series of questions and prompted them to discuss their experiences as first-generation non-traditional students. I also informed each participant that if they feel uneasy with replying to a question, they do not have to answer it. Each participant answered all interview questions in-depth and provided a significant amount of valuable life experiences during their time in the college setting. I also took a few notes while each participant was talking, but I wanted to ensure they can get full attention during the interview. The recordings and the few notes I took during each interview helped me complete field notes to fully meditate on the notes I took during each interview.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to expand the significance of the data compiled in a study. To comprehensively analyze the data, I used Otter.ai to transcribe the audio from the recordings. The data analysis that was used for this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to gather data from the research and group them into similarities, which are organized into themes. Data from the study were analyzed, and the inductive approach was used to determine the themes for this study. The data that was investigated in this study included these steps: organizing the data, reading through all the data, coding the data, re-examining the data, defining themes and creating a narrative justification of the data, and translating data.

Summary

The purpose of this section was to outline the qualitative method used to answer the research questions. This research study focused on the experiences of first-generation non-

traditional students in academia. This study included the research questions, research design, target population and sample, procedures; data collection; and data analysis.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

Overview of Participants

This chapter presents the findings that surfaced from the interviews with the five participants that was conducted via Zoom and were able to give their perceptions and experiences during their time as undergraduate student. The participants in this study were all over 18 years old, identified as first-generation non-traditional students, and had completed a bachelor's degree.

Participant 1 (Amy). Amy identified as an African American female and a first-generation non-traditional student. Amy knew she wanted to go to college in high school and was passionate about going to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Amy attended an HBCU right after high school in the state of Alabama. When asked, “What motivated you to attend college at that point in your life?” Amy explained that she got pregnant during her sophomore of college. Amy had to drop out of school to take care of her daughter. Amy knew she needed to start working full-time to provide for herself and her daughter. Amy explained that her daughter was her motivation to return to college to finish her degree years later. Amy wanted to let her daughter know that she did not give up when times got tough. I asked Amy, “What challenges did you face in college?” She informed me that she dealt with being homesick and unable to see her family regularly. She moved to a new city with no family and friends. Amy had no transportation, so she had to rely on friends to take her places. I asked Amy, “What successes did you have while in college?” She mentioned that she met many great people who helped her along the way during college. Amy also landed a work-study position as a research assistant to

graduate students in the Department of African American Studies. Lastly, she stated her most enormous success was graduating with her undergraduate degree.

I asked Amy to send me three photos from her time as an undergraduate student and asked her to explain the significance of each image. Amy discussed that the first photo was from her freshman year of college. She learned more about the college and gained many lifelong friends during her freshman year. Amy explained the significance of the second photo was during her sophomore year of college; she gave birth to her daughter. Amy stated, “When she became a mother, it changed the dynamics of my college experience because I couldn’t do the same things and have the same experiences as other students since they were not mothers and fathers already.” The final photo was of Alex in her cap and gown. Alex stated, “I was happy to finally complete that chapter in my life and move on to the next chapter.”

I asked Amy, “Did you experience any financial hardships as an undergraduate student?” Amy stated that she maxed out all her financial aid assistance, which led to her paying out of pocket during the final semester. Amy had bills to pay, rent, taking care of her daughter, working a full-time job, and going to school full-time. Amy said it was highly rough for her during this time financially. Amy indicated there was a period when she and her daughter had slept on friends’ couches. Amy was also asked to reflect on the resources the college provided that were beneficial to her success. She shared that the financial aid office because she was able to take care of a lot of bills, tuition, and books with her aid. Amy also mentioned that because of her work-study position within the Department of African American Studies, she met and talked with Tupac Shakur’s father. She discussed she learned a lot from him, which also added to her success in college.

The next question was, “How was your experience with your professors and staff at your institution?” Amy explained that from her experience when she returned to college and went to a larger institution, students would stand out more based on their academic performance. Amy explained that she struggled at first, but once she got focused, she stood out more to her professors. Because she stood out to her professors, they started recommending Amy for different opportunities, such as a graduate assistantship, because of her high grades in class. Amy was asked to reflect on how she navigated her way through the first year of her career. Amy discussed that receiving her bachelor's degree was vital because it was a minimal requirement for her to apply for a job in financial aid. She also said that sometimes it takes baby steps before a person finally lands a job in their career field after college.

