First-Generation College Students:

Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic

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Abstract

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This qualitative case study explored with a sample of first-generation students the factors that aided or impeded their pursuit of a degree before the pandemic, factors that impacted them during the crisis and any differences in their experiences at elite vs. non-elite schools. The rationale for the study was based on the researcher’s objective to uncover ways to help these students navigate through higher education. The researcher assumed increased understanding of the reality of a first-generation student during the pandemic would help universities design better supports to meet these students’ needs.

The sample was composed of 27 first-generation undergraduates who attended 15 public and private universities across the U.S. The data collection methods were interviews and a focus group, including demographic and statistical data supplied by the participants. The data from the interviews and focus group was coded and organized according to the research questions. Analysis, interpretation and synthesis of the findings were organized by 2 analytic categories based on the conceptual framework: a) supports and barriers influencing first-generation students’ pursuit of a degree before the crisis and b) the relationship between first-generation students’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic.

This research revealed that factors, such as how they prepared for college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits, either enabled or impeded first-generation
students’ pursuit of a college degree before the pandemic. During the crisis, these students reflected on the value of a degree, in relation to the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education. Therefore, many participants reported their struggles during the pandemic helped them learn how to succeed. Finally, selectivity of the universities and availability of public funding had no material impact on how they met the needs of first-generation students during the pandemic.

Recommendations are offered for universities and education policy makers to provide advisory services over 4 years, family workshops and mentors to assist with social supports. Recommendations for students and their families include guidelines for how students can achieve more effective two-way communication with their universities. Recommendations for future research are also included.
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Acknowledgments

This dissertation represents not only my research, but it is also a milestone in my journey to understand the needs of students who are first in their families to attend college. This research study was first inspired by my grandparents; although their formal education ended in eighth grade, they valued the importance of higher education, and by my parents who were first-generation college students. However, the students in this study, who overcame barriers to get to college and then navigated through college by climbing every mountain they faced, are the true heroes in this story.

First, I want to thank Dr. Lyle Yorks, the first person I met at Teachers College. I met Dr. Yorks even before I applied, when I asked how someone like me, an economist by training whose entire career was in financial services, would be considered among a pool of highly qualified applicants. Dr. Yorks encouraged me without any hesitation. I am thankful that I applied and even more so that Dr. Yorks agreed to be my sponsor for this research study. His wisdom, guidance and good humor, as well as stories about his experiences as a first-generation student, sustained me throughout the process of writing this dissertation.

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Finally, I want to recognize my daughter, Meredith, who is currently in college. Whenever, I doubted my abilities to juggle full-time work, school and family, Meredith was there. Sometimes, we even sat side by side as we studied for exams or wrote papers. Even for someone who loves being a student as much as I do, periodically I would ask myself, “Why am I doing this?” Meredith responded with her love and unwavering support. She was my biggest booster throughout this journey. I love you and know that I will always be in your corner. Thank you.

L.B.S.
Dedication

To my late parents, Mae and Milton, who gave me unwavering love and support and whose example as first-generation college students inspired me to do this research.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Neither of my parents had the means to attend college, but taught me to love learning, to care about people, and to work hard for whatever I wanted or believed in. What has become of me could happen only in America. Like so many others, I owe so much to the entry this Nation afforded to people yearning to breathe free.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg
First-Generation College Student
Cornell University, AB, Class of 1954
Columbia University, JD, Class of 1959
From Confirmation Hearings, Senate Judiciary Committee, July 20, 1993

COVID-19 exposed and exacerbated the inequities that were pronounced prior to 2020. As the pandemic entered its third year, it was crucial to reimagine a different future, because our past was too fragile and too inequitable. To provide insight on how to reinterpret a future where first-generation college students (1Gs) can look forward to a life with better possibilities, this research was aimed at understanding the stress points that impacted college students because of their first-generation status, both before and during the pandemic. These students were impacted by factors that did not affect other undergraduates. Predominantly non-white and low-income, these students were the first in their families to navigate college admission, financial aid and university courses. The early phase of the pandemic amplified existing stress points and as the health crisis passed its second anniversary, stressors mounted and created new ones that resulted in an unprecedented decline in enrollment.

A postsecondary education in the twenty-first century was never more important. As the U.S. continues to move from an industrialized economy to a more technological one, advanced skills are required. Even prior to the pandemic, this was a time of uncertainty for college students who worried about jobs and repaying loans. Then the health crisis accelerated existing trends in the economy and society through increased use of technology, telework, virtual education and
artificial intelligence. Undergraduates were reflecting on whether their majors would allow them to find well-paying jobs. The pandemic fast-tracked workplace initiatives for white collar jobs. Two years of remote work caused CEOs to rethink traditional 9-5 or five-day workweek models in favor of hybrid or fully remote models. What this means for recent graduates is they will face more competition from a widely dispersed pool of applicants. These trends will have a lasting impact on higher education even after the pandemic.

When COVID-19 first swept across the U.S. in the early spring of 2020, colleges and universities focused on the immediate problems of sending students home and transitioning to online instruction. However, after the initial months of the pandemic, colleges and universities shifted their attention to a longer time horizon, as they faced decreasing enrollment especially among low-income and marginalized students, a steep decline in international students, state funding cuts and an economic crisis. For these vulnerable students, delayed enrollment, even by just a semester or two, made it more likely they would need remedial courses if they eventually enrolled, and it made never obtaining a college degree a possibility. A realistic concern is that a generation of low-income, potential college students could be left behind and get trapped in minimum wage jobs, thereby losing their tenuous foothold on the economic ladder.

