

**Navigating the Next Chapter: Post-Pandemic Challenges and Pathways in Accessing  
Higher Education for First-Generation College Students**

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Navigating the Next Chapter: Post-Pandemic Challenges and Pathways in Accessing Higher Education for First-Generation College Students

Despite some progress, college enrollment and completion rates for first-generation students remain below those of their peers, particularly in Oregon, where numbers are lower than the national average. First-generation students face unique challenges, including the absence of family role models familiar with the college application process, insufficient academic preparation due to lower-level coursework, and significant financial difficulties, such as the need to stay close to home to support their families. These obstacles often create a domino effect, complicating the path to college success from an early age. Additional challenges posed by the post-pandemic landscape, such as increased poverty and mental health issues, further compound these barriers. Smaller communities with limited resources struggle to address these needs, highlighting the necessity for research that clarifies and updates the systems and supports required to assist first-generation students.

This study employs a mixed methods approach, starting with a comprehensive survey of current potential first-generation college students in a semi-rural community in the Pacific Northwest. The survey was followed by in-depth interviews with select survey respondents to gain deeper insights into their experiences. This study identifies the barriers and protective factors that influence first-generation students' decisions regarding college attendance, analyzing shifts that have occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic, and then develops recommendations for practical additions to support systems that public schools can implement in a fiscally responsible and manageable way. By understanding these dynamics, the research provides actionable insights that can improve support for first-generation students, particularly those impacted by post-pandemic challenges, thus enhancing their college access and success.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Oregon is struggling to send students to college. Only 55% of Oregon students enroll in a college program after high school graduation (Oregon Department of Education, 2021). My school district, in a semi-rural area of Oregon about an hour from Portland, continually produces some of the top high-school graduation rates in the state. However, overall college-going rates are low. In fact, our rates are often more than 10% below the state average despite graduation success. Digging deeper into the data, approximately 80% of students in the district would be first-generation students if they did attend college, yet only 45% actually enroll (Oregon Department of Education, 2021). Despite the concentrated development of the College Credit Now program, a program designed to provide students with easily transferable community college credits for their high-school courses, and substantial effort to create college exposure, it is clear that our district's population needs a different approach to achieve post-secondary academic success.

### **Background Context**

First-generation college students are defined as students who are the first in their families to attend college. National census data interprets this as no caregiver in the student's household has achieved an education beyond a high school diploma (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). First-generation students face many obstacles when it comes to applying, enrolling, matriculating, and maintaining enrollment in college programs. Despite large percentage growth in national college enrollment, overall enrollment for first-generation students has consistently lagged over the last several decades. The United States Department of Education first initiated support for first-generation college students and other potential college-going

populations through the *Higher Education Act of 1965*. One key feature of the Act was to provide increased federal financial aid to low-income students (Fallon, 1997). However, financial challenges are only one hindrance for potential first-generation students.

First-generation students require an intricate system of supports to enter and persevere through college, including a high proportion of college graduates who can model and support college-going choices, familiarity with the college application process, and support in navigating the financial process to obtain scholarships and loans. Often those supports are challenging to find in rural areas. Thus, more work needs to be done to better understand and prepare for the multifaceted needs of these students to propel them to post-secondary success, particularly when access to such supports is limited primarily due to students' zip code.

### **National Trends in First-Generation Student Enrollment**

Nationally, there are some discouraging trends in post-secondary educational enrollment for prospective college students. Overall enrollment hit its peak with over 21 million students in 2010, with numbers going down by almost 10% since (Hanson, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Approximately 62% of high school graduates move on to college, but that rate continues to decline over time (Hanson, 2023). Although some statistics show promise, such as a 125% increase in non-white students attending college over the last 45 years, the numbers alone may not paint a complete picture (Hanson, 2023).

Recent data shows slight growth in first-generation student enrollment in post-secondary institutions. In 2016, only 23.9% of undergraduates across the U.S. were first-generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Although this percentage grew nationally by 1.5% from 2016 to 2018 (RTI International, 2019), there are a few important characteristics of these data to note. First-generation students are more likely to attend a 2-year college program,

compared to their peers. Overall, 74.9% of college students attend a 4-year college program, while only 25% enroll in 2-year colleges (Hanson, 2023). For first-generation students, however, these percentages do not hold. Among first-generation college students, only 34.8% attend a 4-year college program, while 44.1% enroll in 2-year colleges, with the remaining attending for-profit programs (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Additionally, by 2017, only 16.2% of graduates with a bachelor's degree were first-generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Therefore, while the overall percentage has increased slightly, the graduation rate for first-generation students is drastically lower than that of their peers who are more likely to complete 4-year bachelor's programs directly after high school.

Why might this be the case? We can make some guesses based on the data, but the actual causes are still somewhat unclear. First-generation college students tend to come from low-income families of color, largely Latinx or African-American, and they are more likely to be female (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022; RTI International, 2019). Knowing this, we can hypothesize. For example, enrollment among Hispanic females increased by more than 1000% from 1976 to 2021 (Hanson, 2023), with about 174,100 Hispanic females enrolled in 1976 and 2,222,000 in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This increase might suggest large accomplishments in first-generation enrollment in the last several decades; however, these data do not specifically indicate that these students are first-generation. It is possible that this increase simply reflects the overall growth of the Latina population in the U.S. over the last 45 years, from 5,678,000 in 1976 (Fernandez, 1977) to 30,625,000 in 2020 (Noe-Bustamante & Moslimani, 2023), which accounts for over 500% of that growth but not all. Therefore, deeper analysis is necessary.

Because first-generation students tend to be low-income, financing college can be a concern. Some students feel the overall cost of college is prohibitive. Another related reason may be that students often feel the need to stay near home, both to support their families and save costs by living at home rather than on campus (Fallon, 1997). Additional reasonable hypotheses could be made here, particularly regarding rural students. Rural communities tend to have fewer resources and are farther geographically from multiple college options. Potentially, two-year programs are the only geographically viable option for many students to consider if they plan to live at home to save money. However, this hypothesis needs to be researched. Again, it appears additional data and analysis are needed.

### **College Enrollment Trends in Oregon**

Between 1970 and 2010, postsecondary enrollment in Oregon increased by 106%, with the majority (84.2%) of students enrolled in public college programs (Hanson, 2023). However, since that 2010 peak, Oregon enrollment has decreased by almost 20%, such that in more recent years, only 55.6% of high-school graduates enrolled in college within 16 months of graduating (Hanson, 2023; Oregon Department of Education, 2021). It is also important to note that currently 51% of all children in Oregon live in a household where no adult has attended college, and of current working adults in Oregon, only 46% have any post-secondary education (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). So, while there is evidence that college enrollment increased in Oregon public colleges, it could be attributed to other reasons, such as an increase in population, not an increase in access for more Oregonians, particularly for first-generation students.

Oregon's high school cohort graduation rates across the state increased from 68.4% to 81% in the last decade (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023), implying relatively strong systems in place throughout K-12 public schools that positively impact students' completion of high school

requirements. However, Oregon appears to face broader challenges in matriculating students from high school to college, despite the growth in high school graduation rates. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2023), 31% of Oregon children lived in households receiving public assistance in 2021, and 75% of Oregon households had children who were already employed. Only three states in the nation (Louisiana, New Mexico, and West Virginia) had higher percentages of families receiving public assistance, and three had more households with employed children (North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah).

Implications can be drawn from these data as well. For example, Oregonians, on average, might struggle more to find college affordable due to higher rates of households on public assistance. Similarly, there may be a larger percentage of students who need to work, which might override their need for a degree, an indicated barrier in national research (Nowicki, 2018). More data is needed to tie these conclusions to college enrollment, yet the possible connections are valuable to note when considering future research. For example, the strengths of the K-12 system could be leveraged to support student engagement in post-secondary pursuits. Possibly, elements within the system associated with the increased high school graduation rates could provide insights related to the knowledge and support needed to pursue higher education for first-generation students.

### **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Communities**

The impact of the global COVID-19 impact was felt within college enrollment numbers. With disrupted learning, K-12 educators worked hard to get students to graduate, with national graduation rates increasing rather than declining. While only 79% of students graduated in 2011, that rate rose to 89% in 2020 and continues to rise (NCES, 2021) Yet, at the same time, the state saw a decrease in college enrollment. Nationally, students who graduated in 2021 were 2% less

likely to enroll in four-year colleges and 16% less likely to enroll in two-year colleges, than their 2019 peers (Howell et al., 2022). Considering the larger number of first-generation students who typically enroll in two-year programs, the decrease in two-year college enrollment was particularly impactful for that population, which experienced a 1.7% decline in 4-year college enrollment for first-generation students, but a 19% decline in two-year program enrollment (Howell et al., 2022).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

In writing this Literature Synthesis, I initially used search terms related to first-generation college students and the preparation that they might receive from their respective high school programs as I searched through Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included “first-generation college student” and “high school” or “secondary education.” This search was expanded to include articles related to preparation for college and college enrollment. Additionally, search terms related to COVID-19 were used, such as pandemic, mental health, low income, socioeconomic, and poverty. As I read articles, I took note of those that were of interest to my research and then searched for references and resources from those articles to add to the literature base.

#### **The Value of Post-Secondary Education**

As of 2021, approximately 55% of all Americans have no college degree, and 42% of children live in a household with a guardian who does not have a degree (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). While unemployment rates have rebounded to lower percentages since their rise during the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of families with children who receive public assistance has risen since 2019 and remains steady at 26%, with 16% of those children living in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Research is clear on the benefits of a college education. Income growth is stronger for individuals with a college education, with nearly \$100,000 greater median wealth than those without a college education (Fry, 2021). Some have raised questions about the value of college when the costs and incurring student debt are continuously rising. However, Niendorf and Beck

(2021) conclude that college is still beneficial. After examining 115 degree/school combinations, considering the full cost of attending, repayment of loans over time, and post-graduate median income, the researchers found that, at even the lowest earning degree outcomes, there was still a \$149,286 value-added income over a lifetime compared to students with only a high school education (Niendorf & Beck, 2021). At its highest, college-earning adults earn \$1,694,086 more over a lifetime, after accounting for the cost of their degree (Niendorf & Beck, 2021). Though this is a wide range, there was no negative effect determined in paying for the cost of college in relation to lifetime income.

However, where students attend college and the types of programs they enter does matter. To realize the income benefits associated with a college degree, students need to complete a bachelor's degree program, even if that means transferring to a four-year college. Carnevale et al. (2011) found that the higher the degree, the better the lifetime earnings, with those earning a bachelor's degree making an average of \$2.3 million over a lifetime, while associate's degree earners make only \$1.7 million on average over a lifetime. They also claim that 65% of jobs require a college degree now, as opposed to only 28% in 1973. This increase continues with advanced degrees. Because 64% of first-generation students attend public, two-year programs and are 16% less likely to graduate than their peers, increasing enrollment numbers alone is not impactful in closing the post-secondary opportunity gap (Terenzini et al., 1996). Students should be encouraged to transfer their program to a four-year bachelor's program and, even after enrolling in a bachelor's program, first-generation students need to be supported in completing their education and obtaining a bachelor's degree (Kezar et al., 2019) to obtain the most benefit from their college degree.

The long-term effects of having a college education can amount to more than just boosting lifestyle and income. Being a college-educated parent helps one lead one's own child through post-secondary processes. Fully 70% of adults who had a parent who went to college earned their own bachelor's degree, whereas only 26% of adults who were not raised in a household with college-educated parents did the same (Fry, 2021).

### **Historical Challenges for First-Generation Students**

First-generation students face a number of challenges when considering attending college. Researchers point to three key areas that include: (a) lack of a family role model who can provide a vision of college and help aid in the search and application process; (b) less academic preparation because of lower-level coursework taken through middle and high school; and (c) substantial financial challenges, including paying for college and a need to live close to home to help support their family (Fallon, 1997; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Such challenges act as obstacles in that they create a domino effect for students that makes obtaining college success difficult at exceptionally early stages of their lives.

#### ***Lack of Role Models with College Experience***

First-generation students typically do not have a model in their families to help them envision a future path to and through college. The lack of a model provides one challenge in that these students do not have someone to help them navigate the elaborate process of getting into college. This process includes maintaining a required grade point average, learning about schools of interest, completing the application process, and applying for financial aid. Additionally, research has shown that students without a family role model struggle in understanding how to act in college and how to balance their home life with their college life. Gibbons et al. (2016) conducted a focus group of 15 first-generation college students from a large public university

which enlightened both sides of the struggle for first-generation students. Students shared that, while family was able to provide emotional support, students were still in need of information to help them be successful, such as norms and procedures for college and how to manage their time as a student once on campus (Gibbons et al., 2016.) Further, these students shared a feeling of disconnect both at home and at school. They struggled to bring information about school back home because their families did not understand school life and their interactions.

A qualitative study of 16 first-generation students showed similar results. Naff et al. (2017) learned that all 16 students were influenced by their families to enroll in college, but this was based upon emotional support and the student's want to help their families. All 16 also agreed that they needed to rely on school staff to help them walk through the process of applying and enrolling in school because their families just did not have the knowledge to do so.

The need to have knowledge and a sense of belonging was supported by other researchers, as well. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) talked with students who explained in interviews a need to know the rules for how to behave both in and out of the classroom on a college campus, as well as feeling lost when those rules were not clear. Similarly, O'Shea et al. (2015) found that students felt like imposters due to their lack of knowledge of the rules of college life.

Azmitia et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study of 214 students, surveying students four times over the course of six years, from their first year in college, throughout that journey, and then finally checking in two years after they graduated. The main theme arose as both a struggle and an asset with the idea of a "sense of belonging" (p. 95). Their findings indicated that students who were able to create a strong sense of belonging typically academically persevered through school and maintained better mental health, while those who struggled to find their

identity had both academic and mental health challenges, sometimes dropping out of school altogether (Azmitia et al., 2021).

Researchers have found school counselors can be key in helping students approach the college process. In a longitudinal study of 4,835 high school seniors, Byron et al. (2011) found that students who saw their counselor regularly before 10th grade were more likely to apply to college, especially if their counselor discussed and shared important information about college programs. Further, for students with low socioeconomic status, increased contact with a school counselor before 10th grade was a positive determinant in mitigating student income as a barrier to attending college. School counselors play a clear role in helping first-generation students, in particular, navigate the complex challenges of the college admissions process (Bryan et al., 2011). Havlik (2017) supported this idea, by sharing that first-generation students can be supported in their transition to college by having the right support people in place to guide that transition and help students find their “intersectional identities” (p. 135).