To wrap up this interview, I asked Amy, “What advice would she give to another first-generation non-traditional student who is about to enter college for the first time?” Amy mentioned that college is not a race; complete it in your own time. She also stated that students must ensure they have a “nice even balance.” Amy said, “To further explain this, students need to focus on school and their personal life as needed. It would need to be an even balance to have a successful college experience.”

Participant 2 (William). William identified as an African American male and a first-generation non-traditional student. William was not even interested in going to college right after high school. When asked, “What motivated you to attend college at that point in your life?” William shared that his mind was on going to the Air Force after 9/11. He shared he wanted to keep his options open. William chose to attend the same college as one of his friends and make something of himself. I asked William, “What challenges did he face in college?” He shared that

he lost his mom during his sophomore year of college. William said, “Losing my mom forced me to grow up overnight because I had already lost my dad.” I asked William, “What successes did he have while in college?” He stated he met his wife in college, was able to graduate, and was able to find his career in higher education by working work-study jobs on campus. I asked William to send me three photos from his time as an undergraduate student and asked him to explain the significance of each image. William explained the importance of the first photo of him working in the registrar’s office, and it was by him working in that office that he knew higher education would be the right career choice. William discussed the significance of the second photo of him and his fraternity brothers. He said, “after the death of his mother, those guys were there for me and held me accountable. I probably would not have graduated if it was not for them.” William discussed the significance of the last photo of him dressed up to attend graduation. William was incredibly proud of himself for making it to that day, even with all the setbacks that happened in his life.

I asked William, “did he experience any financial hardships as an undergraduate?” William shared he did not experience any financial hardships in college. He worked two and sometimes three jobs to have money in his pocket. When asked, “What resources did the college have that were beneficial to your success?” William revealed that he did not know much about the resources offered. He was fortunate to know people in the financial aid and registrar’s office to help him and make his college experience much smoother. I asked William, “How was your experience with your institution's professors and staff?” William loved the professors and staff at his college. He explained that one professor he had at the time his mom passed was truly there for him throughout that tough time. When asked, “How did you navigate your way through the

first year of your career?” William shared that he was already working in higher education while he was a student at the college in a work-study position. After William graduated, he worked for T-Mobile for six years before returning to higher education.

To wrap up this interview, I asked William, “What advice would you give to another first-generation non-traditional student who is about to enter college for the first time?” He expressed that students do not need to “overthink.” William also mentioned that it is suitable for first-generation non-traditional students to get involved with organizations on campus because they would build a network with individuals and possibly hold them accountable. Lastly, William stated, “do not be afraid to ask for help. Also, no matter how rough it is, keep going.”

Participant 3 (Christina). Christina identified as a Caucasian female and a first-generation non-traditional student. Christina did not attend college after high school. I asked Christina, “What motivated you to attend college at that point in your life?” Christina explained that she saw her parents work in retail all their lives and how much of a toll it has taken on them physically and financially. Christina has worked in retail since she was fifteen and did not go to college until she was thirty-two. That is when Christina wanted to change her future for the better. When asked, “What challenges did you face while in college?” Christina shared that the biggest challenge was the demographic of the typical student. She also shared that the age gap became even more evident when group projects were conducted. Also, Christina experienced a technology gap because she was not knowledgeable about the Microsoft Office products and how to use them compared to the other students. I asked Christina, “What successes did you have while in college?” Christina shared that she received A’s in classes, which was a significant

success. She also stated that college had made her a better person overall, and receiving her bachelor's degree has opened many doors for her.

I asked Christina to send me three photos from her time as an undergraduate student and asked her to explain the significance of each image. Christina explained the importance of this first photo at graduation with three of her friends; she was a non-traditional student, experiencing the age gap, but still able to become friends with three remarkable individuals. Christina discussed in the second photo it was her friend and professor, and the significance of the second photo is her professor showed her so much patience and kindness when she took his class. It was because of that professor that Christina was able to overcome that course and continue with her degree. Christina discussed in the third photo it was one of her friends at graduation, and the significance of this photo is that both are first-generation non-traditional students. They were able to make it to graduation and shared some similarities from struggling with retail jobs in the past and deciding to change their future for the better.