Even though colleges and universities became increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, international status and income level, they struggled to understand the needs of these students. In 1996, students of color represented 29.6 percent of undergraduates. Twenty years later, enrollment by communities of color increased to 45.2 percent according to the American Council on Education’s (ACE) report on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (2019). However, 73.2 percent of full-time faculty are white (ACE, 2019). This raises concerns about how well they understand the stress points facing low-income marginalized undergraduates.
Many marginalized and multicultural students are the first in their families to attend college or university. On campus, they lack role models in the classroom because they are more likely to encounter people of color in service and maintenance jobs (42.2 percent) or in public safety roles (33 percent) according to ACE (2019). A report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) during the fall 2020 showed enrollment by students from low-income urban high schools dropped 8.7 percent from a year earlier, compared to a 6.7 percent decrease from students coming from high schools in wealthier neighborhoods (2020).

This chapter begins with a discussion of the Background and Context to understand the Research Problem. Then the chapter continues with an explanation of the Research Purpose and Questions, and Research Design Overview. The researcher shares her Perspectives and Assumptions. The chapter concludes with the Rationale and Significance. Definitions of commonly used terms are also provided.

1.1 Background and Context

Before the pandemic, there was a range of factors that impacted 1Gs in their pursuit of a college education. One way to think about these issues was to look at them on a spectrum, starting from when colleges and universities recruited potential students, through the time when 1Gs arrived on campuses and eventually, when the pandemic caused an abrupt closure of universities that in turn, forced an overnight conversion to online instruction.

For many years, colleges and universities actively recruited non-white students and in more recent years, higher education went one step further by encouraging enrollment of 1Gs. They actively recruited 1Gs and once admitted, these students received financial aid packages that made them feel as if they won the lottery. However, no one explained to the students and their families that the loans would eventually need to be repaid and 1Gs often lacked advice from
adults who could help them make informed financial decisions. As a result, many 1Gs incurred
debt that will affect them for decades and this could impede their ability to achieve a middle-
class lifestyle.

Many colleges and universities had good intentions when they established programs to help 1Gs. However, since most of the faculty and administrators came from white, middle-class backgrounds, they lacked the first-hand experience required to relate to 1Gs. Living among affluent classmates, working-class students were more likely to experience marginalization and social segregation; this can lead to feeling overwhelmed, isolated and inadequate. By necessity, 1Gs became more autonomous than students who can rely on their families.

Even though 1Gs dressed like their wealthier classmates, registered for the same classes and enjoyed the same music, they were influenced by their families in ways that did not impact more affluent students. Their parents may have needed help with childcare, homework assistance or translation at doctors’ appointments. Some students lived at home to assist their families, whose parents were often essential workers in service jobs. Since their parents had low wage jobs, with minimal benefits or security, 1Gs were more likely to know adults who became sick and lost their jobs. Some were undocumented and had a difficult time getting rehired. Without savings, many low-income workers were forced to make drastic lifestyle changes.

When the pandemic reached campuses in the U.S. in March 2020, nearly everyone’s lives were upended, and students were sent home. In contrast to wealthier classmates, who sheltered in their parents’ spacious homes, many 1Gs returned to their family’s overcrowded apartments, without reliable internet connections or a quiet place to study. The pandemic amplified ongoing concerns about access to healthcare and food, so it was difficult for them to remain focused on school. They worried about their parents who were more likely to work in public-facing jobs,
without adequate protection or healthcare. Some 1Gs became the sole providers in their families when parents lost jobs or became ill. Many 1Gs made personal sacrifices such as prioritizing homeschooling younger siblings over their own studies. Domestic violence increased 8.1 percent during the first two months of the pandemic when lockdowns were in place (National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, 2021) and Anti-Asian hate crimes made daily headlines. Some students did not return home during the pandemic because they felt it was safer to stay near campus. For LGBTQ+ students who were “out” on campus, they may not have been transparent with their parents and returned to hostile families or communities.

In the spring of 2020, many colleges and universities imposed stopgap measures in the form of hiring freezes and early retirement. Some administrators optimistically assumed the virus would be quickly controlled so that campuses could reopen in the fall of 2020. As cash flows tightened, administrators were anxious for students to return, even if most classes were online. Quite simply, universities needed the income generated by tuition, on-campus housing and dining facilities. Meanwhile, in the fall 2020, over 560,000 students declined to enroll and a year later in the fall 2021, another 465,600 students did not enroll, for a total two-year decline of 6.6 percent or 1,025,600 students since the beginning of the pandemic (NSCRC, 2021). For those students who returned in the fall 2020, they were more likely to have some or all their classes online, although more universities started to resume in-person classes in the fall 2021. Without consistent advice from the government or their own “pandemic playbook,” administrators devised their own reopening and testing plans, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the students who returned to campus. As of May 26, 2021, over 700,000 coronavirus cases were reported by colleges and universities in the U.S., an increase of 64 percent from the end of 2020 (The New York Times, 2021). Despite wide-spread vaccine mandates, the total number of cases
on campuses is undoubtedly much higher because this data more recent variants. Thousands of college students ended 2021 and began 2022 in isolation or quarantine as university administrators scrambled to contain outbreaks through a combination of testing and housing students in “COVID dorms.”

COVID-19 had a direct impact on undergraduate enrollment. Freshman enrollment stabilized in the fall 2021 (up 8,100 students or .4 percent) after an unprecedented 13.1 percent (or 327,500 students) decline in the fall 2020 (NSCRC, 2020, 2021). The freshman class in the fall 2021 was still lower by 9.2 percent (or 213,400 students) from pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (NSCRC, 2021). Meanwhile transfers to four-year schools were down 8.1 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, which suggests that students from low-income backgrounds, rural areas or communities of color changed course (NSCRC, 2020). Like the decline in transfers, enrollment by Black and white undergraduates in four-year degree programs declined by 8 percent in 2020 from 2019. Native American students decreased 11 percent for the same period. Registration by Black and Hispanic students contracted more than any other group, especially at two-year colleges; in Massachusetts, community colleges experienced a one-third decline in enrollment by first-year Black and Latino students. Overall enrollment in community colleges fell 14.1 percent (or 713,000 students) since 2019 (NSCRC, 2020, 2021; The Boston Globe, 2020).