Even for students who know that their school counselor is their best resource for college-going support, fewer than half of students utilize this resource well (Fallon, 1997; Naff et al., 2017). Additionally, counselors themselves are not always as available as they would like to be for students as their caseloads have increased and counselors are responsible for many other tasks around their schools, such as scheduling and testing (Perna et al., 2015). This finding is supported by research from the U.S Government Accountability Office (Nowicki, 2018) where college admissions staff shared that high school counselors are essential to helping students walk through the college admissions process, “such as taking students to college fairs and building relationships with colleges. However, counselors often face high caseloads and competing priorities, such as getting kids to graduate and handling emotional and social issues” (Nowicki,

2018, p. 32). Therefore, either systems need to be addressed that free up time for counselors to do this important work, or different programs and adults to support those programs need to be put into place.

### ***Less Rigorous Coursework***

First-generation students, on average, also take less rigorous coursework in both middle and high school. This can limit their view of attending college as a possibility and lower their college prospects, as they have less desirable transcripts to present in the application process. The benefits of taking advanced coursework can be a striking determinant of future success, as well as an indicator of negative systematic views on first-generation students. Horn and Nunez (2000) studied U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics Data and found that first-generation students who took advanced math courses more than doubled their chance of enrolling in 4-year programs after graduation. However, only 14% of first-generation students studied were on the advanced math track.

Fallon (1997) argued that due to lower on-average socioeconomic status and bias due to race and gender tendencies, these students are not seen as fitting the role of traditional college students, and therefore, may not be encouraged by their teachers or counselors to pursue advanced, rigorous coursework in the same way their peers may. But the problem may be deeper than that. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (Nowicki, 2018), in an analysis of the nation's public schools, discovered that the higher the poverty rate of a school, the less access students had to advanced courses, such as calculus, physics, and Advanced Placement classes. This pattern was correlated to college acceptance in that students were unable to complete the courses that most four-year colleges expect of students, automatically putting high-poverty students at a disadvantage (Nowicki, 2018). The research furthered that students in high-poverty

areas also struggled to attend to school, even when such courses were offered, due to adverse and challenging conditions at home, such as hunger, domestic violence, and homelessness, which did not allow for school to be the student's priority. A phenomenological study by Kirton (2023), where she interviewed five college counselors supported these findings, in that the counselors shared that first-generation students were not well prepared for college, as they often came from low-performing middle and high-school programs with less opportunity to be ready for the advanced coursework required of a college student.

This is an area for school staff to consider, as their view of and relationships with students is an opportunity to change this dynamic and have a positive impact on first-generation students and their view of and enrollment in college. Staff can powerfully change student outcomes long term and build student potential by encouraging more challenging courses and promoting opportunities to advance students early in their education.

### ***Limited Financial Resources***

Some of the hesitancy by prospective first-generation students in college matriculation also relates to the cost. Approximately 66% of first-generation students incurred a debt of at least \$25,000 for their college education, compared with only about 50% of non-first-generation students (Fry, 2021). Further, according to the Institute for College Access and Success (2018), 23% of first-generation students defaulted on their federal student loans within 12 years. Comparatively, only 14% of non-first-generation students entered default. Separate from financial aid, many first-generation students work to provide financial support for their families, which may limit the time spent on attending and studying for classes and may artificially limit the programs of study available to them if they need to live at or closer to home to support their family (Fallon, 1997).

Furquim et al. (2017) studied the college financial decisions of over 100,000 students in a large public university. Through a comprehensive analysis that controlled for many covariates, such as overall costs, ability to pay, level of borrowing, and the overall amount of borrowing, they found that first-generation students borrow more often and in larger amounts than continuing generation students. They theorize that continuing generation students have parents that are able to better navigate the financial aid process and are more likely to have saved some money for college prior to sending their children (Furquim et al., 2017). This would imply that first-generation students have to work through the funding system with less knowledge and support and that they leave college with higher debt ratios than their peers.

Other studies supported the idea that financial struggles were a key barrier for first-generation students. Gibbons et al. (2016) found that, while scholarships could help, first-generation students faced a consistent and unending struggle to support themselves financially (p. 503). This included not only the need to cover tuition. Many first-generation college students commute to school to avoid room and board fees, however, they still need to pay for transportation, and parking, as well as ensure they have a reliable car or other vehicle for this travel (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Additionally, many first-generation students feel a need to stay home to support their families (Nowicki, 2018), which adds to their overall academic and financial stress in trying to balance school and work obligations.

Researchers have drawn clear differences between first-generation students and their peers in terms of the challenges surrounding college. Understanding these differences, and the needs that surface from them, requires teachers, counselors, and other school personnel to take a different and more nuanced approach to supporting first-generation students from as early as middle school. Information related to college enrollment and success must be shared differently,

with both students and their families, to help students break through these three persistent challenges identified. Multiple frameworks may assist in better understanding how effective supports might be designed and implemented.

### **Protective Factors to Overcome These Challenges**

Social capital (Coleman, 1988) is defined by what is gained when interpersonal relationships drive individuals to act on and achieve goals. In the context of first-generation college students, social capital applies to the knowledge, or lack of knowledge, that they might have around college enrollment and attendance. Students gain social capital through their interactions with teachers, counselors, and other adults who make the college system clear and attainable, despite perhaps not having previous exposure and guidance (Naff et al., 2017). The interactions with these adults may help students gain needed social capital that they are unable to obtain from family members who may not have post-secondary knowledge and experience (Bryan et al., 2011).

In the book, *New Directions for Institutional Research* (Swail, 2000), the idea of increasing social and cultural capital was brought up as a key to allowing more students access to higher education. The author argued that students who have this already have the knowledge through this home life and community are able to use it well to find success in the system. However, those within disadvantaged and high-poverty schools typically are without the knowledge to navigate the system, therefore, it is the duty of school systems to develop programs that will provide additional support to students who need it and to “fill gaps where the system fails” (Swail, 2000, p. 88).

Students benefit greatly from targeted programming that supports their personal growth toward the college-going process. According to Kezar et al. (2019), purposefully planned

programs to support student's transition from high school to college provide a "significant, positive" impact on students' ability to develop career self-efficacy and focus on a successful education to reach their goals. Their mixed methods study included 273 students transitioning into midwestern public universities, with both a control group not receiving any additional support, and students who were receiving mentorship and guidance from school personnel in a transition program. Through a system of surveys, focus groups, and interviews, the researchers showed a clear benefit to students in the transition program. Students showed statistical growth in their knowledge of how to be successful in college by identifying a major and a career path, as well as described anecdotally about their increased personal beliefs about their ability to achieve these goals (Kezar et al., 2019). Though this study focused on students already moving into college, the structure of mentorship and support could be replicated in a high school system to provide the necessary social capital that will allow them to access college. Students also need support in skill-building activities that will benefit them through the process, such as applications, college entry essays, preparation for interviews, and networking events (Kezar et al., 2019). In lieu of parent support, this information could come from trusted adults within a student's social system, such as a counselor, teacher, or principal (Ramirez et al., 2016). By teaching students to utilize the network of adults within their lives, they can gain information to develop future options that would otherwise not have been within their view.

Further, it is just as important that counselors work directly with the parents of first-generation students, both in helping them see the pathway to accessing college as well as guiding them to help their child shape their aspirations (Fallon, 1997; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Naff et al., 2017). Parents who have not navigated the complicated college application process lack the background knowledge often needed in the process and likely struggle to support their child

through it. Counselors can serve as the conduit to success by guiding both parents and students through the process, providing the missing social capital needed, but time needs to be made for students to access their knowledgeable staff, and outreach to students who need this support should be systematically addressed to reach the right students.

In fact, engaging families in the conversation about overall success has been shown to build student capacity, despite the fact that families might not have the background to understand the college process. Covarrubias et al. (2018) found that students who had regular conversations with families around academic success were more likely to have higher grades. Because these conversations occurred more frequently in continuing generation households, those students benefited from them. However, the researchers argue that families can still discuss the idea of working hard and being successful with their children to gain the same benefits, despite not having the personal connection to college (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Kitchen (2021) found that validation was crucial in helping students to feel more successful in setting and pursuing goals. His study of 760 students in a midwestern university system showed that the effects of validation were high for all subcategories of students and had no statistical difference across various student characteristics studied, such as race, gender, first-generation status, and grades. This implies that the strategy and building student confidence through validation when well employed throughout the K-12 system, can provide a strong level of building confidence and the ability to believe in their own capacity for success in all students, including underrepresented students, before they enter the college system.

This work is further supported by Palbusa and Gauvain's (2017) study showing that first-generation students benefit from the emotional support provided by their parents in terms of having higher grade point averages and overall better college performance. The research

indicates that parents are still an important piece of the puzzle for first-generation students, even when it does not bring the social capital of applying to and getting into college. Terenzini et al. (2001) share that parents are essential in shaping their children and need to be brought into the discussion and understanding around college-going and what it could mean for their child. They further that these discussions should begin as early as 5th grade and must incorporate a full approach to the value of college, as well as how to navigate the costs and enrollment procedures (Terenzini, 2001).

A study by Schwartz et al. (2018) reveals some small steps that school systems could take in building networking and mentoring between students and staff. This study, which included 164 first-generation students, utilized simple strategies, such as networking events and discussions about how to identify support, which resulted in students indicating an increased ability to ask for help, better relationships with their instructors, and overall better grades (Schwartz et al., 2017). Further, the power of this study is stated by the researchers in that these steps are simple to take, and could be replicated easily in any school environment.

A multifaceted high school counseling program that provides support in a different format may give potential first-generation college students the social capital necessary to apply for and enroll in post-secondary programs. Additionally, classroom instructors play a role in helping shape the mindset of first-generation students, most especially in helping them see their potential in certain careers and areas of study. Students are much more likely to take rigorous courses, pursue college, and persist in completion when they have a mindset that they are capable of the career options they are pursuing (Kezar et al., 2019). Building this mindset is possible. Research shows key areas of social influences that should be developed mindfully for

students and are accessible to all schools regardless of their location and funding, as they are not about purchasing, but practice.

Research by Garza and Fullerton (2017) also helped provide some ideas around how to support students once on campus in finding their footing and addressing their sense of belonging. They looked at the relationship between a student's distance from home and their college grade point average (GPA) and found that students who stayed closer to home actually struggled more than those who enrolled further away from their families. The researchers believed that removing a student from their culture actually fostered an environment where students had to integrate into the college format, and that this social integration led to great degree completion (Garza, 2017). Although many first-generation students will still need to enroll in colleges close to home for both financial and family needs, this information can be of value in thinking about how to create social integration for all students on a college campus, making purposeful choices for those who need more support. By knowing this, schools and universities can cultivate this same sense of belonging on their campuses for students who commute, are part-time, or otherwise close to home by actively engaging students in activities that would allow them to build a sense of culture and belonging on campus.

Social Cognitive Career Theory is a psychological theory that refers to how individuals develop personal interests, make choices, and achieve success in educational and career pursuits (Lent et al., 2000). This theory focuses on how students grow career interests and make choices that support them, turning their interests into action using self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and clear goals (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Further, we know that students who create long-term career goals that are in alignment with personal goals are, overall, more successful (Azmitia et al., 2021). The research has demonstrated some clear methods that can be employed in school

programs to help first-generation students build not only personal career interests but also structured paths toward the actualization of these goals that might increase first-generation students' enrollment and success in college.

### **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted people's lives all around the globe. In the United States, communities are still seeing that impact via a national mental health crisis and an increase in homelessness. Research from Ryan et al. (2021) showed a dramatic increase in suicidal ideation and attempts due to fears within American communities about the COVID-19 disease, as well as the isolation and distancing that were required. Many people lost their jobs, creating a financial crisis. Many of these lost jobs impacted low-income families, who are also more likely to live in unsafe communities and more likely to suffer from food insecurities (Soria et al., 2020). Little relief has been found and communities continue to suffer. This has an impact on families' abilities to support their children and the increased need for those children to support their families.

During the global pandemic, these community impacts created new barriers that broadened the divide between first-generation and continuing generation students. Therefore, additional updated research is needed to explore the impact of the pandemic on the lives of first-generation students and the enrollment decline since the pandemic.

### ***Additional Barriers Since the Pandemic***

National data shows a comparatively small number of students attending college or other post-secondary learning opportunities (i.e., apprenticeships, trade schools, etc.) when compared to highly successful graduation rates. The national average for high school graduation rates is about 87% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023); however, only about 60% of

graduates attend either a two- or four-year college program (Hanson, 2024). The number has reduced since the pandemic, with a 14.7% decline between Fall 2020 and Spring 2022 (Hanson, 2024). Could there be other factors that are at play beyond the three found in previous research that are exacerbating the divide and putting additional barriers in place for first-generation college students? If so, what might these barriers be and how might educators affect them?

Educational data shows that students, all students, are experiencing increased social and educational challenges since COVID. Initial thoughts were that there was a learning gap that we would need to work hard to close, but we would return to “normal” after a few years. But, we see additional societal challenges that are not just persistent, but are growing, and are deeply affecting families, and subsequently the children in those families. The Student Experience in the Research (SERU) COVID-19 Survey (Soria et al., 2020) looked at the initial impact of the pandemic on first-generation students in large, public universities. They found that first-generation students were more likely than continuing education students to struggle in many areas. 52% of first-generation students had some lost income due to the pandemic in their household, as compared to only 30% of families with college backgrounds. Similarly, first-generation students were twice as likely to worry about food (36%) compared to only 16% of continuing generation students, and while 33% of continuing students showed high levels of depression, 40% of first-generation students did. Could the increase in personal challenges be related to the reduction in what was already low college enrollment for this group of students? Is there more to understand about how poverty, mental health, and societal challenges are affecting this post-COVID generation of students?

What past research shows are typical challenges for first-generation students reaching college have changed. Regan et al. (2023) conducted a descriptive research study with 1,573

undergraduate students from around the country. Through survey results, they found that “the pandemic has widened the divide between first- and continuing generation students and has exacerbated the challenges faced by all students (and created new ones)” (Regan et al., 2023, p. 24). This includes fewer first-generation students having health insurance, being more likely to consider suicide, and being less likely to seek mental health treatment and support. The researchers share their belief in a potential shift of challenges faced by first-generation students that must be further researched, to evaluate support systems currently in place.

**Mental Health.** Though it has only been a few years, there are a handful of studies that show a significant impact on student mental health because of the pandemic, which was particularly impactful to low-income and potential first-generation students. In general, mental health concerns in children and young adults increased substantially during the pandemic. An increase in suicidal ideation and attempts was found by Ryan et al. (2021), which focused on data gathered from a pediatric emergency room in Texas. This quantitative analysis found that youth between 11-21 years of age were 1.60 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation in 2020, and 1.45 times more likely to attempt suicide, than the year before.

Serpas & Ignacio (2023) studied 107 Hispanic students at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI), looking at psychological stress on students as a result of the pandemic. They hypothesized that the cultural-affirming and socially supporting environment of an HSI could serve as a protective factor for students in bouncing back from pandemic stresses, however, that was not the case. In fact, they found that added stress and poor mental health were high for students after the pandemic despite any sense of social and community support, indicating the need for new programs and supports to be put into place to help students. They further hypothesized that social

support alone would not deal with the mental health challenges that arose from something as impactful as a global pandemic.