I asked Christina, "Did you experience any financial hardships as an undergraduate student?" Christina shared that she was used to financial hardship, which was not different from her past. She had to take out student loans to pay for school and has student loan debt. When asked, "What resources did the college have that were beneficial to your success?" Christina shared that she was thankful that she got the opportunity to go to college in the first place. Christina stated that the financial Aid department was helpful with some of the resources they provided and sometimes awarded her a grant for some semesters. I asked Christina, "How was your experience with your professors and staff at your institution?" Christina found that her age benefitted her when communicating with professors and staff. Faculty and staff were some of the

contributing factors that fueled Christina throughout her time as an undergraduate student. When asked, “How did you navigate your way through the first year of your career?” Christina explained that she experienced imposter syndrome during that first year of her career. She felt like she did not belong in the environment and “felt like a fish out of water.”

To wrap up this interview, I asked Christina, “What advice would you give to another first-generation non-traditional student who is about to enter college for the first time?”

Christina shared that her most prominent piece of advice is to ask for help when you do not know something. She explained that she felt out of place and like an imposter around many traditional students. In closing, she advised there is always going to be someone on campus to help and to be bold enough to keep searching until the right person does help.

Participant 4 (Cathy). Cathy identified as a Caucasian female and a first-generation non-traditional student. Cathy ended up dropping out of high school and got her GED. I asked Cathy, “What motivated her to attend college at that point in her life?” Cathy shared that before she took the GED test, her class instructor informed them that if they passed the GED exam, then they could take one free course at the community college. Cathy knew it would be beneficial and had the option to choose a class based on her interests. When asked, “What challenges did you face while in college?” Cathy mentioned that she did not know how to ask for help and assumed that she was not allowed to ask for help. Cathy was afraid of what people would think if she did ask for help. She believed she was supposed to have it all figured out by the time she enrolled in college. Cathy worked a full-time job on weekends and had to drop down to part-time. During the week, Cathy had two part-time jobs where she worked, and that cut into her study time. Cathy also mentioned that since she did not live on campus, she did not feel connected to the

campus and other students. I also asked Cathy, “What successes did she have while in college?”

Cathy shared that her most considerable success was being able to take academic criticism.

Cathy mentioned she did not do well on a paper and asked the professor for feedback on how she could improve for the next assignment. She explained that she would have never asked for feedback before and considered that a significant success.

I asked Cathy to send me three photos from her time as an undergraduate student and asked her to explain the significance of each image. Cathy shared the importance of the first photo of her mom and her friend, and so many events were going on in her life during this time. Cathy just got out of a relationship, was trying to decide on a major for school, and just felt lost. Cathy discussed in the second picture that it was her niece and nephew and the significance of the second photo is that the niece and nephew are why she stayed in school to graduate. Cathy stated, “This picture is significant because it was all why I was trying to stick through it, even when I did not feel like I was good enough to do it.” Cathy started the significance in the third photo was just her and that she was working at a call center and her co-workers were a bunch of students who had their “life together.” Cathy’s co-workers knew precisely what they wanted to major in, and Cathy felt like an imposter amongst them.

I asked Cathy, “Did you experience any financial hardships as an undergraduate student?” Cathy shared that her whole time as an undergraduate student was filled with financial hardships. Cathy had to take out student loans to pay for college and work two part-time jobs to support herself and her family. Cathy barely had time to study, and she could not attend the commencement ceremony due to work. When asked, “What resources did the college have that were beneficial to your success?” Cathy explained that the student center was a great place for

her to study, and the bookstore had a program where they would buy back textbooks from students. Cathy was able to resell her books to make a little extra cash. Cathy was asked to discuss what her experience was like with her professors and staff at her institution. Cathy shared that her overall experience with the faculty and campus staff was good. One professor from a non-traditional background inspired Cathy because he was reasonable with his students. Cathy was asked to discuss how she was able to navigate through the first year of her career. Cathy mentioned that she completed an internship but realized the career was not for her. She worked multiple jobs and found “a love-in higher education.” Cathy discovered her passion for helping students because they reminded her of herself, and she wanted to be able to help them.