The decline in enrollment points to worrisome trends for all low-income students. According to the National Association of Independent Colleges (2020), “The data clearly demonstrate the significant impact the pandemic is having on students and families, especially those who are low-income. Like other areas of the economy, this pandemic has hit lower-income families especially hard and higher education is no exception.” Depending on the long-term impact of the health crisis, this trend could affect 1Gs for a generation or more. 1Gs were more
challenged to complete applications for financial aid when college financial aid offices were closed during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the availability of financial assistance was under increasing pressure due to shrinking state funding, lower enrollment and student concerns about rising tuition, although this was somewhat offset by education benefits under the CARES Act Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.

COVID-19 accelerated the trend in online learning and significantly lowered the psychological barriers to change among students, professors and university administrators. Some universities successfully supported faculty with the tools and training for best practices in online education. However, non-academic services, such as counseling and social activities, are more difficult to deliver online. While a fully online model was not a new concept, a virtual degree program from a reputable university was unique. Govindarajan and Srivastava (2020) made an argument for a good quality online college education, where the annual tuition was under $5,000 which would be an attractive option for 1Gs.

While the pandemic is a unique event, there are some parallels to the Financial Crisis. During the earlier economic crisis, white collar workers, with advanced degrees suffered fewer long-term consequences than low-income workers. Traditionally, a college degree helped families who moved to the U.S. and their children reach the middle class. If the pandemic hinders 1Gs’ ability to continue their education, they increase their risk of slipping further down the economic ladder (NBER, 2020).

1.2 Research Problem

The global health crisis is unprecedented in modern history and as a result there are no studies, models or even handbooks on how higher education can cope with a prolonged pandemic. A year ago, the medical establishment thought safe and highly effective vaccines
against COVID-19 would help end the pandemic. More than a year after the first Americans were vaccinated, the virus continued to mutate into more contagious and sometimes more deadly infections. As the nation learns to live with COVID-19, it is generally assumed that the health crisis will have a lasting effect on higher education and neither students nor educational institutions should expect a return to the status quo. The future of higher education will be fundamentally different.

We knew that there were significant differences in enrollment, degree attainment and finances for 1Gs, as compared to 1Gs who were also low-income and continuing-generation students. Furthermore, different definitions of first-generation and low-income made comparisons of these overlapping populations more challenging. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that based on data from 2011-12, 1Gs were more likely to attend college part-time and were less likely to complete a college degree in six years than their peers who were continuing-generation students; only 50 percent of 1Gs finished their degrees within six years, as opposed to 62.2 percent for continuing-generation students (NCES, 2021; NSCRS, 2022). Only 21 percent of 1Gs, who were also low-income, will have a college degree within six years, as opposed to 57 percent for more affluent classmates who were not first-generation (NCES, 2021).

We already knew that families played an important role in 1Gs’ advanced studies, that higher education has not done a good job at meeting the needs of low-income, multi-cultural students and that higher education was key to social integration and economic advancement. Lessons learned from the Financial Crisis revealed similarities to the current health crisis; during that economic crisis, we knew that undergraduates often postponed entrance to the labor market by staying in school longer.
Research confirms that 1Gs’ families played a role in their pursuit of higher education (Hyland-Russell, 2011; Figueieredo de Baros, 2015; Yang, Tu & Dai, 2020; Roksa, J., Deutschlander, D. & Whitley, S.E., 2020). The research shows that 1Gs continued to rely on their parents for emotional support even though their parents did not attend college (Covarrubias, 2018; Chang et al., 2020; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). We also knew that families were not isolated; systemic and socio-historical factors such as education policy, financial aid, recruitment by universities, standardized testing, quality of high school education and technology influenced low-income students (Hyland-Russell, 2011; Figueieredo de Baros, 2015; Yang, Tu & Dai, 2020).

The literature showed that higher education did not effectively meet the needs of minorities because they applied a one-size-fits-all approach by putting all persons of color in one group, instead of considering the unique needs of African Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and American Indians (Chang, 2015). Higher education’s approach to grouping low-income marginalized students was like how international students were combined into a singular category. The impact of culture on higher education was not well understood. For example, when an Asian-American student needed help, they were more concerned about losing face, than a Latinx undergraduate who was motivated to preserve group harmony and not make problems worse (Chang, 2015).

We also knew that education was key to social and economic integration. Our education system was a primary venue for the formation of identity and a sense of belonging was a fundamental motive that drove human behavior and it was especially true among immigrants (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002; Verkuyten and Yildiz, 2007; Strayhorn, 2015). Class was central to students’ identities and experiences in higher education (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). An
advanced education provided not only the benefit of professional preparation for the labor market, but helped immigrants with language, social networking and familiarity with the host country’s culture; this was a type of incidental learning that was a byproduct of interacting with professors and fellow students. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) reported that low-income students were likely to have lost a job during the pandemic and without additional financial aid, a college education would be out of reach (NBER, 2020).

Research shows that the Financial Crisis in 2008-9 caused some students to postpone graduation. Recent data suggested that the pandemic prompted many students to delay entering the labor market because enrollment in graduate school increased 3.6 percent (98,800) from 2019 (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2015; NCRSC, 2020). Graduate school remained the only area of growth in enrollment during the pandemic (NCRSC, 2020).

While there were studies on low-income students prior to the health crisis, we did not know enough about how and in what ways 1Gs developed effective coping mechanisms, both in normal and high stress environments (Chang, 2015; Chang et al, 2020; Hyland-Russell, 2011). Although we knew COVID-19 had an adverse impact on college enrollment, we do not know whether the 1,025,600 undergraduates who did not enroll in 2020 and 2021 will return in the future (NSCRC, 2021). Some campuses returned to normalcy in the fall of 2021, with in-person or hybrid instruction, thereby enticing some students to come back. However, we did not know whether the pandemic’s forced experiment with online courses had caused them to reconsider the value of a four-year on-campus experience (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Furthermore, since the ongoing pandemic remains a relatively new development, there are no studies in the U.S. on 1Gs’ experiences in higher education during as the crisis extends into a third year.
The health crisis exacerbated existing pressure for 1Gs and therefore, the pandemic created a vacuum of knowledge. Consequently, the problem was that little was known about how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus since it further intensified their existing pressures while they pursued a degree.