The effects of this data are also seen explicitly affecting first-generation students. Kirton (2023) found that first-generation students had increased anxiety and depression due to the change to remote learning, most especially from low-income students. Regan et al. (2023) reported similar findings, in that first-generation students had higher rates of anxiety and depression than continuing-education students, but were 15% less likely to seek treatment. Further, they found that one-fourth of students in their study had considered or attempted suicide since the pandemic (Regan et al., 2023). Sense of belonging also declined for first-generation students, with many reporting they were experiencing “imposter syndrome” (Soria et al., 2020).

**Added Family and Financial Challenges.** Food and housing insecurities have increased substantially since the pandemic began in 2020. The California Student Aid Commission found that food insecurities amongst college students have increased from 39% in 2018 to 66% in 2022. Similarly, housing insecurities have increased from 36% to 53% in the same timeframe (California Student Aid Commission, 2023). Two recent studies highlight the increased struggle first-generation, in particular, students have faced.

A statistical analysis of survey responses from 947 college students revealed the substantial struggle first-generation students have faced in helping more at home because of the pandemic (Barber et al., 2021). Helping at home included helping siblings who were at home. Additionally, these students were living in households that did not have savings to overcome lost jobs and were less likely to have healthcare. Such situations led to overall feelings of stress and food insecurities that negatively affected student performance and GPA (Barber et al., 2021).

Davis et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-method study involving 659 first-generation students chosen through a detailed purposeful sampling process across five universities in the U.S. Their focus was to understand the particular struggles of first-generation students through the pandemic, especially the idea that the pandemic exacerbated the already existing inequalities and challenges this group of students faced. Students faced heightened challenges in affording college due to lost employment opportunities for themselves and their families. They also felt an increased need to take care of family members at home, making college-going a challenge (Davis et al., 2021). All of these added challenges led to less persistence in college for the students studied.

### ***Additional Protective Factors Needed***

What implications do these findings have for shifts that need to happen in our school systems to support students being successful in post-high settings? Students continue to share that the support of family members is crucial for their confidence and motivation to continue with school (Davis et al., 2021). But that alone will not address all of the exacerbated challenges. Schools need to focus on historically documented challenges, as well as work on analyzing new barriers that might be in place for students because of the pandemic and its lasting effect on our communities. Davis et al. (2021) suggest that institutions take the time to talk with students and understand the unique challenges they face in staying engaged in their coursework, and then create additional services to support them, such as increased academic advising, mental health services, and added financial support. A similar suggestion is given by Soria et al. (2020) to take time to understand the particular challenges first-generation students face and provide mental health support to guide them through it.

## **Purpose of This Study**

Despite some growth over time, enrollment and completion of college for first-generation students is still below that of their peers. Numbers in Oregon fall below the national average, and when that is further complicated by being outside of major cities and their resources, rural students struggle even more with college access. Ample research points to both the specific challenges that first-generation students face, as well as theories and potential strategies that can be employed by school districts to help improve college-going outcomes for students. First, we know that first-generation students need targeted, focused support to help build the mindsets and social skills that will allow for actionable goal-setting toward college and career success. Second, K-12 public school programs that find success in helping all students graduate from high school can utilize their wide reach and programming skills to help students navigate the systems that are required to approach their college aspirations. Such support includes providing opportunities for more rigorous courses and encouraging students to explore career paths, as well as providing direct support to visit colleges, fill out applications and financial aid packets, and navigate the paperwork that makes college a reality for students. Finally, both high school and college programs have the knowledge to support first-generation students to see success once enrolled, including flexible schedules to support working students and the social connection needed to persevere. By employing some practices around belief systems and prompting access, staff can help first-generation students actualize the goal of achieving a college diploma.

First-generation students benefit greatly from targeted K-12 programming that supports their personal growth toward the college-going process. Research and theory generally support these practices. However, the needs have changed and what is unclear are the potential nuances that are influential in varied communities, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. The

addition of mental health and financial challenges that impact low-income families most significantly has shifted the challenges that need to be addressed to support first-generation students' capacity to apply for and matriculate into college. Being that we are only a few years removed from the pandemic and that these are new challenges to our communities, research needs to be more explicit about the nuances needed to support students in our current times, meeting the unique and specialized needs of first-generation students from demographically challenged communities. Therefore, in my dissertation, I aim to address the following research questions.

**Research Questions:**

- 1a. How do recent high school graduates describe their educational aspirations and post-secondary decisions in the context of their lived experiences with poverty, mental health, and societal challenges?
- 1b. What are the similarities and differences in aspirations and decisions between potential first-generation and continuing generation students?
- 2a. What are the current perceived barriers and facilitators to accessing post-secondary education for recent high school graduates, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and within the context of poverty and mental health challenges?
- 2b. What are the similarities and differences in perceived barriers and facilitators between potential first-generation and continuing generation students?

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHOD**

As documented in the first two chapters, there has been a concerning decrease in the number of high school graduates who are pursuing post-secondary education, in particular for those who would be first-generation college students. My study expanded on prior research to explore potential new impactful changes since the COVID-19 pandemic that could be at the root of the continuing decrease in college enrollment among first-generation college students. The research questions in this study explored the personal dynamics surrounding this decrease in college enrollment by considering the broader context of societal challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. This study also investigated participants' experiences to help identify implementation strategies for high school support systems that address the needs of vulnerable student populations, such as prospective first-generation college students.

#### **Research Design**

I used a mixed methods approach, initially gathering quantitative data using an online survey then following up with semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data to deepen my understanding of the topic. This methodological combination allowed for a comprehensive analysis that leverages the strengths of each data type, offering an opportunity for both development and expansion from one method to the other to strengthen the understanding garnered from the research (Bryman, 2006). I sought participant feedback on barriers well-documented prior to the pandemic and new barriers since the pandemic that have potentially increased influence on the educational aspirations and decisions of high school students to enroll in college or not.

The population focus was individuals approximately 18-21 years of age who have recently graduated from high school. I conducted a survey to gather information about the self-reported influences on students' decision to attend college. Then, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants from the survey to narrow and deepen the findings to key themes. The primary purpose of this research was to identify actionable insights that could be used in the redevelopment of strategies and resources for high school programs that support students in the college readiness process. The University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study design and all study protocols and materials in July 2024.

### **Setting**

This study was set in a semi-rural area of Oregon, about an hour outside of a large metropolitan area, where 75.5% of the county identifies as white and 17.3% identify as Hispanic/Latino (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2024). Although 89.9% of county residents report having obtained a high school diploma, only 29.3% hold a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2024). Two different colleges are readily available to students who choose to stay in the area after high school graduation. A satellite campus of a regional, public community college provides certificate and associate degree options within the county. In addition, a small, private liberal arts university in the community provides access to 4-year degree programs for students, including a First Scholars Program designed to support the particular financial challenges of first-generation college students.

The local school district has one high school serving approximately 2,300 students. In contrast to the county, fewer students (54%) identify as white, more (40%) identify as Hispanic, and approximately 80% of students would be first-generation college students if they choose to pursue higher education (Oregon Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, 47.5% of

students identify as female, 50.9% as male, and 1.6% choose not to identify by gender. The high school has a higher graduation rate than the state as a whole, yet fewer students in this community go on to post-secondary education than the state average (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Comparative High School Graduation and College-Going Rates in the State and District*

School Year	State		District	
	HS Grad Rate	College Rate	HS Grad Rate	College Rate
2022-2023	81%	56%	93%	45%
2021-2022	81%	56%	93%	47%
2020-2021	83%	62%	92%	56%
2019-2020	80%	n/a	91%	n/a
2018-2019	79%	62%	91%	52%
2017-2018	77%	n/a	88%	n/a

*Note.* Data retrieved from At-A-Glance School and District Profiles and Accountability Details (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.).

Although the graduation rate in the district has increased from year to year, the percentage of students attending college has reduced since the pandemic. The post-COVID decline in college-going rate is mirrored in the state as a whole, though the decline is more significant within this district.

## **Participants**

Participants were identified via two criteria. First, they had to be recent high school graduates, having received their diploma within the last three years (2022-2024). Second, they had to be at least 18 years of age at the time they were recruited for the study. It is important to note that although approximately 40% of the school district's student body identifies as Hispanic, only 11% are considered active English Language Learners. Further, that number reduces to 1.2% at the high school and to only 1% of seniors, which equates to a total of 6 students. Therefore, the survey and interviews were conducted in English only.

I used a multifaceted approach to recruit survey participants. Initially, through a Letter of Agreement from the district's Superintendent (Appendix A), I was granted access to a database of email contacts through a senior survey given at the high school. This database produced approximately 300 emails for graduates of the 2023-24 school year, which included students who were going to college and those who were not. IRB required I use school-provided emails only to contact former students who had agreed to be contacted in the future to learn about their post-high school experience. Therefore, I was unable to ask for access to the Senior Survey of previous graduating classes, as those took place before I designed this study, and I could not obtain permission. However, I used two additional approaches to broaden the sample and gather perspectives of students from other graduating classes.

First, I used snowball sampling to recruit more participants. To accomplish this, I personally contacted former students and parents with whom I remained connected, asking for their consent to participate, as well as asking them to share the invitation to participate with friends who might also be willing. Many of the students from the district remain living in the area after graduation and either work in the community or attend college on local campuses.

Therefore, recruiting participants through their connection with the local high school was intended to provide a stronger representation of the recent high school graduate community.

Additionally, recruitment links were listed on publicly available Instagram pages for recent graduates, as well as my own personal social media accounts. These links were shared by others on their own platform pages as well, broadening the audience of potential participants. Ultimately, using a multi-pronged method of recruitment, I succeeded in recruiting 66 high school graduates as survey participants, with 54 fully completing the survey

For the quantitative portion of the study, potential participants received a link to a Qualtrics survey that invited them to participate (Appendix B). The initial section detailed the purpose of the survey, provided a digital consent form, and asked participants to verify that they were 18 years of age or older. Clicking “yes” to this section recorded confirmation that they consented and met the age criterion to participate in the research. The initial portion of the survey asked a series of questions to gather demographic and descriptive information about participants. The final question of the survey asked participants if they would like to be considered for an interview in the second, qualitative part of the study. Those interested in follow-up were directed to a second, separate Qualtrics survey that gathered contact information and additional demographics. This separation was to ensure participants’ initial survey responses remained separate and anonymous from their interview interest forms.

Fifteen respondents indicated that they were interested in the interview portion of this research, however, I received limited responses to my initial emails requesting participants sign up for an interview. Potential participants were then incentivized to sign up, offering each a \$10 coffee card upon completion of the interview. This second approach led to seven participants. To acquire additional participants, I used snowball sampling, asking interview participants for

referrals to friends who might be interested. With this personal outreach, three additional participants were recruited.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected in two phases, first quantitative (survey) and then qualitative (semi-structured interviews). Details for each phase are included below.

#### ***Quantitative Phase***

In the quantitative phase, data were collected from participants via a survey. The survey had two main sections: (a) demographics and (b) influences on attending college. First, participants were asked to provide demographic information (used to check for balanced participation rates and identify potential limits in the responses). Demographic data included first-generation status, overall college decision, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and home language. These data were examined to gauge overall response rates and provide a demographic picture of the respondents. Additional questions provided self-reported descriptive data that offered the opportunity for specific subgroup data. Subgroups include students who did or did not go to college, types of courses taken in high school, work status, and income level.

The second section of the survey included selected response items designed to query participants' self-reported perceptions of the people and experiences that crafted their decision to attend or not attend college. This section was developed by adapting questions from existing surveys, including the State of Oregon's *12th Grade Exit Survey* (Oregon Goes to College, n.d.), Los Angeles Unified School District's *College & Career Readiness Survey* (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2024), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The second section of the survey was divided into three categories: school influences, personal influences, and

health. Each category included several selected response items that inquired about the participants' reflection of broader supports and barriers at the family and community level on their college-going decisions, such as family beliefs, school supports, mental health, and personal influences (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to respond to each question in the second section using a 4-point ordinal scale, ranging from *Strongly Agree* (4) to *Strongly Disagree* (1). Selected response items targeted specific barriers and facilitators using focused and positive language that covered a range of possible replies.

Survey data are reported in Chapter IV Results with frequency counts and displayed using frequency distribution tables (see Table 2). To prepare the data for analyses, key socio-demographic variables were coded for analysis. I collapsed three codes to create dichotomous variables. First, the college choice questions were collapsed to college-going, which included 2-year community college and 4-year college or university (code = 1), and all else as non-college going (code = 2). This coding reflected the percentages shared by the Oregon Department of Education, which are gathered through National Clearinghouse data, which determines college-going only as 2-year and 4-year institutions (*Oregon Department of Education: Accountability Measures: At-A-Glance School and District Profiles: State of Oregon*, n.d.). Second, home language was collapsed to represent those who reported speaking only English at home (code = 1) and those who spoke any other language (code = 2). Finally, race was collapsed to identify white students (code = 1) and all other ethnicities and races (code = 2). A fourth code, gender, was not collapsed to be dichotomous. Analysis was run using male (code = 1) and female (code = 2). Two participants who responded non-binary and three who chose not to identify at all were not included in the dichotomous coding. There were too few respondents who self-reported being non-binary to include in analyses. Though I recognize the importance of non-binary participants'

lives and experiences, the numbers for statistical purposes were too small to include in this analyses.

I ran independent sample t-tests using Jamovi on each of the above variables to analyze the statistical differences between first-generation and continuing generation participants for each of these dependent variables. Statistical significance was determined using a criterion of  $p < .05$ . Additionally, considering the smaller overall sample size of the survey, additional trend findings were identified using a criterion of  $p < .10$ . The inclusion of trend findings allows for the discussion of potential influences that may draw interest and raise questions related to underlying patterns that could be further explored.

I also used Chi-square tests to analyze the potential relationship among the sociodemographic and program variables and the decision to go to college, first analyzing the combined sample, and then separating first-generation students versus continuing generation students. For this analysis, each facilitator and barrier variable was run with the collapsed dichotomous variable of *college* or *no college*. As with independent sample t-tests, statistical significance was determined using a criterion of  $p < .05$ , with trend findings also being identified with a criterion of  $p < .10$ . Preliminary findings from quantitative data analyses were used to fine-tune the participant questions for the qualitative, semi-structured interview phase of the research. Once survey data were analyzed to determine statistical significance between dichotomous groups in regard to perceived facilitators and barriers on participant decisions, I revised my interview questions. Statistically significant factors related to adult support at high school, family support, and mental health challenges were specifically noted to investigate further in the interview portion of this study.