To wrap up this interview, Cathy was asked to advise other first-generation non-traditional students who are about to enter college for the first time. Cathy shared, “Do not be afraid to ask for help.” Because she was afraid to ask for help, it took six years to receive her bachelor’s degree, and she could have avoided many mistakes just by not being afraid to ask for help. The last piece of advice she wanted to share was to take care of yourself, know what campus resources are available to you, and get to know your professors.

Participant 5 (Anna) Anna identified as a Caucasian female and a first-generation non-traditional student. Anna did not go to college after high school. She ended up attending ITT Tech, which has now closed. I asked Anna, “What motivated you to attend college at that point in your life?” Anna shared that during that point in her life, she needed to go back to school to support her family. She was five months pregnant, and the company she and her husband were working for ended up filing bankruptcy. Anna and her husband were left without income for their household and decided it was time for them to attend college to get their bachelor's degrees.

I asked Anna, “What challenges did she face in college?” Anna stated that her biggest challenge was balancing motherhood, working full-time, and being in school to obtain her bachelor’s degree. Anna shared that it was hard trying to juggle all three. Anna was asked to reflect on the successes she had while in college. Anna explained that she was able to receive a childcare grant, was able to experience a global pandemic, and with her major being public health, she could make it to graduation.

I asked Anna to send me three photos from her time as an undergraduate student and asked her to explain the significance of each image. Anna shared the importance of the first photo of her son dressed in a dragon costume, and he was able to participate in the parade because he was part of the daycare at the university. Anna wanted to show her son that everything she did was for him. Anna discussed in the second photo it was her and her classmates. The significance of this photo was that the first class in public health and the group had to create a video for anyone who spoke any language could understand. Anna explained in the third photo it was her and the significance of that photo was she finally reached graduation and realized that everything she went through was for that moment.

I asked Anna, “Did you experience any financial hardships as an undergraduate student?” Anna shared that she and her husband had to move in with his parents because the husband chose to finish his degree and had to quit his job. Anna also mentioned that her husband’s program offered no online classes, which contributed to him leaving his job to pursue his degree 100%. Anna was asked to reflect on what resources the college had that benefited her success. Anna explained that the childcare grant from the university program she applied for helped with daycare, financial aid administered with paying for school, and having a supportive boss allowed

her to take lunch breaks to attend classes. I asked Anna, “How was your experience with your institution's professors and staff?” Anna shared that she “clicked” with a few professors and others not so much. She felt the professors who taught the community health classes were more down-to-earth and easier to talk to. Anna was asked to comment on how she navigated her way through the first year of her career after college. Anna shared that she is still in the same position as she was during her time as an undergraduate student. She is actively applying for jobs in the non-profit sector.

To wrap up this interview, Anna was asked to give advice to other first-generation non-traditional students who are about to enter college for the first time. Anna explained not to be afraid to ask when needed. She mentioned that each time she asked for help, the professors and classmates were more than happy to help her. In closing, Anna stated, “Give yourself some grace and remember what you are doing it for.”

Common Themes on First-Generation Non-Traditional Students and Their Experiences

The data analysis from the interviews with the five participants provided two major themes.

Theme 1. Experiences of being afraid to ask for help as a first-generation non-traditional student. This theme represents the five participants in the study who all experienced being afraid to ask for help during their time as undergraduate students. First-generation non-traditional students who are afraid to ask for help sometimes do not want to be perceived as needy or come across as incompetent. The participants stated, “they felt that since they were older, they should already have it together and should not need help from anyone on campus.”

They saw the traditional students answering questions in class and had study groups with other traditional students. The participants felt there was an age gap with the traditional students. The participants did not feel comfortable asking the traditional students for help in and outside of class. The participants also stated, “asking for help felt like they were already defeated and saw it as a sign of weakness.” The participants also mentioned that being the first in their family to attend college, they felt a lot of pressure to complete their degrees. The findings revealed that all five participants struggled with asking for help during their time as undergraduate students.