From an adult education perspective, learning from experience (LFE), informal and incidental learning theory (IIL) and self-directed learning theory (SDL) provided insight into how 1Gs were managing the impact of COVID-19 as it amplified existing stress while they pursued a degree. In addition, the Ecological Systems Model (ESM) was leveraged in this study to understand how social environments influence 1Gs’ development. Whereas taking responsibility for one’s learning goals was important for any undergraduate, it was more critical for students who could not fall back on advice from family members who graduated from college. For many undergraduates, they learned as much outside the classroom as they did in class. From the researcher’s experience, informal, unstructured learning through interactions with peers, professors, mentors and other advisors was an important way for 1Gs to adapt to the academic and social rigors of higher education. Prior to this study, what we knew was that the pandemic would have a lasting effect on the economy, society and higher education, and 1Gs would need to become even more self-directed in their education and career goals. While there were many studies on SDL in white, middle-class students in higher education, we did not know enough about self-directedness in 1Gs or how context (either a normal or high stress environment) or social environments influenced their self-direction. Consequently, more needed to be learned about how the pandemic impacted 1Gs through the lens of adult learning.
1.3 Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impacted 1Gs in their pursuit of a college degree. Many of these factors simultaneously enabled and hindered 1Gs, and over time, these issues shifted in relative importance. To shed light on the problem and to carry out the purpose of this research study, the following questions were addressed:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs’ pursuit of higher education; and
4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

1.4 Research Design Overview

This qualitative exploratory study drew upon the experiences of 1Gs who were enrolled in four-year, public and private colleges or universities in the U.S. prior to and during the pandemic. To achieve triangulation, interviews, a focus group and a document review were used. As the health crisis lengthened, there was already a substantial amount of raw data on how overlapping groups of low-income and marginalized adults were impacted by job losses, high infection rates, less access to medical care, food insecurity and declines in university enrollment. The existing raw data was supplemented with demographic information provided by the interview and focus group participants (Appendix J). Therefore, the research study identified issues and trends from the existing statistical data to support the qualitative analysis.
The sample included 27 1Gs who were enrolled at or graduated during the pandemic from four-year institutions located across the U.S. The sample included both those students who pursued the path they commenced prior to 2020, as well as those who transferred or took a break of a semester or longer. The participants in this research study included 1Gs enrolled at public and private institutions, ranging in size from less than 2,500 to over 20,000 undergraduates and with various levels of selectivity. Some institutions offered hybrid instruction, while others offered exclusively online classes in different phases of the pandemic. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually.

The researcher arranged a focus group composed of 4 1Gs who were willing to share their experiences with each other. Like the sample for the interviews, focus group participants were drawn from a mix of public and private universities, with various levels of selectivity and the focus group was also online.

1.5 Researcher Perspectives

The researcher’s interest in higher education was influenced by her parents’ experience and her own. While the researcher is not a first-generation student, both of her parents were the first in their immediate families to attend college, although only her father completed his degree. The researcher has a Master of Business Administration and a Bachelor of Science in Economics and has worked in the financial services industry for over thirty years. For a similar period, she has mentored low-income, high-achieving students as they applied to college. The researcher is conscious of certain biases she brings to this study, as a white female whose family had the economic means to pay for her undergraduate education at a private university and an employer who covered the cost of her graduate studies. Furthermore, she believes that an undergraduate
degree is the minimum level necessary to either maintain or achieve a middle-class lifestyle, except for some high-tech jobs where a college degree is not required.

As a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University and an economist, the researcher is keenly interested in what factors influence the pursuit of higher education by low-income, first-generation students. She believes that by learning more about how 1Gs are managing the prolonged impact of the virus on their stress points, best practices will emerge that will help these students and their families succeed.

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

The researcher brought several assumptions to the study based on her own family’s experience and her familiarity with low-income, high achieving, college-bound high school seniors. She held five core assumptions while conducting this study as shown below.

1. Low-income students in general, and more specifically, 1Gs were less well prepared for the academic and social rigors of a university experience than students from middle-class backgrounds.

2. Low-income students were more likely to experience isolation than wealthier classmates. Consequently, 1Gs tried to rely on their own resourcefulness or helpful peers.

3. Cultural influences and interdependency between 1Gs and their families were not well understood by universities. Consequently, universities struggled to meet the needs of 1Gs prior to the health crisis, although private and some public, elite universities had more resources to direct toward programs for this community of students. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, university officials were distracted by
mounting financial pressures and were slow to adjust to the changes in low-income students’ lives brought about by the crisis.

4. As the pandemic stretched into the third year, 1Gs were more likely to postpone their pursuit of a university degree if classes were offered only in an online format. Deferral of enrollment was likely to become permanent unless universities and colleges met the needs of these students.

5. 1Gs were willing to discuss their experiences with the researcher who was independent from the participants’ universities.

1.7 Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this research was based on the premise that colleges and universities were not meeting the needs of 1Gs. Once these students arrived on campus, they were largely left on their own to navigate the academic and social systems. Historically, colleges and universities made limited effort to differentiate between racial and cultural groups and between 1Gs and low-income students, so it was no surprise that higher education had not done a good job meeting their needs even in ordinary times, despite the well-documented outcomes of 1Gs who completed their degrees and obtained well-paying jobs leading to economic advancement. During the pandemic, university administrators were distracted by mounting financial pressures caused by sharp declines in enrollment, cuts in funding and at private universities, lower returns on their endowments. Consequently, outreach to 1Gs was de-prioritized during the pandemic, even though the crisis meant these students needed more help rather than less. The duration of the health crisis and its long-term impact are unknown. The major risk for society was that if colleges and universities failed to help 1Gs during the pandemic, an entire generation of students could be unable to complete their education. Colleges and universities did not differentiate
among 1Gs and low-income students and consequently, many did not provide the necessary on-campus services. By conducting research on 1Gs, the insights gained from interviews, a focus group and a document review will help inform higher education policy and practice.