### *Qualitative Phase*

I used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) frame for the qualitative portion of my work. The emphasis was on learning from participants' lived experiences, which included putting care into interpreting the meanings of shared experiences and utilizing self-reflexivity in being attentive to my own lens as an administrator in the district, a parent, and a community member. IPA provides a careful platform for this work, in that it is "especially valuable when examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden" (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Further, IPA allows for deep examination of individual cases with the researcher trying to make sense of participants' personal experiences before moving to more generalizable ideas. Questions for the interviews, listed in Appendix D, were refined from their initial format after analysis of the quantitative data, with the intent that those barriers and facilitators most commonly reported by participants as having an influence on students' decisions to attend college or not would be further explored in the interview process. I adapted Asmussen and Creswell's (1995) sample interview protocol (as cited in Creswell, 2016, pp. 132-133). This layout provided a clear set of steps to follow during the interview and allowed for a checkbox system to ensure all necessary procedures were in place.

Overall, I conducted 10 interviews: eight virtually and two in person. Prior to each interview, I provided details to the interviewee that included time, date, and a link or location for the meeting. I detailed these on the protocol to ensure that they were recorded to track the overall interview process. I sent consent forms before the interview using Qualtrics, sending a link via email or text, where participants read and signed the consent form digitally and were able to retain a PDF copy for their records (Weiss, 1994). This was done one week ahead of the scheduled interview to allow for questions from the participants and follow-up as needed.

Each interview began by introducing myself and the study and then moved to the interview content questions. Based upon the protocol from Creswell (2016), I included both an icebreaker question and a wrap-up or follow-up question at the beginning and end of the interview to round it out and make it feel complete. I included probe suggestions below each content question that were used as needed to help encourage participants to respond more deeply and expand on their thoughts toward the overarching ideas.

Interview recordings were transcribed initially using the Otter AI voice transcription tool, while also being recorded via cellphone. I reviewed each transcript for necessary corrections, comparing the AI transcripts with the audio recordings, and de-identifying the data to preserve participant confidentiality. To prepare the data for analysis, participants were identified by their generational status first (FG = first-generation, CG = continuing generation). This was then followed by a gender code (F = female, M = male, N = non-binary). Finally, this was followed by a number code that differentiated between participants with same code identifications. For example, FGF1 and FGF2 identified two separate first-generation female participants. Additionally, the names of colleges were removed, with 4-year programs being identified by number as code = College #1 (etc.) and community college being identified as code = community college. I also removed the name of the high school, referring to it only as “high school”. Similarly, staff names were removed and replaced with “teacher” or “staff” depending on their role.

The deidentification process was particularly important in light of the analysis model used for this study: ChatGPT’s large-scale language model. Chat GPT was chosen, as “[I]t’s distinguished by its exceptional ability to understand and generate human-like text” (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 2). However, the platform does best when working with clean, organized data. Once

the transcripts were cleaned and coded properly, they were coded through multiple passes using carefully designed prompts to enhance the effectiveness of the platform in thematic analysis (Zhang et al., 2023). AI prompts used are listed in Appendix E. Deidentified codes increased protections for anonymity of participants. Additional settings were applied to the platform to ensure the protection of information. First, a temporary chat setting was used to keep the platform from saving information from each chat. Also, the data control function allowed me to turn off the “model improvement” component, which is used by the platform to train the language model for further development. Turning this off also removed the capability of the language model to retain data from my input.

The first cycle run through AI for each individual transcript used open descriptive coding to identify themes specific to each participant, capturing key elements as described in the interview, assigning basic labels to data to give an overview of key topics found in the notes (Saldaña, 2013). This provided a foundation for further analysis and exploration of the data, including basic vocabulary and topics to lay the groundwork for deeper analytics throughout the coding process (Saldaña, 2013). In this initial process, I detailed information that connected back to my research questions and identified direct quotes from the transcript.

The second coding cycle used In Vivo coding to capture verbatim words and phrases participants used to describe their personal experiences and factors related to participant experiences in a combined analysis, pulling similar details from each individual descriptive code chart into one comprehensive analysis that involved the relationship between all interviews. This allowed for further refinement of core themes throughout the data, which eventually became parent codes in the final analysis. This cycle also provided refined participant quotes that detailed each theme.

For the final coding cycle, I used Axial Coding to identify relationships and connections between the broader list of open codes and begin to narrow data to refined parent and child themes. Axial coding allows the researcher to group similar data “while sorting and relabeling them into conceptual categories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 218). This process was also deepened to compare codes between first-generation participants and continuing generation participants by prompting AI to analyze the assigned FG and CG participant codes. Within this coding pass, I narrowed themes into defined parent categories, with initial codes serving as child subcategories. I then analyzed these data in two sections, identifying both similarities and differences within the analysis, bringing the data back to my research questions.

### **Validity, Reliability, and Methodological Integrity**

Several components were put into place to ensure the validity, reliability, and integrity of the inferences drawn from this research. A letter of agreement was signed between me and the superintendent of the school district prior to the start of the research. This agreement documented permission to use district-provided former student email addresses to recruit potential participants. It also provided the assurance of the safeguards of privacy and confidentiality of all participant identities (Appendix A). This commitment to confidentiality extends to both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study and covers all information shared by participants. Protecting participants’ identities was particularly important considering both my role within the school district and as a long-time community member.

All participants completed an informed consent agreement. This document outlined the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the research, fully informing participants before they provided their consent. For survey participants, consent to participate in the research study was the initial question asked before completing any other portion of the survey. If a

participant did not agree, they were not able to continue the survey. Additionally, participants were asked to confirm they were 18 years or older, to allow for the protection of minors within the research. For interview participants, the informed consent form was emailed, digitally signed, and returned prior to the interview, with participants retaining a digital copy.

The mixed methods approach of this study strengthened the internal validity of my research by ensuring that the collected data accurately reflected participants' experiences and decision-making processes. By first gathering responses from a large sample through surveys and then conducting in-depth interviews with a selected subset, I was able to triangulate my findings, thereby increasing the reliability and generalizability of the study. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing students' postsecondary choices and also increased the applicability of my findings.

To ensure the validity and generalizability of my findings, I developed the survey by integrating questions from established and widely used sources. Specifically, items were adapted from surveys published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), the Los Angeles Unified School District (2024), and Oregon Goes to College (n.d.). These resources have been implemented in diverse educational and public health settings. By aligning the wording, format, and structure of my survey with these tools, I aimed to enhance the overall rigor of my own questioning.

Finally, my own reflexivity was actively acknowledged throughout the study, recognizing the potential influence of my background, role in the district, and connection to the community on the research process and outcomes. Intentional personal debriefing was utilized to reflect on my positionality and its implications for the study's validity and interpretation of findings,

particularly during the interview portion of the research which removed the anonymity of data of the participants from my own knowledge base.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Phase 1: Quantitative

I analyzed the results of the Qualtrics survey to understand the self-reported differences between first-generation and continuing generation college students in my sample. Of the 66 participants who took the survey, 54 answered all questions. The additional 12 respondents only answered the first two questions: their post-secondary decision and whether or not they were potentially first-generation students. Due to the potential of these responses to skew the comparative data analysis, those 12 respondents were removed from further analysis. Table 2 provides demographic information for the 54 participants comprising the analytic sample.

These data indicate an overrepresentation of students attending 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities (85%) compared to other options, such as trade school or working full- or part-time (15%). This is important to note, as it is not representative of the current proportion of students at the high school who attend college; this overrepresentation must be considered in the discussion. There was a similar overrepresentation of female participants, as compared to all other gender identifications. However, representation of race and home language within the sample were proportional to their representation in the general high school population.

**Table 2***Survey Participant Demographic Information*

Variables	First-Generation		Continuing Generation		Full Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Overall college decision</i>						
2-year community college	6	25%	3	10%	9	17%
4-year college or university	13	54%	24	80%	37	69%
Trade School	1	4%	1	3%	2	4%
Work full- or part-time	4	17%	2	7%	6	11%
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	6	25%	10	33%	16	30%
Female	16	67%	17	57%	33	61%
Non-Binary	1	4%	1	3%	2	4%
Choose not to identify	1	4%	2	7%	3	6%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>						
Hispanic/Latino	11	46%	2	7%	13	24%
White	10	42%	22	73%	32	59%
Asian	1	4%	2	7%	3	6%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	4%	1	3%	2	4%
Bi-racial/Multi-racial	0	0%	1	3%	1	2%
Choose not to identify	1	4%	2	7%	3	6%
<i>Home language</i>						
English	13	54%	29	96%	42	78%
Spanish	9	38%	1	3%	10	19%
Multilingual	2	8%	0	0%	2	4%

Several survey questions asked respondents to indicate whether they had participated in programs while in high school designed to promote college-going (see Table 3). In all three programs, the participation split was approximately 20%/80% for all respondents. These data will be explored later in examining the potential impact of these programs.

**Table 3**

*Participation in Programs that Encourage College-Going*

Variables	First-Generation		Continuing Generation		Full Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Honors/AP Courses</i>						
No	7	29%	5	17%	12	22%
Yes	17	71%	25	83%	42	78%
<i>AVID</i>						
No	16	67%	26	87%	42	78%
Yes	8	33%	4	13%	12	22%
<i>Career Pathway</i>						
No	5	21%	3	10%	8	15%
Yes	19	79%	27	90%	46	85%

Table 4 shows potential challenges or barriers that respondents may have faced when making their college decision, particularly after the pandemic. These data are reported to show the percentage for each category, initially separated by first and continuing generation status, and then representing the full sample of participants. Similar to the proportion of respondents who reported they had participated in promotional programs designed to increase college-going, approximately 20% of respondents reported having experienced some struggle in the finance-based questions, lacking financial stability, work stability, and health care.

**Table 4***Respondent-Identified Potential Barriers to College-Going*

Variables	First-Generation		Continuing Generation		Full Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Currently have a monthly wage or salary</i>						
No	13	54%	15	50%	28	52%
Yes	11	46%	15	50%	26	48%
<i>Must help financially at home</i>						
No	19	79%	23	77%	42	78%
Yes	5	21%	7	23%	12	22%
<i>Sufficient family income</i>						
No	4	17%	4	13%	8	15%
Yes	20	83%	26	87%	46	85%
<i>Sufficient access to transportation for work/school</i>						
No	2	8%	1	3%	3	6%
Yes	22	92%	29	97%	51	94%
<i>Financial stability since the pandemic</i>						
No	8	33%	3	10%	11	20%
Yes	16	67%	27	90%	43	80%
<i>Work stability since the pandemic</i>						
No	6	25%	4	13%	10	19%
Yes	18	75%	26	87%	44	81%
<i>Have health insurance</i>						
No	3	13%	3	10%	6	11%
Yes	21	88%	27	90%	48	89%

One question on the survey asked participants who were not planning to pursue education after high school to elaborate on why that was the case. Responses provided to this question were limited, as only 10 participants answered this question, but analysis does share some themes that could be explored later. Interestingly, 7 of the 10 respondents were continuing generation students, with only three being first-generation. The most common response, given by seven participants (70%), shared that the high cost of further education was the primary reason for not pursuing it. Tuition, fees, and related expenses created a significant obstacle to continuing their

education. Following that, five respondents (50%) believed that additional education was unnecessary for their career goals or financial success. Those respondents indicated that they were pursuing trade school or going straight into work. The final theme to note was shared by three participants (30%), who shared answers centered around needing to take time off from education due to personal responsibilities, such as health, family obligations, or other responsibilities.

### ***Comparing the Demographics of First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students***

The participating district is committed to promoting successful futures for all students, regardless of background. Thus, it is important to know if student demographics might be related to college-going in the district. Table 5 displays the results of t-test analysis of variables that may indicate criteria to consider in program development.

Based on the t-test results, there were statistically significant differences between the groups in three areas. First, when considering race, significantly more non-white students were first-generation ( $M = 1.54$ ) than continuing generation ( $M = 1.27$ ),  $t(46.36) = 2.08, p = .043$ . Similarly, those who reported speaking a home language other than English were significantly more likely to be first-generation college attendees than continuing generation,  $t(27.75) = 3.90, p = <.001$ . Finally, there was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the self-reported financial stability of families since the pandemic,  $t(37.11) = -2.07, p = .046$ . First-generation respondents, on average, indicated that they were less financially stable since the pandemic ( $M = 0.67$ ) than continuing generation respondents ( $M = 0.90$ ).

**Table 5***Comparing First-Generation (FG) to Continuing Generation (CG) Participants*

Variable	FG		CG		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Overall college decision	1.19	0.40	1.10	0.30	1.00	.323	0.27
Gender	1.88	0.68	1.83	0.79	0.21	.836	0.06
<b>Race</b>	<b>1.54</b>	<b>0.51</b>	<b>1.27</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>2.08</b>	<b>.043*</b>	<b>0.57</b>
<b>Home language</b>	<b>1.46</b>	<b>0.51</b>	<b>1.03</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>&lt;.001***</b>	<b>1.11</b>
Honors/AP Courses	0.71	0.46	0.83	0.38	-1.07	.293	-0.29
AVID	0.33	0.48	0.13	0.35	1.71	.095+	0.48
Career Pathway	0.79	0.41	0.90	0.31	-1.07	.291	-0.30
Currently earning wage/salary	0.46	0.51	0.50	0.51	-0.30	.766	-0.08
Must help financially at home	0.21	0.41	0.23	0.43	-0.22	.830	-0.06
Sufficient income	0.83	0.38	0.87	0.35	-0.33	.741	-0.09
Sufficient transportation	0.92	0.28	0.97	0.18	-0.75	.457	-0.21
<b>Financial stability post pandemic</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>-2.07</b>	<b>.046*</b>	<b>-0.58</b>
Work stable since pandemic	0.75	0.44	0.87	0.35	-1.06	.296	-0.29
Have health insurance	0.88	0.34	0.90	0.31	-0.28	.779	-0.08

Note. FG = first-generation; CG = continuing generation;  $H_a \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$

+ $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Though not statistically significant, a trend within the category of AVID might be worth noting. This was the only other category that indicated a *p*-value less than .10 and showed a seeming difference between the means of each group, first-generation and continuing generation. This data shares that more first-generation students participate in the AVID program than their continuing generation peers. What is to be explored is the impact the program has on these students' college-going decisions.

### ***Comparing the Impact of Different District Initiatives for Students***

A question often asked by district leadership, and the core question in this study, is how we identify what specific programming guides our students towards college. Therefore, I wanted to consider whether taking different courses and or being enrolled in particular programs

potentially influenced first-generation students' decision to attend college. I performed Chi-square tests to determine if generation status related to enrollment in key programs. Although I found no statistically significant differences between first-generation and continuing generation students, when all data from the Chi-square tests were combined, one program was a statistically-significant predictor of all combined students' decisions to go to college: whether a participant took Honors/AP courses ( $\chi^2 [n = 54] = 4.19, p = .040$ ).