Theme 2. Experiences of financial and social challenges. This theme represents the five participants who experienced financial and social challenges during their time as undergraduate students. Students who experience financial and social challenges in college has to work full-time and sometimes part-time jobs and have a difficult time socializing amongst individuals. The participants stated, “they had responsibilities outside of classes, so it required them to work full-time and sometimes part-time jobs.” Some participants had families to care for and did not have the luxury of staying on campus to network with the other students after classes. All the participants had to take out student loans to pay their tuition charges. During the interviews, they all mentioned that they did not want to take out student loans, but that was their only other option for paying for school. Because the participants had to work after classes and could not get involved with campus organizations, they experienced social challenges being on campus. All participants experienced feeling like an imposter amongst their peers. The participants also mentioned, “the age gap they felt around traditional students had them feeling like they did not have anything in common.”

The two themes in this research answered the following research questions:

1. What barriers, if any, did first-generation non-traditional students encounter during their college experience?
2. How did first-generation non-traditional students navigate through their college journey?

The first-generation non-traditional participants' experiences provided a lot of insight into colleges and how they can create more resources that can benefit the first-generation non-traditional student population.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. Five participants shared their experiences and answered nine open-ended questions about the different facets of their journey as first-generation non-traditional students. The findings from this research connected with previous literature with students lacking social connection to the campus and their peers, which led to them being less involved in organizations. Also, upon returning to college, the participants wanted to be a role model to their children and other family members, which also connected with previous literature. Prior literature provided a considerable amount of information on first-generation traditional students but lacked information on first-generation non-traditional students. Additionally, this study provided the gap that existed in research for first-generation non-traditional students. This study also revealed the challenges that existed for the participants. The participants reported they received academic support from faculty and staff at their institution. They were excited to share their experiences with the possibilities to help future first-generation non-traditional students avoid making the same mistakes. The results from this study can bring awareness, institutional growth, and prolific approaches to the higher education sector.

However, to achieve these results, college administrators would need to adapt and create a more welcoming campus for first-generation non-traditional students. First, college administrators would need to create a database of first-generation non-traditional students attending that institution and send a survey to them to find out the resources they need to succeed. Second, college administrators could have the bookstore create a book exchange program where students could share books to lessen the overall costs. Third, they could provide affordable childcare for those students while they are in class or trying to study during regular

business hours. They could also create a designated space for first-generation non-traditional students to gather, socialize, or study to establish a sense of belonging for them. Lastly, college administrators could develop campus programming that is inclusive to children and families.

The limitations of this study are that additional valuable data could come from more interviews with further participants. This study only involved five participants who identified as first-generation non-traditional students; hence, there would need to be more participants in the future to receive a better variety of responses, which could be beneficial for higher education administrators. This study was only able to recruit participants from the same state, a narrow population of first-generation non-traditional students. For future studies, there would need to be participants in other states to participate to gain a broader perspective on their experiences

Conclusion

To conclude, this study was designed to explore the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. There was a significant gap missing in previous literature for first-generation non-traditional students. This study provided the gap that existed in previous literature for first-generation non-traditional students. These students were faced with many challenges during their time as undergraduate students. They were able to overcome their challenges and were able to make it to graduation. Data revealed the themes from perceived barriers the participants experienced during their time as undergraduate students. Furthermore, this study found that higher education administrators would need to adapt and create initiatives to have a more welcoming campus for first-generation non-traditional students. This study has the potential to bring more awareness to college campuses to help better serve future first-generation non-traditional students.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**Office of
Research Integrity**



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 21-411
PROJECT TITLE: The Experiences of First-Generation Non-Traditional Students in Academia
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Educational Research & Administration
RESEARCHERS: PI: Christopher Smith
Investigators: Smith, Christopher J-Wallace, Jason K-
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 04-Apr-2022 to 03-Apr-2023

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: The Experiences of First-Generation Non-Traditional Students in Academia

Principal Investigator: Christopher Smith

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to assist the researcher in understanding the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. This study will allow for a deeper understanding of the participant's higher education experiences and provide future research data. This study will enable first-generation non-traditional students the chance to share their experiences on navigating through the college environment and making it to graduation. Data collected during this study will bring more awareness to the higher education environment for first-generation non-traditional students.