The significance of this research study is for its potential positive impact on 1Gs during their four-year university experience and subsequent career advancement to facilitate entrance into the middle class. Several stakeholders are expected to benefit from this study, including students and their families, private and public colleges and universities and education policymakers. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide university administrators and education policymakers, and students and their families with evidence-based recommendations for programs that will help 1Gs complete their education. The larger society benefits because there is a more diverse labor force, with more advanced technical skills.

1.8 Definitions

Continuing-Generation Students: These are students who are 18 years old and older, who have at least one parent who graduated from a four-year university or college, or a two-year community college in the U.S. or abroad. For this research, parents include biological, adoptive and stepparents, and guardians.

Cultural Divide: A boundary that separates low-income and often marginalized students from the white, middle-class values adopted by universities. Higher education has taken a one-size-fits-all approach to communities of color, by putting all persons of color in one group, instead of considering the unique needs of African Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and American Indians.

Elite Institutions: There are many rankings of universities and colleges that draw from a range of criteria. For this study, elite institutions are public or private four-year universities or colleges, with an undergraduate acceptance rate of 15 percent and lower.

First-Generation College Students (1Gs): There are many ways to define students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. For this study, first-generation students are 18 years old and older; they are currently enrolled in or recent graduates of a four-year course of study, whose parents did not graduate from a four-year university or college, or a two-year community college in the U.S. or abroad. For this research, parents include biological, adoptive and stepparents, and guardians. These students are not necessarily immigrants or low-income.
**Higher Education:** Education that occurs after completion of high school. In this study, higher education, college and university are used interchangeably to describe a post-secondary course of study that leads to a Baccalaureate Degree.

**Immigrants:** Individuals who were born abroad and came with the intention to live permanently in the U.S. These individuals are not necessarily 1Gs or low-income.

**Low-Income Students:** Students from low-income families typically need substantial financial assistance to attend. Colleges and universities use different standards to determine low-income status. While most 1Gs are low-income, not all are considered low-income by colleges and universities.

**Non-Elite or Other Universities:** Non-elite or other institutions are public or private four-year universities or colleges, with an undergraduate acceptance rate higher than 15 percent.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore with 27 1Gs the factors that impacted them in their pursuit of a college degree prior to and during the pandemic. Many of these stressors simultaneously enabled and impeded 1Gs, and as the health crisis entered the third year, these issues shifted in relative importance. The objective of this research was to understand how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus since it further intensified their existing pressures as they pursued a degree. This research is expected to inform students and their families, colleges and universities and education policymakers about the needs of 1Gs. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide university administrators with evidence-based recommendations for programs that will help 1Gs complete their education. To shed light on the problem and to carry out the purpose of this research study, the following questions were explored:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs’ pursuit of higher education; and
4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

Sources used for the literature review were limited to publications within the last ten years, with the one exception of studies about how the Financial Crisis in 2008-9 impacted undergraduates. Studies on the Financial Crisis are relevant to this research because there are
similarities between how students behaved during that period and the current health crisis.

However, it is worth noting that while there is research on overlapping populations of 1Gs, marginalized students and low-income students, comparisons are further complicated by different definitions of first-generation and low-income and combining minorities into a single group. Columbia University libraries and various databases accessible from that portal were used for the literature review. The researcher reviewed articles from peer-reviewed journals, periodicals, books and U.S. government reports. Some of the publications include:

Adult Education Quarterly
American Council on Higher Education
British Journal of Sociology of Education
British Medical Journal
Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education
College Student Journal
Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology
Current Psychology
Frontiers in Psychology
Harvard Business Review
High Ability Studies
Higher Education
Journal of Adolescent Research
Journal of Adult Learning, Knowledge and Learning
Journal of College Student Retention
Journal of Education for Business
Journal of European Social Policy
Journal of Further and Higher Education
Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Center for Educational Statistics
Perspectives on Psychological Science
Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy
South African Journal of Higher Education
Studies in Higher Education

Keywords that were used to search for literature about 1Gs included “first-generation,” “first-generation students,” “low-income,” “race”, “Black”, “Hispanic”, “strivers,” “achievement,” “COVID-19,” “pandemic,” “Financial Crisis,” “health,” “family,” “hourly workers,”
“unemployment,” “sociology of education” and “education policy.” Keywords used to locate literature on adult learning theory applicable to university students included “self-directed learning,” “incidental learning,” “informal learning,” “learning from experience,” “ecological systems,” and “undergraduates.” In addition to online search engines, scholarly articles and books on adult learning theory were leveraged.

The researcher used a two-step process to screen the literature for its relevance to the research problem. First, the studies were organized according to the sample which was used: low-income students or 1Gs at four-year universities. Because there were fewer studies on 1Gs alone, the researcher reviewed studies on low-income, marginalized undergraduates because they experienced many of the same challenges as 1Gs who usually came from low-income families and were often minorities. Second, the studies were divided based on the context of the research: normal environment or high stress (e.g., Financial Crisis). Given the scarcity of studies in the U.S. with sufficient data on non-white 1Gs, the researcher decided to include a limited number of studies conducted on undergraduates outside the U.S., even though this made some comparisons more challenging. In addition, special attention was directed at the demographics of the samples. Many studies grouped all non-whites in one category or grouped all Asians together. Some studies did not provide any details on the race or ethnicity of participants which implied that the researcher did not consider this important. While the researcher reviewed studies about 1Gs at two-year community colleges as background material, these studies were excluded from the literature review since the student experience at four-year universities is different from an academic and social perspective.
2.2 Rationale for Topics

A selected review of the literature on a) 1Gs and b) adult learning theory was appropriate because the study’s purpose was to explore the factors that enabled and/or hindered 1Gs in their pursuit of a secondary degree prior to and during the pandemic. The literature review identified research that was relevant to this study to situate and inform this work. In addition, this review helped support or refute the opinions expressed by the research participants. Finally, the literature review also aided in the development and refinement of the conceptual framework, so the researcher was in a better position to collect and analyze the data.