I also ran Chi-square tests for social components related to finances, transportation, and health insurance. Similarly, there was no statistical significance in any variable when first-generation and continuing generation respondents were compared. One indicator did arise from the data when combined: whether they were currently earning a monthly wage or salary, ( $\chi^2 [n = 54] = 5.83, p = .016$ ). No other comparisons yielded statistical significance overall or between groups.

The last part of the survey included three categories of potential influences to respondents' college-going decisions: school, personal, and health influences. Respondents self-reported the impact of each influence using a 4-point ordinal scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (code = 1) to *strongly agree* (code = 4). I ran t-tests to examine the potential impact of the data (see Table 6).

Responses from both first-generation and continuing generation students were quite similar regarding school influences. Overall, they considered adults at school as having a positive influence on their decision to go to college. Within this data set, one influence can be considered statistically significant. First-generation college students were statistically significantly more likely to indicate that adults at school helped them learn the steps to get to and pay for college than their continuing generation peers,  $t(50.52) = 2.37, p = .022$ .

**Table 6***Analysis of School Influences*

Variable	FG		CG		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>School Influences</i>							
Adults expected me to go to college	3.30	0.82	3.50	0.63	-0.95	.349	-0.27
Adults talked to me about college choices	3.52	0.51	3.27	0.83	1.38	.174	0.37
<b>Adults helped me learn the steps to get to and pay for college</b>	<b>3.26</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>2.77</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>.022*</b>	<b>0.64</b>
Adults maintained high expectations for me	3.09	0.60	3.20	0.76	-0.61	.547	-0.17

*Note.* FG = first-generation; CG = continuing generation;  $H_a \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$

\* $p < .05$

Next, I looked at personal influences around friends and family that may have had an impact on the college-going decision of participants. Three of the six analyses showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups of students, all within the influence of family (see Table 7).

First-generation students were less likely to indicate that their family expected them to go to college ( $M = 3.05$ ) than continuing generation students ( $M = 3.52$ ),  $t(35.99) = -2.10$ ,  $p = .043$ . The data also show that first-generation students were much less likely to say they have family who helped them through the college process ( $M = 2.18$ ) than continuing generation participants ( $M = 3.38$ ),  $t(44.41) = -5.05$ ,  $p = <.001$ . Additionally, high family expectations post pandemic for continuing generation participants ( $M = 3.59$ ) were stronger than for first-generation students ( $M = 2.82$ ),  $t(29.67) = -3.42$ ,  $p = .002$ .

**Table 7***Analysis of Personal Influences*

Variable	FG		CG		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>Personal Influences</i>							
<b>Family expected me to go to college</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>3.52</b>	<b>0.63</b>	<b>-2.10</b>	<b>.043*</b>	<b>-0.61</b>
<b>Family was able to help me with the college process</b>	<b>2.18</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>-5.05</b>	<b>&lt;.001***</b>	<b>-1.43</b>
<b>Family maintained high expectations for me</b>	<b>2.82</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>-3.42</b>	<b>.002**</b>	<b>-1.00</b>
Friends had a strong influence on my college-going decision	2.59	0.67	2.34	1.04	1.02	.311	0.28
Plans for college same since the pandemic	2.32	0.95	2.86	1.09	-1.90	.063+	-0.53
College feels important to my future	3.18	0.91	3.38	0.98	-0.74	.460	-0.21

*Note.* FG = first-generation; CG = continuing generation;  $H_a \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001

Although the difference in means was not statistically significant, a trend was observed suggesting that fewer first-generation respondents, compared to their continuing generation peers, reported maintaining their college plans since the onset of the pandemic.

Finally, the survey asked questions about health influences and how they may have affected the mindset and overall health of participants and their friends and family, including after the pandemic (see Table 8). None of the results from this analysis yielded statistical significance; however, there are still a few important findings to note. Average responses to these questions related to health and mental health, regardless of whether they were first-generation or continuing generation, suggested that all respondents were navigating mental health concerns post-pandemic. The mean in most categories tended toward the lower end of the response scale, suggesting a tendency toward the *disagree* side for all respondents.

**Table 8***Analysis of Health Influences*

Variable	FG		CG		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>Health Influences</i>							
Stable health and well-being	3.09	0.61	3.00	0.85	0.45	.658	0.12
Strong emotional stability and resilience	2.91	0.81	3.00	0.96	-0.37	.716	-0.10
Stable levels of anxiety/depression since the pandemic.	2.45	0.86	2.34	0.86	0.45	.653	0.13
Stable levels of stress since the pandemic.	2.45	0.80	2.14	0.88	1.34	.186	0.38
Can find effective health treatment	2.86	0.56	2.97	0.91	-0.49	.624	-0.14
Stable family mental health since the pandemic.	2.45	0.67	2.48	0.91	-0.13	.899	-0.04
Stable friends' mental health since the pandemic.	2.45	0.67	2.34	0.86	0.51	.610	0.14

*Note.* FG = first-generation; CG = continuing generation;  $H_a \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$

**Phase 2: Qualitative**

The initial goal in recruiting interview participants was to have an even number in each subset, those who chose to attend college and those who did not, as well as to recruit student groups that were representative of the school by race/ethnicity and gender. This recruitment strategy was intended to represent the community as accurately as possible and ensure that no single group would influence the research more than another. However, with a smaller group of survey participants than anticipated, that was not possible. The lower numbers of survey participants, and the need to snowball sample for interview participation hindered my ability to align these percentages. As a result, college-going students and females were overrepresented as compared to the community. However, race representation was closer to county demographics. Participants were 50% first-generation and 50% continuing generation students, which also is not representational, but still allowed for a robust enough sample to explore differences between

first-generation and continuing generation participants. Additional demographics are detailed in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Interview Participant Demographic Information*

Variables	First-Generation		Continuing Generation		Full Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Overall college decision</i>						
2-year community college	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
4-year college or university	3	60%	4	80%	7	70%
Military	1	20%	0	0%	1	10%
Work full- or part-time	1	20%	1	20%	2	20%
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	2	40%	1	20%	3	30%
Female	3	60%	3	60%	6	60%
Non-Binary	0	0%	1	20%	1	10%
<i>Race</i>						
Hispanic/Latino	3	60%	0	0%	3	30%
White	2	40%	4	80%	6	60%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0%	1	20%	1	10%

For the analysis of interview transcripts, I ran three coding cycles (Descriptive, In Vivo, and Axial). The initial descriptive coding cycle was run on each individual transcript for themes from each separate interview. Each set of codes was put into its own table. Then, In Vivo coding was applied to merge the 10 transcript tables and find overlapping themes that arose throughout the interviews. Six frequent common themes that emerged from the first two cycles of coding (Descriptive, In Vivo) are detailed in Table 10, ranked from high to low according to the number of participants who spoke to each theme.

Within these themes, support from school staff in the college going process was a key facilitator to student success, with the highest frequency among participants. Participants were clear, regardless of college familiarity and status, that school staff at the high school were

significantly influential to them as students in making post-high school decisions. Those participants who had a strong connection with a staff person or were in a program led by a strong teacher believed those factors were the strongest overall influence on their college and career decisions.

**Table 10**

*Common Themes Throughout All Interviews*

Code	Description	Frequency, <i>n</i>
Support from Staff/Programs in the College-going Process	Describes the critical role of high school staff and programs specific to navigating the college application process and overcoming barriers. This includes providing guidance on financial aid, career paths, and emotional support.	8
Barriers Related to Financial Constraints	Explores how financial challenges, including inadequate financial aid and costs associated with higher education, acted as barriers to students pursuing their post-high school plans.	7
Impact of COVID-19 on Education	Highlights how the pandemic disrupted traditional learning environments, resulting in academic, social, and emotional challenges for students.	6
Role of Family Support and Limitations	Explores the dual nature of family support-offering emotional encouragement but often lacking practical guidance, particularly for first-generation college students.	6
Influence of Teachers and Mentors	Discusses the pivotal role of teachers and mentors in encouraging students to persist in their education and discover their interests, which often led to college.	5
Importance of Individual Determination	Emphasizes the importance of personal motivation, self-discipline, and resilience in overcoming challenges and achieving educational goals.	5

Two barriers were equally identified as the next most frequently identified by participants. First, participants experienced financial challenges that created potential barriers. In part, they named the FAFSA application process and the need to acquire financial aid, via loans or other means, as a significantly stressful barrier to the college going process. Further, if they had a low GPA or were not college focused early enough during their high school years to

understand the impact of their GPA, they felt the financial barrier was more difficult to overcome, as much of the financing they were hoping for was merit based.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as a common barrier for participants and has a relationship to the identified financial barrier. All participants in this study had multiple years of their high school career interrupted by school closures and online learning. Overall, the impact showed that students, regardless of generation status, became withdrawn and isolated, struggling with friendship and their ability to re-enter school when in-person learning resumed. Additionally, many struggled academically during this time. This led participants to be in a place where they needed to recover their grades and improve their GPAs to even consider college as a possibility. As previously mentioned, this often impeded their ability to acquire scholarships.

### ***Similarities Between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participants***

The final coding pass involved Axial coding, where I compared themes in a few ways. First, I sought to find themes from the comprehensive analysis in the second pass that showed similarities between first-generation and continuing generation participants. This process resulted in the identification of four clear themes, outlined in Table 11. Each of these have child codes that further explain their significance and how they align the experience between first-generation and continuing generation participants.

**Table 11***Similarities between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participants*

Parent Code	Child Code	Description
School and Institutional Support	Support from School Staff and Programs	Both groups emphasized the significant role of school staff and programs like AVID and Pathways in guiding them through the college preparation process.
	Guidance from Teachers and Advisors	School personnel played a key role in helping students navigate applications, FAFSA, and career exploration.
Financial Challenges	Financial Aid Challenges	Students in both groups highlighted financial struggles, including issues with FAFSA, difficulty securing financial aid, and the necessity of balancing school with financial responsibilities.
	Balancing Work and School	Many students had to make decisions about college based on affordability.
Pandemic Impact on Learning	COVID-19 Online Learning	The pandemic negatively affected students from both groups, disrupting learning, affecting grades, and leading to struggles with online schooling.
	Adjusting Back to In-Person Learning	Many described challenges in re-adapting to in-person learning and the loss of social engagement during lockdowns.
Mental Health and Well-being	Mental Health and Peer Support	Students in both groups mentioned the importance of social support in managing their mental health.
	Coping Strategies and Resilience	Peer relationships and friendships helped them stay motivated, while isolation during COVID-19 was particularly detrimental to their well-being.

**School and Institutional Support.** Both first-generation and continuing generation students expressed that the guided support and positive influence of college and career-oriented programs was beneficial in thinking about their post-secondary options. One participant shared that “programs, like AVID and like the Pathways and everything, definitely helped a lot” (FGF1, lines 76-77). Whether specific programs, like AVID, or courses within career pathways or Junior seminar, these programs provided a clear set of procedures to help students feel prepared and helped them connect with adults who were able to provide the necessary guidance, regardless of

generation status. Within these courses and programs, students expressed the ability to learn about careers of interest and get the necessary support to take the steps towards college programs that would help them access those careers. One continuing generation participant shared:

It was mostly just like teaching about the college process and having us research colleges you were interested in going to. That we would understand college requirements and how to apply and all the things we had to do in the last two years of high school to get into college (CGN1, lines 72-75).

Additionally, participants shared that specific guidance from program staff and high school personnel felt impactful and provided the necessary social capital to guide them to their post-secondary path. A first-generation participant reflected:

I had tons of support at the high school, like, I am so thankful for our town high school, like support system they had, because if it was not for them, I would not have filled out my FAFSA, I would not have submitted applications I wanted to (FGM2, lines 116-118).

Eight participants identified these courses and programs as being the single biggest facilitator of their college-going success.

**Financial Challenges.** The financial challenge of paying for college and the necessity of working while enrolled were consistently expressed by all participants, regardless of generational status. Across interviews, participants—both first-generation and continuing generation—shared that they were assuming at least some, if not all, of the financial responsibility for their college education. For most, this involved applying for federal aid and student loans. Participants struggled with the financial aid process significantly, naming FAFSA applications and the delay in the recent application process as particularly stressful, including some not knowing if they had financial aid until weeks before their high school graduation. One first-generation participant

shared, “FAFSA was honestly a headache... so it opened a little bit later, yeah, but we weren’t able to get our statement in until, like, I think, a month before we graduated high school. So, it was really stressful” (FGF1, lines 140-143). Another participant shared frustration with FAFSA’s assumption that parental income indicated who was paying for college and altered the type of and amount of funding received.

FAFSA was a major like, they didn’t give me anything, which was really frustrating, because...yes, I have to put my parents’ information in because they’re my legal guardians, but they’re not paying for it. So, I think that was really frustrating because it’s like, there’s no button to press. It’s like, yes, my parents make this, but they’re not paying for it. Like, I’m paying (CGF1, lines 264-268).

Others shared that the stress of needing to acquire more than loans, such as grants or other merit-based funding, held them back during the college application process. A continuing generation participant shared, “We don’t have infinite money to send me to whatever school I wanted to go to. There was a factor that I had to consider. And so, I tried to keep good grades, apply to as many scholarships as I could” (CGF2, lines 281-283). Clearly, the burden of needing financial support was evident across participants, regardless of their generation status.

For several participants, the added burden of needing to work to be able to even consider college as an option weighed heavily. For some, this recognition started in high school, saving up funding knowing that college would be expensive. One first-generation participant explained, “I think a big part of it was financial. I was like, okay, well, can I even afford to go to college?...I’ve been saving up for college since, like, sophomore year” (FGF1, lines 119-123). For other participants, the need to work and save funds arose after beginning college and became a continual need to be able to afford their tuition and remain enrolled. A different first-generation

participant shared, “I was really struggling with money because I had no longer a savings. And, so I just saved up every single penny that I could and then I just took out loans for this year. I did not get any financial aid. So, that kind of sucks” (FGF2, lines 51-54). Overall, participants who enrolled in college felt the financial impact of affording their programs, regardless of their family income, generational status, or ability to access supports and programs.

**Pandemic Impact on Learning.** The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt universally among participants. They shared many associated challenges. First, academic struggles with online learning both created frustration and later led to low GPAs during their first years of high school. For some, this created a barrier in that they needed to recover their GPAs to consider college as an option or to be eligible for grants and scholarships. A continuing generation participant said, “One thing that made college a little bit difficult was definitely COVID...taking a toll on my grades in high school, which made the selection process...just a little bit harder because of a combination of my GPA and financial issues...making it more difficult to choose a school” (CGN1, lines 86-89). A first-generation participant described the frustration of having to learn from home while helping with family during the closure. This participant shared about how she couldn’t focus on school because she had to take care of family who were sick with COVID-19 (FGF3, lines 257-262). She added that this really hurt her grades, and bringing her GPA back up was incredibly difficult. Other participants shared the inability to focus only on learning, or not engaging in quality learning, and needing to catch up and rebuild their transcripts once they returned to in-person learning. A continuing generation student explained, “All my math courses later on in high school, it wasn’t strictly just calculus or finance, it just was put into one class, and it was math skills. So, we, like, speed ran through all

of those math courses. So it was, it was a lot of catching up” (CGM1, lines 47-50). Another first-generation participant shared a similar experience:

[G]oing back to my sophomore year and being in person was super beneficial. I’m so serious. I went from, actually, I’ve never really realized this. I went from having a, I think it was like a 2.4 that second semester of my freshman year, I had a 4.0 through my whole sophomore year (FGM2, lines 149-152).