Description of the Study:

As a participant in this study, I will be asked to join the researcher in one interview that will last 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher will use the interview method to collect data for the study. Once the participants are selected, they will be interviewed individually via Zoom. Before the interview, the participants will receive an email that will request them to bring three photos from their time as undergraduate students representing a significant event. The researcher will ask the participants a list of nine questions and will ask them to elaborate more with their responses. The interview and photos would give the participant a chance to share their undergraduate experiences fully.

Participants that will participate identify as first-generation non-traditional students during their time as undergraduates. The participants will be recruited from a flier posted on the researcher's

Facebook page. The criteria to participate in this study will require the participants to be 18 years or older, identify as a first-generation non-traditional student, and have completed a bachelor's degree. For the study, there will only be 5 participants selected.

Benefits:

I am aware that my participation in this research will not directly benefit me or my well-being; however, it will serve as a tool for future first-generation non-traditional students like myself. I am aware that an incentive of \$20 will be provided at the end of this case study by the primary researcher in cash. I understand that I can discontinue my participation at anytime, but I will only receive \$20 if I complete the full interview process.

Risks:

While my participation in this study does not include any significant risks, there is the possibility that sensitive information may be discussed.

Confidentiality:

Any information learned and collected from this study in which I might be identified will remain confidential. To help protect my confidentiality, interviews will be recorded digitally and stored on a laptop, backed up on OneDrive, and password-protected. Identifying information for recordings and transcripts will be coded

to protect privacy. The researcher will maintain a list of participants and identifying codes, stored separately in password-protected computer files. If a participant withdraws from the study, the same procedures to protect the confidentiality of all participants will be maintained.

Alternative Procedures:

This study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without informing me of your reason

Participant's Assurance:

This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997.

Any questions about this research project should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

Consent to Participate in Research:

By clicking the box below, I give my consent to participate in this research project.

Yes, I consent to participate.

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Hello First-Generation Non-Traditional Student,

My name is Christopher Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. I would like to ask you to consider participating in a study. The purpose of this study is to assist the researcher in understanding the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia. Participating in this study will afford you with the opportunity to reflect on your own views with respect to inclusion.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to join the researcher in one interview that will last 60 to 90 minutes. Once the participants are selected, they will be interviewed individually via Zoom. If you agree to participate, we will discuss a date and time for your interview. The researcher will ask you a list of nine questions during the interview. The interview would give you a chance to share their undergraduate experiences fully. Participants in this study will receive a \$20 incentive at the end of the interview.

If you are still interested in participating or have any questions relating to this study, please feel free to email me at Christopher.j.smith@usm.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Christopher J. Smith, MBA

Doctoral Candidate

Higher Education Administration

University of Southern Mississippi

APPENDIX D
RECRUITMENT FLYER



Research Participants Needed

ARE YOU A FIRST-GENERATION NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT?

This research study seeks to understand the experiences of first-generation non-traditional students in academia.

ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE

- Must be 18 years or older
- Identify as a first-generation non-traditional student
- Have completed a bachelor's degree

Participation Involves:

- Completing a confidential interview via Zoom for 60 - 90 minutes

**Participants will receive an incentive of \$20 for participating in this study.*

Contact: Christopher Smith

Christopher.J.Smith@usm.edu

This research has been approved by The University of Southern Mississippi Review Board (IRB)

Approval #21-411



APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What motivated you to attend college at that point in your life?
2. What challenges did you face while in college?
3. What successes did you have while in college?
4. During this time, please present your 3 photos from your time as an undergraduate student. Please explain the significance of each photo.
5. Did you experience any financial hardships while as an undergraduate student?
6. What resources did the college have that was beneficial to your success?
7. How was your experience like with your professors and staff at your institution?
8. How did you navigate your way through the first year into your career?
9. What advice would you give to another first-generation non-traditional student who is about to enter college for the first-time?