The selection of topics was based on a review of existing literature, an informal test conducted with two first-generation graduates who are friends of the researcher and the researcher’s experience.

The topic of first-generation undergraduates was discussed to expand the researcher’s knowledge of how 1Gs and other similar marginalized groups, such as low-income or immigrant students, managed multiple stress points before and during the pandemic. The review drew attention to 1Gs: access to higher education in a normal environment; access to higher education in high stress situations; factors impacting 1Gs in a normal environment; and factors impacting 1Gs in a high stress environment.

The topic of adult learning theory allowed the researcher to see what might otherwise be hidden or concealed. In the context of 1Gs, adult learning theory provided a framework to interpret how these students managed everyday stress and the added pressure imposed by the pandemic. Specifically, this section will explore 4 of the most applicable theories: LFE; ILL; SDL; and ESM. Transformative learning was excluded, since it was identified as less applicable
to this research than the above theories, based on the initial review of literature, an informal test with two friends of the researcher and the researcher’s experiences.

This chapter concludes with the conceptual framework. The purpose of this framework is to present a roadmap to seek answers to the research questions. The framework has 4 main elements: factors enabling 1Gs access to higher education prior to 2020; factors hindering 1Gs access to higher education prior to 2020; factors impacting 1Gs because of the pandemic; and 1Gs’ experiences attending elite and non-elite universities during the pandemic. These 4 elements are based on the literature review, feedback from the informal test and the researcher’s own experiences.

2.3 Topic I: First-Generation Students

There is literature on overlapping populations of low-income college students, 1Gs, and communities of color in higher education, prior to the pandemic. While there are many definitions of low-income and first-generation, these groups do not always intersect even though they share some similarities, according to researchers at Central Michigan University (2020). Because of the similarities in experiences of low-income and first-generation students, the researcher included literature on low-income undergraduates (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Hyland-Russell, 2011; Cataldi, Bennet & Chen; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Covarrubias, 2018; Chang, et al., 2020) as a supplement the more limited literature available on 1Gs (Bibbons et al., 2019; Eveland, 2019).

Since the focus of this study is on adults whose parents did not earn college degrees, the literature review focuses principally on studies about 1Gs. While there is literature on 1Gs’ access to higher education in a normal environment, there are few studies comparing samples of 1Gs at elite vs. non-elite universities and/or public vs. private universities and the factors that
influenced their pursuit of higher education prior to the pandemic. Since the pandemic is such a recent development, there is limited research about 1Gs’ experiences during the health crisis, although there is one study about 1Gs at five universities in the U.S. and their experiences during the first seven months of the crisis. The pandemic is a unique event, because it commenced as a health emergency, which then triggered an economic and political crisis that served to expose the inequities in our society; there is no directly comparable event in modern history because other recent health emergencies, such as H1N1, were shorter in duration and did not have a widespread impact on the political and economic climate in the U.S. As the pandemic entered its third year, the inequities between low-income students and more affluent classmates became even more pronounced, which has some parallels to the Financial Crisis in 2008-9. Consequently, the literature review explores learnings from how that economic crisis affected low-income undergraduates.

The patterns across the research show that in a normal environment, low-income students are impacted by family interdependence, durable class structures and a long-lasting cultural mismatch with higher education. Therefore, these undergraduates use coping mechanisms, such as self-reliance to foster safe learning environments and hence, become more self-directed. Research studies were framed using a variety of tools and approaches, including interviews, surveys, questionnaires and data from government sources. The primary weaknesses of several studies are the small sample size and homogeneity of participants. When samples include students with diverse ethnic backgrounds, there is usually insufficient data on different groups which minimizes analysis of the impact of race. In addition, many studies do not distinguish 1Gs from low-income students even though 1Gs are not always poor. Furthermore, aside from studies on undergraduates during the Financial Crisis, there is an absence of research about how 1Gs in
the U.S. react to other periods of high stress, such as terrorism, war, a natural disaster or an epidemic (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2015).

Research on what enables or impedes working class students’ access to higher education falls into 4 categories; access to higher education in a normal environment; access to higher education in high stress situations; specific factors impacting 1Gs in normal conditions; and specific factors affecting 1Gs in a stressed environment.

2.3.1 Access to Higher Education in a Normal Environment

College students, regardless of economic background, report they are increasingly stressed. According to the American College Health Association (2018), prior to the pandemic, 44.6 percent of college students reported they had “more than average stress” and 86 percent of over 26,000 students said they felt “more than overwhelmed” in the preceding twelve months.

Focus on low-income undergraduates and it becomes clear that they have pressures that wealthier students do not experience. Their parents may be very proud of their children because they believe an advanced degree is a pathway to the middle-class. At the same time, low-income students, whether they are mature students or young adults, continue to provide their families with emotional support, language brokering, financial assistance, physical care, life advice and childcare (Covarrubias, 2018). Covarrubias’ findings are skewed by a small sample of 34 1Gs of which 25 were female, which probably accounts for the high level of family influence. However, if these familial responsibilities are shared by most low-income students, there is a sub-set of students whose familial roles are further complicated by severe deprivation caused by homelessness, drug or alcohol dependency, violence, chronic illness, disability or war. An understanding of all these students’ life histories will shed light on the complex interactions of the learner and learning space (Hyland-Russell, 2011).
Now drill down further to first-generation students; they often come from low-income families and experience unique pressures that are not faced by continuing-generation classmates who are low-income. Even at the same university, 1Gs have lower GPAs and lower levels of social support than later-generation peers according to a study of 1,278 sophomores, of which 90 percent were white (Eveland, 2019). These vulnerable students report that adjustment to college is one of their biggest challenges because their parents cannot help them navigate higher education (Bibbons et al., 2019). While there is an abundance of research on socioeconomically advantaged parents’ active engagement in their children’s college experience, there is a dearth of research on low-income or 1Gs’ parents. Unfamiliarity with higher education and language fluency are some of the barriers that stand in the way of 1Gs’ parents who might otherwise want to support their children. Students from low-income backgrounds were less likely to complete their degrees even prior to the pandemic (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Cataldi, Bennet & Chen; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). A study of 261 low-income students and 1Gs, confirms that parental support contributes to positive experiences in college, a greater sense of belonging and students’ commitment to complete their degrees (Roksa, Deutschlander & Whitley, 2020). While the sample includes marginalized students, neither race nor ethnicity are factored into the overall findings. Despite this drawback, the research shows that because low-income students and 1Gs have fewer connections to their universities, parental validation is an important factor contributing to their success.