For most, it took years of additional learning to adapt and overcome the negative academic impacts associated with comprehensive distance education as a result of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mental Health and Well-Being.** A specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the continuing mental health challenges that participants expressed, which included isolation from peers and adults during school closures, creating a lack of connection and relationship in their lives. As this time fell into the first year of high school for this group, it had an impact on their ability to do well throughout the rest of high school and influenced their post-secondary plans. Participants expressed feeling isolated and alone. Some even felt their own personality shifted because of that isolation. One first-generation participant reflected, “I was, like, an extrovert in middle school, and once I got to high school and I came back from the pandemic, I was very like, I always wanted to be alone, introverted” (FGF3, lines 79-81). Others even considered dropping out of school, changing course from the dreams of college they once had. One first-generation participant shared always wanting to aim for college but almost walking away due to the stress of school closures:

I was always told, like, hey, college is gonna be your ticket. Like, if you do get in school, like...I was always told that I was gonna qualify for tons of scholarships. My junior year,

actually, I was like, I'm gonna drop out and not go to college. And I was like, pretty, pretty, pretty certain about that. I just wanted to not finish high school. I wasn't doing great (FGM2, lines 44-48).

Overcoming these challenges took time, even after school campuses opened. Participants claimed different factors helped them regain their footing. Some relied on interpersonal connections to stay focused on their academic goals, such as one continuing generation student who shared that "having friends around kinda helped with mental health and kept me motivated" (CGN1, lines 135-136). Another first-generation student explained, "I knew what I needed to do is I needed to go to the teacher. Honestly, a lot of the times I just needed to talk" (FGM2, lines 212-213). Others shared their own ability to self-motivate and push through challenges, such as a first-generation female who shared, "I felt really like stuck in place. But then eventually I again, I was kind of getting into that like, little funk, you know, like, mentally, I just was probably not in the best space, and so I would kind of force myself to have a routine and, like, kind of find the positives and everything" (FGF1, lines 235-237). Overall, participants faced many personal challenges that arose from the closure of school during COVID.

### ***Differences Between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participants***

After considering themes shared by participants, I identified themes that highlighted differences between these groups. This process provided three themes, named as Parent Codes in Table 12. Similar to the previous analysis, each of these larger themes have child codes that further detail their significance, specifically highlighting the differences experienced between first-generation and continuing generation participants.

**Table 12***Differences between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participants*

Parent Code	Child Code	Description
Family and Personal Background	Parental Influence and Support	Continuing Generation Participants generally received more structured guidance from their families, with strong academic expectations and legacy influences (e.g., parents and siblings attending college).
	Expectations from Family	In contrast, First-Generation Participants often lacked direct parental guidance on navigating the college process, though they received emotional encouragement.
Academic and Career Planning	Early Career Planning and Goal Setting	Continuing Generation Participants frequently engaged in early career planning, researching colleges and pathways as early as sophomore year.
	Access to College Preparation Resources and Family Support	First-Generation Participants often lacked the same structured early planning, leading to last-minute decision-making. They uniquely faced challenges related to navigating college without family experience, including difficulties with applications, understanding financial aid, and feeling isolated.
Alternative Pathways to Success	Military or Trades as an Alternative Pathway	Some participants saw the military or Trades as a viable alternative to college, citing financial stability and structured career paths.
	Traditional Education Pathways	This was not a theme among most Continuing Generation Participants, who focused more on traditional academic pathways.

**Family and Personal Background.** Continuing generation participants shared great family involvement in building the vision of college-going, many expressing they were fulfilling a legacy set by their parents and a parental want for them to achieve at a high level. One participant expressed, “My family’s very high academic, so it’s very not like high pressure, but high expectations. And so it’s okay if you don’t get the greatest grade, as long as you like, put in 100%” (CGF2, lines 196-198). Some continuing generation participants were clear that there was an expectation to follow through on a legacy that was laid out to them by their family. CGM1 knew exactly what his path would be, stating, “Yeah, my whole family actually went to College

#2. I'm the fifth person in my family" (line 63). Another took the legacy effect in a different direction, fulfilling the continuation of something her parent started, sharing "my mom was first-generation college graduate on her side. So, it was very like important to her that we understood the significance of education and how that can take us places" (CGF2, lines 32-34). This participant made it clear that learning from her mother's journey was one of the strongest influences in knowing her exact post-secondary path.

By contrast, though first-generation participants expressed receiving great love and support from their parents, they shared they did not have direct guidance that allowed them to navigate the college going process. One participant expressed it this way.

I think a big part was, like, my parents wanted to help, but they don't exactly know how. And that's what I saw with a lot of like, my friends, whose parents might have already gone to college, they were very involved with the process. Well, like, compared to me, it was more like I just let them know what I was doing. It's not like they were really helping, you know what I mean (FGF1, Lines 72-76).

Similarly, other first-generation participants leaned on the relationship with a parent to be emotionally supportive of their efforts, if not guiding support. "Growing up my grandmother was just my biggest supporter. She is just the kindest, most wonderful woman you have met in your life, like she's just absolutely amazing" (FGF2, lines 87-88). Others shared that, although family could not help with the college process, they could share support in different ways, such as FGF3's mom offering her car for transportation to campus, and her dad chipping in when he could to pay part of her tuition (line 202). Others felt lost trying to act on their desire to go to college without any guidance, such as FGM2, who shared that "college was always mentioned to

me. I'm a first-generation college student, so I never had, I was never surrounded by anyone who had a degree, really, at least in my family" (lines 42-43).

Sometimes, the lack of understanding created frustrations and challenges to navigating relationships with friends and family. "(O)ne of my family's close friends, she asked, she told me, she's like, oh, you know, you're 18 and you should think about getting a job, and I'm like, a full-time student and a job!" (FGF3, lines 215-217). She further explained the frustration by sharing that her family does not always understand how hard and time consuming it is to be a full-time college student and the hard work that entails. For one participant, that drive to go to college, despite the struggles, was guided by a desire to change the path of their own legacy. "The way I see it is like, I'm gonna go to college, but also think about, like, the generations that come after...maybe like your future partner, your future kids...I just think it could, like, set you up for success in a really big way" (FGF1, lines 258-264).

**Academic and Career Planning.** Continuing generation students demonstrated a clear trend of being engaged in early planning related to career opportunities and the college degrees that support those goals. Several stated they were driven by the want to pursue career plans that started while they were young, like CGF1 who shared, "I have always probably, like, 6th grade have always said nursing, like it has not even been a question, I've always said nursing, through and through there has never even been a question" (lines 29-31). Similarly, CGM1 was inspired early by two coding classes taken at the beginning of high school and decided to pursue computer programming in college (lines 19-20). Overall, continuing generation participants had an early plan and felt successful in pursuing it.

Once these participants had an inspiration for a program or career of interest, they researched colleges that were connected to these programs of interest and what they needed to

accomplish in high school to be eligible for and afford their desired programs. They also expressed doing this work much earlier in the high school process than their first-generation peers, giving them a stronger likelihood of being on track to reach their goals. One continuing generation participant explained how “having done that sophomore year made my life so much easier junior and senior year... then I got to, like, do tours throughout junior year, and then senior year just really focused on applications. So, I honestly set myself up really well” (CGF2, lines 66-71).

However, first-generation students expressed they or their friends more often had not considered careers of interest and associated college details until later in high school, which often caused stress related to taking necessary classes, applying for programs and scholarships, and navigating other processes to reach their career goals. Because of such delays, many first-generation students wondered if they could attend college with less prep time than their continuing generation peers. One first-generation participant shared:

I noticed that they’re like, counselors aren’t really asking you, like, “Oh, what are your plans for graduation?” until, like, a month before you’re graduating. Honestly, I think, like, I had friends that, like, obviously, were not in AVID and stuff, and they weren’t even thinking about college until their counselors, like, kind of brought it up. But at that point, it’s kind of too late to start, at least for like, the Fall term of, like, that year. So I think a big thing that would help is, like, counselors checking in with senior students a lot earlier in junior year (FGF1, lines 289-294).

Others expressed needing to start thinking about the college option even earlier than junior year, particularly noting that maintaining a strong GPA throughout high school is key in getting into college programs and not knowing that until late in the process can make bringing that GPA up

even harder. For one first-generation participant, the lack of attention during COVID and distance learning created challenges when she wanted to apply. “I’ve seen how hard it is to actually bring up your GPA after that. I would really encourage them...your freshman year actually matters, take it from me, I literally just graduated” (FGF3, lines 263-265). This sentiment, and an overall call to start thinking about college earlier in the high school process, was shared by all first-generation participants in this study.

**Alternative Pathways to Success.** First-generation students were more likely to consider alternatives to traditional college paths. For some, this consideration centered around the need to save the money to pay for college and instead begin working early, or working through a program that provided benefits later, rather than racking up student loans. One participant shared that “Especially now with student loans, high interest. Most people are in debt. A lot of people don’t actually use their college education outside of college” (FGM1, lines 53-54). Another participant shared the enticement that comes from moving up within a company and seeing the possibilities:

I worked at a large coffee shop chain, and I really enjoyed the environment of the job, and I kind of became very glued into like the company and like the different positions, I became the youngest shift lead in the franchise. I was like, 16, and I became a shift lead (FGM2, lines 85-87).

Opportunities that provided a direct career path and the ability to earn a strong income could sometimes sway first-generation students from the idea of college.

Alternatively, continuing generation students seemed almost entirely interested in the traditional college path, including only considering 4-year college programs as opposed to 2-year community college options. CGF1 even shared that she considered a 2-year program, for the

financial benefit of saving two full years of tuition at a large university, but others persuaded her to change that path:

I was originally thinking of doing like community college, like free college at the time, and every single person was like yeah, but, you know, you don't get to meet a bunch of people, the outreach of people isn't that big, so, it was always kind of in the back of my mind (lines 34-36).

The need to balance barriers in their lives, as expressed by so many first-generation participants, was not mentioned by continuing generation participants.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study explored recent high school graduates' (within three years of graduation) self-described barriers and facilitators related to college aspirations and enrollment, with a particular emphasis on factors influencing the choices of potential first-generation college students. This work adds to a large body of research around first-generation college students that is both deep and also changing over time, in particular as we have recently faced impactful moments in education, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools all over the country. In this study, the data exploration is intended to inform district practice by adding to the knowledge-base so schools can better meet current challenges and shift programming accordingly.

A key finding from this study is the need for increased opportunity for adult support in high school programs to build positive mentorships with students. This one factor has the capacity to overcome well-researched barriers for first-generation students, such as access to college preparation and resources for applying to post-secondary institutions. In addition, as described in my study, students attribute adult support in their high school programs with improving their grades and fostering social growth to overcome the mental health challenges that have exhibited in students since the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Differing Aspirations between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students**

Over the last eight years, the community studied in this research has seen a continuing rise of high school graduation rates, but a steep decline in college-going rates. The graduation rate continues to be well above that of the state, while the college-going rate continues to fall below that of the state. It is important to note that a larger number of students graduating from

the high school does not necessarily translate to increased college going, as high school programs that help students achieve graduation often support students who might not otherwise graduate and likely do not have college aspirations. A focus on improving high school graduation rates state-wide may be influencing the overall state reduction in the college-going rate as well. However, the gap between the state rate and the district rate is still of concern, as the district should ideally maintain a rate above the state average that is proportional to their higher graduation rate. Over the last several years, the district has had an average college enrollment rate that is at least 6% below the state, with a broadening separation and continued decline post-pandemic over the last three years.

An important parallel to Regan et al's (2023) research, which highlighted the broadened divide between first-generation and continuing generation students due to the pandemic, emerged in this study. Similar to Regan et al's descriptive research study, the first-generation participants in my dissertation struggled significantly more than their continuing generation counterparts when working towards the goal of college, needing more focused and adult-led support after the pandemic. The Analysis of the Personal Influences questions (Table 7) revealed that most recent graduates who participated in the survey, regardless of generation status, indicated that college was important to their future. However, several areas of significance in this data indicated that first-generation students did not have family support necessary for the college process. Further, though not statistically significant, a trend finding showed that fewer first-generation than continuing generation respondents maintained their own plans for college after the pandemic. These differences are highlighted further when examining the qualitative results. The desire to attend college was maintained by continuing generation students seemingly due to legacy and tradition, while first-generation college students struggled to maintain focus in school, had poor

grades, and needed to work harder to make up for academic shortfalls during their early high school years to be college ready. This finding will be explored further in this discussion when addressing barriers and facilitators.

When considering students who aspired to do something other than college, though the number of participants in this study meeting this criterion is small, there are some trends in the data worth noting. Within the free response question of the survey, participants shared that their lack of college aspiration was related to the fact that the work they were choosing to pursue did not require further education, such as employment in the skilled trades. Participants also discussed how finances would make it difficult to attend college and how personal responsibilities, such as health and family obligations, superseded any aspiration to attend college after high school. This finding suggests that participants who are struggling financially and have additional financial challenges related to lost work or the need to support family are less likely to aspire to attend college and instead potentially pursue a career that does not require a degree. This finding aligns with Fallon's (1997) research on first-generation college students, which highlighted their increased likelihood of needing to work to support their families. But it also brings to light the possibility of this challenge being exacerbated by the pandemic. Davis et al. (2021) observed this trend even as the pandemic's effects were subsiding, noting that participants who suffered financial losses during the pandemic continued to struggle financially, making it even more difficult for them and their families to afford college. This financial struggle could be a contributor to the reasoning of those in the survey who did not aspire to go to college.

### **Contemporary Barriers for Potential First-Generation College Students**

By and large, data from this study are aligned with what prior research shared as the three key barriers for potential first-generation college students: lack of role-models with college-

going experiences, struggles with high-academic coursework, and challenges with financial resources. First-generation students in this study did share consistently that both a lack of college-going role-models and financial resources were potential barriers to college success. The third barrier addressed in the research, less rigorous course work, was identified as well, but with a few nuances, as discussed below, that distinguish it from the work of Nowicki (2018) and Kirton (2023). A fourth contemporary barrier surfaced in the data due to pandemic school closures that is intertwined with each of the above: mental health challenges. Participants throughout the study indicated a need for support regarding their mental health that influenced many of the other barriers, including their personal beliefs around their personal capacity to go to college, to get the grades needed for college, to pay for college, and to be successful as a student.