This research study focuses on the more “typical” low-income students, who despite familial interdependences, enact different types of independence as they become more autonomous and self-directed (which is discussed later in this chapter). In an analysis of personal, family and university values, Chang et al. (2020) notes a mismatch of what low-income
students desire, compared to what their parents value. Many of these undergraduates strive to achieve soft independence from their families by gaining freedom and self-expression, pursuing individual interests and becoming mature. In a study of Latinx and Asian-American undergraduates, Covarrubias (2018) identifies several forms of hard independence including resiliency, self-reliance, being tough, maturity and actively breaking tradition. While self-sufficiency helped IGs overcome many obstacles before they started college, it also hurt these students because they were reluctant to ask for help once they were in college.

2.3.1.1 Durable Class Structures

Even in a country as diverse as the U.S., class structures remain highly durable (Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Wright, 1997). Increased inequality in wealth and ownership exerts more pressure on low-income minorities. Shorris (2000) introduces the concept of a “surround” which is effectively a fence that paralyzes the poor through systemic and structural forces that constrain them. Low-income students face multiple barriers including fear (e.g., low self-esteem, feeling too old to learn), situational issues (e.g., daycare, family roles, monetary problems) and institutional factors (e.g., location, inflexible timetables, entrance requirements). These barriers shape education experience. In addition, class is central to students’ identities and experiences in higher education (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). Even in a normal environment, students who face high barriers have a more difficult time finishing school. The oppressive effects of economic and social forces push them to the margins of society.

2.3.1.2 Cultural Mismatch

Low-income non-white students confront a cultural mismatch with the dominant white, middle-class values found in higher education. Cultural Mismatch Theory refers to disadvantages faced by low-income marginalized students because of misalignment of their own cultural values
with independent university norms (Chang et al, 2020). Independent norms in middle-income families emphasize autonomy, self-expression and creating one’s own path. This is at odds with immigrant communities which emphasize group harmony, family interdependence, avoidance of losing face and responsiveness to others’ needs. Many low-income, marginalized students return home on weekends, forsaking social opportunities, because they feel obligated to care for younger siblings. Other low income, non-white students feel guilty because they left home to attend college, whereas their parents preferred that they lived at home until they married. Cultural mismatch leads to negative outcomes in terms of grades (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014), greater perceived difficulty in academic tasks (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012), lower tendency to seek out college resources (Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014) and greater negative emotions and physical stress related to academics (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

Many low-income students struggled to assimilate to college life even when face-to-face contact with faculty and peers was possible prior to the pandemic. At elite universities, these students have even more trouble blending in (Chang et al, 2020; Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Papadakis, 2017). By failing to make room for diverse cultural norms, colleges fail to provide 1Gs with the benefits of academic and social supports that are needed by this vulnerable group of students. Because their parents did not attend college, 1Gs cannot benefit from their experiences; 1Gs are more likely to feel “out of place” even in normal times, which underscores the importance of student services that are helpful and accessible.

2.3.2 Access to Higher Education in a High Stress Environment

The pandemic will have a lasting impact on higher education. In the short-term, the pandemic caused major disruption on college campuses. However, the long-term impact is difficult to predict because what sets COVID-19 apart from prior crises is the unknown impact of
sustained isolation during remote or hybrid education. There is no similar catastrophe that can be directly compared to the global health crisis and there is no handbook or model from which higher education can learn how to cope in a pandemic. However, studies on the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduates in the U.S. and a separate study in China, and the Financial Crisis on undergraduates, offer a lens to understand access to higher education during a period of high stress.

2.3.2.1 COVID-19 Amplified Stress for Undergraduates

In a collaboration between researchers and college administrators, Davis, Hartman and Turner (2021) studied the inequalities faced by 1Gs before the pandemic and compared them to their experiences in the first seven months of the crisis. In a study of 659 1Gs at three public universities, one private university and one historically Black college, participants report they are less likely to feel they had enough money to return to college, feel overwhelmed and lonely and are more likely to have increased family obligations seven months after the pandemic, than before the crisis. The researchers relied on university administrators or student support programs to distribute the survey and the researchers followed up with interviews. The study is limited by a sample that was 66.4 percent female and includes 25.5 percent freshman who had limited experience in college before the pandemic. Furthermore, the participants are not evenly distributed across the five universities and the study only focuses on experiences during the early months of the crisis. Therefore, it is difficult to extrapolate these findings to 1Gs who have continued to be impacted by the pandemic for over two years.

Researchers in Wuhan, China began to study COVID-19’s impact on higher education almost as soon as the first phase of the crisis receded. In a study of 384 undergraduates at 4 universities in Wuhan, students report that feelings of victimization contribute to a decline in
their mental health and positive thinking (Yang, Tu, & Dai, 2020). Researchers found that resilience favorably impacted the students’ ability to deal with the crisis, although adaptability would also be an element in normal times. The researchers used a survey and did not interview the students. The study is limited by its narrow focus on mental health issues during the first months of the pandemic. In addition, the researchers do not attempt to differentiate students by family income or first-generation vs. continuing-generation status. Unlike the U.S., China enforces a zero-COVID policy. Therefore, it is difficult to extrapolate from this data about the impact of a multi-year pandemic on 1Gs in the U.S.