### ***Mental Health***

The data provided around mental health for all participants was clear; almost two thirds of study participants struggled with or were supporting others who struggled with mental health challenges related to the pandemic. Survey responses by both first-generation and continuing generation participants around Health Influences (Table 8) showed overall lower mean scores throughout the individual questions as compared to other survey influences asked about in the quantitative data, and interview participants all shared significant stories of mental health challenges after being isolated from school and peers during the school closures associated with the pandemic. This finding aligns well with the research of Ryan et al. (2021) and Serpas and Ignacio (2023). However, this need seemed universal to participants regardless of their generation status, unlike in the results shared by Kirton (2023) and Regan et al. (2023), who both found an increased level of anxiety and depression in first-generation students, as compared to continuing generation, students.

### ***Role Models***

Similar to foundational research, first-generation participants throughout this study shared the need for role models who could support their aspirations towards college. The data within Personal Influences (see Table 7) brought to light other barriers consistent with research around first-generation students. First-generation participants were less likely to have family members expect them to go to college. For those who still aspired to go, they were less likely to have family who were able to help with the process. Also interesting to note is that expectations were seemingly lowered for first-generation students after the pandemic, when compared to continuing generation students, which is consistent with research from both Gibbons et al. (2016) and Naff et al. (2017). What differed from past research in this study were the protective factors or facilitators that helped participants in this study overcome this particular barrier. This will be explored further in this chapter.

### ***Financial Resources***

When reviewing the data regarding potential barriers to college going (see Table 4), a consistent 20% of respondents reported having experienced instability in work and finances since the COVID-19 pandemic. The data also show the same percentage of respondents stating that they had insufficient income and needed to help financially at home. This need could account for about 20% of graduates not considering college as a post-secondary option, but barriers facing the other 35% lie deeper within the data.

When differentiating responses between first-generation and continuing generation participants within these factors, I found statistically significant differences in a few areas. First, the findings suggest there were more non-white students who are first-generation than continuing generation in my sample, a trend supported by existing research (Fallon, 1997). The data further

suggest a potential negative impact on families of first-generation students' financial stability since the pandemic when compared to continuing generation students. This finding implies an increased negative impact on families of first-generation students' financial stability since the pandemic compared to continuing generation. Finances were identified as a barrier by many first-generation interview participants, who shared that they had additional struggles when considering college due to the need for financial aid, scholarships, or other support. This finding, again, is consistent with prior research, as shared by Fry (2021), Furquim et al. (2017), and Gibbons et al. (2016).

### ***Access to Learning and Lower GPAs During the Pandemic***

Participants in this study discussed the challenge of accessing learning amid pandemic school closures, which they associated with lower GPAs and the need to improve grades before being able to consider college as an option. Students in my sample *did have access* to higher level courses, which was a barrier previously discussed by Horn and Nunez (2000), Nowicki (2018), and Kirton (2023). While not lacking the courses themselves, the academic barrier in my dissertation study aligned with students not being able to access learning successfully through online learning formats during pandemic related school closures. While in a distance learning setting, be it for reasons such as caring for sick family members or finding courses difficult to follow or unengaging online, or even personal challenges with mental health, students fell behind and struggled to recover, even when schools reopened. The lower engagement and subsequent lower GPAs during distance learning, though similar to what has been reported in other studies, showed variances in how academics were a barrier for first-generation participants in this study due to pandemic related factors.

## **Facilitators to Help First-Generation Students Achieve College**

There is an interesting relationship to notice between the most frequent barriers and most frequent facilitators within this study. The challenges experienced around mental health, role models, and low GPAs, when overcome, were done with the facilitation of adult relationships and connections with supportive staff in school programs. Participants consistently shared that strong staff relationships were the most influential factor in changing their trajectory while struggling after the pandemic and still aspiring to go to college.

It is important to note that this was a cross-sectional study with a one-time data measurement model, not a longitudinal design. The data gathered was self-reported and retrospective, not gathered through randomized control trials. Therefore, these conclusions do not represent causality, rather a reflection based upon the reported experience and perceptions of participants.

### ***Relationship Building for Social Capital***

Factors linked to social capital emerged as important in this study, both in the quantitative and qualitative data. One particular thread centers around the idea of relationship building. There is strong indication in the quantitative data that success in attending college for first-generation participants in this study centered around the adults at high school helping students to go through the steps necessary to go to college (see Table 6). Statistically significant findings showed that when first-generation students had this support at the school level, they were more likely to have chosen college as their post-secondary option. Qualitative data provides even deeper insights into this phenomenon.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared stories about the positive influence of trusted adults at school. The connection between the idea of deep relationships at school with

valued mentors and finding collegiate success post high school, especially for first-generation participants, is an important finding. It suggests that adults who built connections with students were able to help them see not just the path to get to college, but often were the precursor towards helping students see their own capacity to be accepted into and successfully navigate college, aiming towards a career they might not have otherwise pursued. This was especially important due to the quantitative data in Table 7, which significantly shows that first-generation participants did not have family support with either the idea or the process of going to college.

Conversely, a few participants indicated that they had negative adult relationships in high school, which ultimately led them to a different post-secondary path. One such student did initially attend college because it was a family expectation, and she felt pressure to do so. However, she left after the first year. That student shared that she did not have great relationships with adults during high school who helped her explore her own college and career opportunities. Rather, she started college due to an enormous amount of pressure from family. Though speculative, the presence of a high school mentor could have equipped this participant with the tools to pursue a more independent path in decision-making that aligns with her current needs and interests. The second participant, who had very negative relationships with adults in high school, seemed to have branded extended learning and education on the whole as not being worth the time or energy. In fact, this participant indicated that his future plans were largely self-determined, self-learned, and self-driven. Simply, the guidance and support of adults was not a piece of the puzzle at all for that student. Investigating this reverse relationship involving negative experiences with adults in high school, though a small number within the sample, indicates that lacking positive adult relationships or experiencing negative relationships with

adults could drive students away from the aspiration of seeing themselves within a higher education setting and the careers and opportunities associated with that.

### ***Relational Capacity for Supporting Mental Health***

Another important finding in this study is the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures had on participants' ability to develop their own sense of relational capacity. Participants indicated very strongly in both their quantitative and qualitative data that the pandemic had a negative impact on their ability to create and maintain friendships and generally socialize with others due to the school closures and social distancing measures put into place. Some participants described becoming isolated and withdrawn, not having social connections. Others described their mental health challenges related to not feeling academically successful in the first years of high school through online learning, then coming back to in-person learning with very low skills and a poor understanding of how to approach high school. Participants shared that the ability to redevelop relationships after returning to campus had the potential to build resilience in them, noting strong relationships with peers and adults often gave the intrinsic support needed to reverse the negativity developed during the pandemic. For those participants, it was the adults in the system who believed in them and helped them understand how to improve their grades who were essential for recovering from pandemic impacts. This suggests that in addition to the social capital gained from positive adult relationships, participants were able to work through their mental health challenges with the positive relationships built with others once they returned to in-person learning on campus.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings from this research, there are a few proactive and structured approaches that schools can take to provide tailored support for first-generation students,

increasing academic preparation and addressing non-academic barriers that disproportionately affect them, particularly post-pandemic. The following recommendations outline practical strategies that public school systems can implement to better equip first-generation students with the knowledge, resources, and confidence needed to navigate the path to college successfully. These suggestions are intended to be universally approachable and not cost-prohibitive to schools and districts, allowing for a creative approach to bringing ideas forward through school-wide goals and initiatives.

### ***Expand and Strengthen High School Mentorship Programs***

Schools could establish or expand mentorship programs that connect first-generation students with trusted school staff, allowing them to serve as informal advisors who are able to support students in developing the social and relational capital necessary to go to college. This is a nuanced approach to the robust counseling programs encouraged in prior research in response to new barriers identified in post-pandemic educational settings and addresses the continued need for first-generation students to garner school support for the processes which their family are unable to provide. The research base indicates specifically that high school counseling programs are a key component to ensuring first-generation college-going success, sharing at length about the role counselors play in supporting the social capital needed to support first-generation students (Byron et al., 2011; Fallon, 1997; Naff et al., 2017; Nowicki, 2018). However, the findings of this study, while aligning to the need for adult-based support for first-generation students (Havlick, 2017), show no relationship to counselors or counseling programs. In fact, the adults that were named by participants all had different capacities within the building: support staff, trusted and honored teachers, and even administrators. Based on these findings, that definition of adult support in high school for first-generation students may need to be expanded.

This suggests that practices centered around larger representative groups at the high school being prepared to reach more students than simply improving counseling centers could be impactful. For example, schools might engage in targeted professional development around the impact of relationship building on the social development of students and help staff see their capacity to be mentors to students, regardless of their role or title within the building.

Additionally, developing a systematic approach to identifying students who have and who still need adult connection would be important. This could be done through wellness surveys, where students are asked to name their trusted adults. Gathering names of students who do not identify a connection allows for a focused approach on reaching them by mobilizing staff to make a connection to those students. Alternatively, schools can identify a core group of staff per grade level who work to build relationships with that group of students annually. At the heart of any strategy is the want to ensure the connections that exist and identify and close the gap for those that do not.

Increasing staff understanding of their ability to influence the trajectory of student lives because of the depth of their relationship is important. When adults can see, through research and data, that the trusting, respectful, mentor-based relationships that they build with students can be impactful to their future, it could put a different lens on how they look at the way they communicate with students, the way that they give feedback, and the way they structure supports. Continuing to broaden the opportunity for students to see adults as trusted mentors within the school system might lead to increased academic success post high for first-generation and continuing generation students alike.

### ***Provide College Readiness Courses Earlier in the High School Curriculum***

With participants indicating someone other than their school counselor as a significant adult who helped them find success, schools may want to consider moving away from a counseling-centered approach to providing college-going information and think about how to prepare a larger number of staff members to have a base of knowledge on the college going process. Implementing college readiness courses in high school that cover career exploration, college applications, and financial aid has a foundation in research for supporting potential first-generation students. The findings in this study further suggest that ensuring that courses or other opportunities like this are placed within the high school learning continuum in a way that has a more positive impact is just as important. Participants who were enrolled in AVID shared how they were consistently supported throughout high school to make strong post-secondary decisions. This is supported by research from Todhunter-Reid et al. (2020), which showed findings that correlate taking at least one AVID elective class to higher rates of college enrollment. This work was endorsed by What Works Clearinghouse for its significant results.

The timing of college-readiness courses does seem to matter. For those not in the AVID program, a college and career centered class, referred to as PEP, was mentioned by many participants and was scheduled in the second semester of their junior year. The course was intended as a universal elective that provides guidance for students toward specific careers, helping students understand whether or not they need college for these careers and how to go about pursuing their desired path after graduation. Participants expressed that the content of this course was meaningful and impactful, however, the timing seemed to create an obstacle for first-generation students. For example, one participant shared her frustration because of learning late in her junior year that her GPA might keep her from a college program of interest, as she had

already completed almost three-quarters of her high school career, boosting her GPA proved difficult. First-generation participants expressed that if high school students knew early on about the value of a strong GPA for college entrance, such as during their sophomore year, students would have more time to focus on their grades to be college ready. This reflection is in line with research from Byron et al. (2011) discussing the need for regular adult support around knowledge of college for students prior to 10<sup>th</sup> grade when that support does not come from adults at home. The implications for practice are not just about having programs that provide the necessary information to fill the informational gap for first-generation students, but to think about providing them in a timeframe that makes the information actionable for students to achieve their goals.

When it is not possible to develop specific college-readiness courses for all students, the impactful components of such a program could be replicated within other coursework to broaden the reach of those practices. Opportunities for sharing information could be present in common periods, such as advisory. These sessions provide a universal platform that engages all students and allows staff to deliver developmentally appropriate content. With support from building-level experts, for example, targeted lessons could be designed to address the evolving needs of students from freshman through senior year, helping them plan effectively for post-secondary success throughout their high school career. All of this shows a need to potentially connect the systems in schools with students, as opposed to having silos of information via departments or programs.

Additionally, schools could look at possible partnership opportunities with families, bringing them into the conversation with their children about the college process. While schools should continue to own the information and programs, parents can be made aware of the work

schools are doing with their children and invited to participate where they are comfortable. This provides alignment with the research related to family and school engagement, as well as bolsters the emotional support that has been identified as valuable for first-generation students (Fallon, 1997; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Naff et al., 2017).

### ***Address Mental Health and Other Continuing Pandemic Challenges***

Overall, the most contemporary finding within this study was the challenge of negative mental health outcomes for participants as a result of school closures and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be wise for school districts to anticipate the potential continued challenges that may arise in various cohorts of students as they move through the school years, acknowledging that students will likely show mental health and relationship needs that developed from social removal during online learning. Students at all levels missed key developmental stages during school closures that will impact their social capacity with peers and adults as they move through the school system. Educators need to be aware, both socially and academically, of our responsibility to continue to see the residual effects of the pandemic on students and their families, shifting our systems and practices to respond accordingly. This might require continued shifts in our mental health support, but it should be noted from the findings of this study that a consistent focus on the way that staff interact with students and families will support inter-personal connections and the ability to close gaps in social development. The impact for each group of students might look different at each stage and at each developmental level of growth, and we should anticipate that we will be facing this for quite a few years to come.

## **Limitations**

The generalizability of this study should be considered within its limitations. Participants in this study were from one particular community in the northwestern United States with a high number of potential first-generation college students. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other locations, particularly urban settings or different regional areas. While the research provides valuable insights into the barriers and facilitators affecting first-generation students in this region, the results may not fully apply to students in more diverse, urban, or high college-going populations where different challenges and resources may exist.

Because this study relies on self-reported data from surveys and interviews, bias may be introduced in the findings. Participants may have provided responses they believed were expected or acceptable rather than entirely reflecting their personal experiences. In addition, retrospective accounts of their decision-making process may be influenced by their current circumstances, potentially skewing the accuracy of the data.

Despite multifaceted recruitment efforts for a broader participant base, this study engaged participants that were disproportionately college-going in comparison to the demographics of the district being studied. The sample may be skewed toward individuals who are more engaged with their educational outcomes. Participants who were disengaged from high school or who faced the most significant barriers to post-secondary education may have been underrepresented in this study, potentially limiting a full understanding of the experiences of those who did not pursue college. Therefore, the opportunity to continue studying feedback from graduates who did not choose to attend college would benefit the research base around this topic. For example, research by Davis et al. (2021) discussed the inability of potential first-generation students to afford college due to lost employment during the pandemic and the need to take care of family.

Some indications of this were shared in the free-response portion of the survey, but there were missing voices from study who might have provided details about the greater effects of this barrier. Additionally, recommended implications for practice are based upon the findings in the data with the voices present. There is potential that the needs identified by engaged participants in this study do not match those of disengaged students, therefore there are limitations on the potential of these implications of practice in reaching students who did not take part in this study.

While this study examines the impact of post-pandemic challenges such as financial struggles and mental health issues on first-generation students, the long-term effects of the pandemic are still unfolding. Given that we are only a few years removed from the pandemic, there currently exists limited research on its effect on education, as some barriers and systemic shifts in education may not yet be fully realized. Future studies would be beneficial to capture the evolving challenges and supports that emerge over time.

Finally, discovering disparities in aspiration between first-generation and continuing generation students through the results of this study has limitations. The majority of students participating in this research aspired to and followed through with going to college. Only 15% of respondents in the quantitative survey portion and 30% of the qualitative interview portion chose not to attend college. While this is an under-representation of the 55% of graduates not attending college overall within the community studied, there were some insights from this research that indicate varying aspirations of participants both post-pandemic and between first-generation and continuing generation students. There is value in evaluating the data around how college-going first-generation students navigated this decision and investigating more deeply the similarities and differences between first-generation and continuing generation students in the data to provide actionable recommendations for schools. There is also a need for further research that

can capture the voices of students who might be disengaged from school and are missing from this research.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the continued decline in college enrollment among first-generation high school graduates, a trend exacerbated by post-pandemic challenges. While previous research has long documented the systemic barriers faced by first-generation college students, this study uncovers two key findings that could reshape high school programs. First, mental health challenges and relational capacity must be given as much focus as traditional efforts to build social capital around the college-going process. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the educational landscape, making emotional well-being and interpersonal connections critical components of student success. Second, the role of mentorship and college support systems in schools must be expanded beyond traditional school counselors. A more comprehensive, system-wide approach—where multiple educators serve as mentors who actively contribute to a culture of post-secondary preparedness—has the potential to create more robust support networks for first-generation students.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift in how educational institutions support first-generation students. The findings suggest that when schools implement holistic support systems that combine mental health resources, relational mentorship, and early intervention to support college readiness, first-generation students can successfully navigate the complexities of higher education. By expanding relational networks and embedding college readiness into broader school structures, students are more likely to envision and achieve a college-going future.

## APPENDIX A

### LETTER OF AGREEMENT

#### **Contact:**

- Lauren Berg, Doctoral Student, University of Oregon, laurenbe@uoregon.edu

This document serves as an agreement between the school district and Lauren E. Berg to provide identifiable data for my dissertation research within the Educational Leadership program at the University of Oregon. The data will fall under the following parameters:

#### **Participating students:**

- I would like to request records from post-graduate high school students.
- I will only be requesting information from students who previously agreed to be contacted via the Spring 2023-24 Senior Survey for follow up on post-graduate plans. This prior agreement allows for consent of disclosure of information compliant with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

#### **Agreement with the district:**

- Data will be collected that could benefit **Goal 1, Objective 3** of the district strategic plan, which will allow insight into those enrolling in post-secondary education, especially within focal populations, and could serve to improve the proportional representation of the focal population within the district's college-going student population.

#### **Secure Data Sharing:**

- Data will be shared via a secured Google Drive file. The district readily uses Google Drive and can share files easily, with controls on who can and cannot see the file.
- I will provide the district with a list of all participating students in each school as confirmation that they are within the agreement specified, compliant with FERPA.

#### **Data requested:**

1. Personal Contact Information:
  - a. Personal email addresses
2. First-Generation Student Status:
  - a. As available, this project is seeking to find participants who are or would be first-generation college students.
3. Final Post-Graduate Plans
  - a. Information on what students stated was their plan after graduation in June 2023 and 2024.

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Dr. Debbie Brockett, Superintendent

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Lauren E. Berg, Researcher

## APPENDIX B

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [name of contact],

I hope you are well and that you enjoyed your summer after your successful graduation in June. I would like to invite you to be a part of a research study, **Navigating the Next Chapter: Post-Pandemic Challenges and Pathways in Accessing Higher Education for First-Generation College Students** This one-year study intends to gather perspectives from potential first-generation college students on the influences that impacted their decision whether or not to attend college.

This project is for my dissertation with the University of Oregon, within the College of Education. This study aims to learn from recent high school graduates about their decision-making processes related to going to college. The purpose of this research is to gather perspectives from potential first-generation college students on the influences that impacted their decision whether or not to attend college. The researcher will pull themes from this work to help guide school districts in building support for students.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take a short (no more than 30-minute) survey online about your recent experiences. All participants must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study. Depending on responses, some subjects may be asked to attend an optional individual follow-up interview lasting approximately 90 minutes.

I would be honored to learn from your experiences. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [laurenbe@uoregon.edu](mailto:laurenbe@uoregon.edu), or 503-320-7915.

Thank you,

Lauren E. Berg

## APPENDIX C

### ONLINE SURVEY

I am trying to learn more about why people do and do not enroll in college. By completing this survey, I will be learning from you. Your opinion matters so please answer each survey question to the best of your ability. **Your individual, personal responses to survey questions are confidential and not shared with anyone.** All survey responses are combined before reporting any results to ensure confidentiality. **This survey is voluntary.** You do not have to answer any question you do not want to, but I hope you will answer as many questions as possible.

What are your plans for this fall?

- Attend a 2-year community college
- Attend a 4-year college or university
- Attend a certificate or trade program
- Attend a military academy
- Enlist in the military
- Work full- or part-time
- I have other plans

Do you have a parent or guardian who has graduated from college with either a two-year associate degree or a four-year bachelor's degree?

- Yes
- No

If you are not planning to pursue education after high school at this time, what are the reasons? (Choose your top 3 choices.)

- I need a break from school.
- I need to work.
- My grades or test scores aren't good enough.
- I don't need more education to be successful in my chosen career.
- I don't need more education to make money.
- I need to take care of a family member.
- It costs too much.
- I don't know how to enroll.
- Most of my friends are not going on.
- I live too far away from where classes are offered.
- I am not motivated to go.
- I want to stay close to my family.
- I need time to take care of my health.

Did you take honors or AP courses in high school?

- Yes
- No

Were you in the AVID program in high school?

- Yes
- No

Did you complete a career pathway program while in high school?

- Yes
- No

Do you currently have a job that pays you a monthly wage or salary?

- Yes
- No

Do you have to help your family financially?

- Yes
- No

The average income for you or your family per month is:

- Sufficient/able to pay the bills
- Not sufficient/hard to pay for everything

Accessing transportation to a college campus or job is:

- Easy/possible for me and/or my family.
- Creates a challenge for me and/or my family.

Things have been financially stable for my family since the pandemic.

- Yes
- No

Work has been stable for my family since the pandemic.

- Yes
- No

I have health insurance and can pay my medical bills.

- Yes
- No

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary
- I choose not to identify

What is your race/cultural identification?

- Hispanic/Latino

- White
- African-American/Black
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Bi-racial/Multi-racial
- Other
- I choose not to identify

What language is spoken in your home?

- Spanish
- English
- Other
- Multilingual

**School Influences:** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Most adults at my high school expected me to go to college.				
Adults at my high school talked to me about different college choices for my future.				
Adults at my high school helped me learn the steps to get to and pay for college.				
Adults at my high school maintained high expectations for me.				

**Personal Influences:** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My family expected me to go to college.				
My family was able to help me with the college process.				
My family maintained high expectations for my education.				
My friends had a strong influence on my college-going decision.				
My plans for college have remained the same since the pandemic.				
College feels important to creating my future.				

**Health:** Please select the response that best fits your situation.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My overall health and well-being is stable.				
My emotional stability and resilience in dealing with challenges are strong.				
My personal levels of anxiety or depression are the same since the pandemic.				
My personal stress levels are the same since the pandemic.				
I know how to find effective health treatment if I need it, including mental health treatment.				
My family’s mental health status (stress level, anxiety, depression) has been the same since the pandemic.				
My friends’ mental health status (stress level, anxiety, depression) has been the same since the pandemic.				

*(Adapted from surveys obtained from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Los Angeles Unified School District, 2024; Oregon Goes to College, n.d.)*

Would you like to be considered for a one-on-one online interview in the second part of this study?

- Yes (Qualtrics redirects to a separate survey for contact information.)
- No (Qualtrics thanks the participant and ends the survey.)

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Project:** Navigating the Next Chapter: Post-Pandemic Challenges and Pathways in Accessing Higher Education for First-Generation College Students

#### **Details about the Interview**

Time of interview:

Date:

Interviewer: Lauren Berg

Interviewee:

Recording/storing interview information: All interviews will be recorded via two formats - cell phone recordings and Zoom transcripts. The researcher will use Zoom, with Otter.ai, to produce initial transcripts and will then compare that to the audio recordings to create a final transcript of each interview. Transcripts will be coded for trends and themes.

#### **Introduction**

- Introduce yourself and review the purpose of the study
- Verify that informed consent signature has been obtained via Qualtrics
- Provide structure of the interview (audio recording via phone, Zoom recording)
- Ask if interviewee has questions

#### **College-Going Participant Content Questions**

1. What have you been up to since graduating high school?
2. Think back to when you were deciding what you were going to do after you graduated high school. These might include really early memories from your childhood

or much more recent experiences. Tell me about what made you want to attend college. If there were a lot of different things, tell me about as many as you can think of.

Probes: Tell me more. Walk me through your experience (Weiss, 1994).

3. Here are some of the themes that arose from the survey data.
  - Adults at school helped students learn the steps to attend college.
  - Families sometimes were able to help with the college-going process, and sometimes families were not able to help with this process.
  - Programs like AVID supported the process.
  - College-related information and processes are challenging to access for families who speak a language other than English at home.
  - Mental health changes after the pandemic affected college decisions.

Which of these themes resonate with your experience? Which do not?

4. Think back to when you were in high school. Tell me about the barriers you did experience that made getting to college difficult. What did you have to overcome?

Probes: Could you tell me more? Was there anyone in your high school who helped you with these barriers? What was their role? What did they do? (Weiss, 1994)

5. What experience(s) in high school would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success?

Probes: Could you tell me more? Were there specific people who helped you in these experiences?

6. What factors do you, personally, possess that you believe have positively impacted your success?

Probes: Can you give an example of when that helped you? Did anyone help you foster that?

7. What advice would you give other high school students preparing to become college students?

Probes: Tell me about who they could reach out to for help.

### **Non College-Going Participant Content Questions**

1. What have you been up to since graduating high school?
2. Think back to when you were deciding what you were going to do after you graduated high school. These might include really early memories from your childhood or much more recent experiences. Tell me about what influenced your decision. If there were a lot of different things, tell me about as many as you can think of.

Probes: Tell me more. Walk me through your experience (Weiss, 1994).

3. Here are some of the themes that arose from the survey data.
  - Adults at school helped students learn the steps to attend college.
  - Families sometimes were able to help with the college-going process, and sometimes families were not able to help with this process.
  - Programs like AVID supported the process.
  - College-related information and processes are challenging to access for families who speak a language other English at home.
  - Mental health changes after the pandemic affected college decisions.

Which of these themes resonate with your experience? Which do not?

4. Think back to when you were in high school. Tell me about the barriers you experienced that made getting to college difficult. What did you have to overcome?

Probes: Could you tell me more? Did anyone at school recognize these barriers or offer to help you overcome them? (Weiss, 1994)

5. What experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your decision to pursue \_\_\_ after high school?

Probes: Could you tell me more? Were there specific moments that you remember?

6. What factors do you, personally, possess that you believe will guide you now in your adult life?

Probes: Can you give an example of how that will support you? Did anyone help you foster that?

7. What advice would you give other high school students making a decision about what to do after they graduate?

Probes: Tell me about what they should consider in their decision.

### **Closing Instructions**

- Thank the individual for participating.
- Assure individual participant of the confidentiality in their responses.
- If needed, request further interviews.
- If asked, comment on how the interviewee will receive the results of the study.

## APPENDIX E

### AI CODING INSTRUCTIONS

#### Individual Transcripts

Imagine you are a researcher and an expert in the analysis of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. I will provide you with an interview transcript that you should analyze using a method called “thematic analysis.” Your task is to assign categories to the answers in the transcript. A category is an abstract summary of the content. You should not assign categories to the questions themselves.

The interview transcript focuses on high school graduates’ responses to questions about their high school experience and how it led to their post-high choices. The interview transcript also focuses on students’ own experiences with schooling, barriers, facilitators and decisions during and after high school. Specifically, the categories you create based on the answers should relate to students’ descriptions of their school experience, supports they had, barriers they faced, and why they made their final decisions.

Don’t give me more than 6 categories and, for each category, find 1-2 text examples or quotes of at least three sentences that best reflect the category.

The transcript is structured as follows:

<Researcher (indicated by the abbreviation ‘Researcher’)>:

<Question (ending with ‘??’)>:

<Continuing Generation Participants (indicated by the abbreviation ‘CGN’, ‘CGF’ or ‘CGM’)>:

<First-Generation Participants (indicated by the abbreviation FGF’ or ‘FGM’)>:

<Answer>

Please present the results in table form. The first column contains the categories, the second column contains a description of the categories (at least three sentences), the third column contains the example quotes, and the fourth column reflects the quote speaker's name(s) and the location of the quote reflected in either a time stamp or a line number.

Let me know when you are ready for the transcript.

### **Comparative Themes between CG and FG Transcripts**

Imagine you are a researcher and an expert in the analysis of qualitative data.

I will provide you with a document containing 10 tables with up to 6 categories each identified through thematic analysis of interview transcripts. A category is an abstract summary of the content. Your task is to first separate and compare themes between two groups:

<Continuing Generation Participants (indicated by the abbreviation 'CGN', 'CGF' or 'CGM')>:

<First-Generation Participants (indicated by the abbreviation FGF' or 'FGM')>:

You should be looking for themes that are both similar and those that are different between these two groups. Identify at least 4 categories that are similar across these 4 tables between those two groups, as well as 4 categories that are different across these 4 tables between those two groups, and present them in two "consolidation documents." The first document should show similarities. The second document should show differences. The categories you will select for the consolidation document should be those categories endorsed by the most participants across all tables.

The categories summarize students' answers during interviews on their own experiences with schooling, barriers, facilitators and decisions during and after school that led to their post-high decisions. Specifically, the categories you create based on the answers should relate to

students' descriptions of their school experience, facilitators they had, barriers they faced, and why they made their final decisions whether or not to go to college.

Only consolidate information in the table formats. The consolidation document is structured in table form. The first column contains the categories that are common across all 10 tables in the document and between both groups are endorsed by the most participants, the second column contains a description of the categories (at least three sentences) that is a consolidation of the description in each table, the third column contains at least 3 example quotes, the fourth column reflects the location of each of the quotes, including the line number, the fifth column includes the participant codes for the speakers of the quotes from the original document, and the last column contains the number of participants who mentioned the topic across all tables. Organize the categories in the first column by the most to the least number of participants in the final column.

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