2.3.2.2 Life Values During the Financial Crisis

Life values identified by undergraduates, both before and after the Financial Crisis, show no difference, with achievement, ability and personal development rated as the most important (Figueiredo de Barros, 2015). The sample included 946 students at public universities in Portugal who were interviewed in 2005 and 2012. The research is limited because it neither differentiates between socio-economic factors in the sample nor studies the same participants in both surveys. Like the research on undergraduates in China, it is challenging to extrapolate findings from a study on students in Portugal to their peers in the U.S.

2.3.2.3 Universities as “Safe Havens”

During the Financial Crisis when jobs were scarce and unemployment was high, students in the U.S. saw college as a “safe haven” and either delayed graduation or entered graduate school (Chen & Yur-Austin, 2015). These findings are also consistent with the increase in enrollment at graduate schools during the pandemic; students continued their studies to mitigate the risk of stagnation in low wage jobs or unemployment. Students who personally knew someone who was laid off during the Financial Crisis were even more risk adverse. Like
Figueiredo de Barros (2015), Chen and Yur-Austin (2015) sampled students just before and after the Financial Crisis, in 2008 and 2012, respectively. One of the weaknesses of this study is the homogeneity of the sample of 437 students. Therefore, it was not possible to determine the impact of race or income on behavior.

2.3.3 Factors Impacting First-Generation Students in a Normal Environment

Research shows that 1Gs use coping mechanisms, which through choice or necessity, enable them to become increasingly autonomous and self-directed (Hyland-Russell, 2011; Chang, 2015).

2.3.3.1 Coping Mechanisms Foster Safe Learning

Coping strategies vary widely, although they usually include planning, positive re-appraisal, support-seeking and avoidance (Freire et al., 2016; Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2016; Kausar, 2010). Coping strategies can be organized as emotion-focused and problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Helmbrech and Ayars (2021) studied 172 1Gs from which they concluded that self-esteem is a predictor of perceived stress and emotional support-seeking as a coping strategy predicts stress; however, their sample was overwhelming female (75 percent) and more mature, as 39 percent were 23 years or older. In addition, they did not collect data on ethnicity or race, although no explanation was given for this decision. Students with high self-esteem were more inclined to use problem-focused coping, whereas students who had lower self-esteem were more likely to use emotion-focused coping such as blaming, wishful-thinking, avoidance, self-blame and isolation (Ben-Zur, 2017; Helmbrech & Ayars, 2021). 1Gs struggle to create a safe learning space by using coping behaviors, like self-reliance, social support and avoidance (Hyland-Russell, 2011). If their colleges and universities are not meeting their needs, self-reliance becomes a barrier to obtaining help (Chang, 2015). While Chang et al. (2020) report
that social support is culturally constructed, this is especially true for 1Gs who often perceive continuing-generation classmates as more knowledgeable about their studies and future careers. Examples include treating students respectfully, regardless of prior experiences, positioning learning as a dialogue among equals and setting clear and healthy boundaries.

2.3.3.2 Autonomy and Self-Direction

There is an emerging field of study on self-directed behaviors among largely white, middle-class undergraduates. Most of the research is narrowly focused on personality traits, autonomy and lifelong learning as contributors to self-direction. After graduation, individuals who were highly self-directed became top performers in their jobs, which has implications for how higher education can promote self-directed behaviors. There are few studies that include a material sampling of non-white, low-income students in the last decade.

2.3.3.3 Positive Personality

Positive personality traits are related to undergraduates’ readiness for SDL. A study of 1,585 freshmen shows that students who are emotionally stable, conscientious, trusting, well controlled, independent and relatively relaxed have good potential to be self-directed learners (de Bruin, 2007). Conversely, feelings of anxiety and superego strength minimize self-directedness. Meanwhile, extroversion has no impact on self-direction. While de Bruin attempts to capture the impact of cultural diversity by sampling Afrikaans and English-speaking students, he finds no meaningful difference using the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). While this tool provides a snapshot by generalizing across a group, it does not account for readiness for SDL as a cumulative process. Furthermore, de Bruin’s research does not capture demographic data and none of the participants are interviewed, so the reasons behind their responses cannot be assessed.
2.3.3.4 Autonomy

An implicit understanding in higher education is that autonomous learning leads to better outcomes. In a study of 386 undergraduates with diverse majors, Macaskill and Taylor (2010) conclude that autonomous learners take responsibility for their learning, are motivated to learn, gain enjoyment from learning, are open-minded, manage time well, plan effectively, meet deadlines, are happy to work independently, display perseverance when encountering difficulties and do not procrastinate. Like de Bruin, they used SDLRS and did not interview their study participants. While Macaskill and Taylor (2010) conclude that students’ majors do not impact SDL, their research does not address demographic factors or family circumstances.

Self-reliance is the primary coping mechanism for 1Gs (Chang et al., 2020). The absence of role models contributes to difficulty navigating university systems. In the U.S., 1Gs report underutilizing college support services because they are perceived as a last resort after getting help from other social systems, such as family and friends. During the pandemic, many college support services were unavailable which created further challenges. 1Gs are more likely to express concern about creating a burden for others, feeling judged and making matters worse than middle-class students. According to Papadakis (2017), a majority of 1Gs initially describe separation from their families as hindering their adjustment to university. However, over time they learn to assimilate through socialization with others and benefit from on-campus support programs. Papadakis’ findings are constrained by a small sample of 16 undergraduates who all attended the selective university, where she works.

2.3.3.5 Self-Direction Impacts Lifelong Learning

Multiple variables determine undergraduates’ SDL skills. Unlike de Bruin and Macaskill and Taylor’s studies which assess a narrow group of variables, Askin and Demiril (2018)
evaluate how multiple variables (such as gender, major, year of study, academic success, entrance score, income level and interest in graduate school,) impact self-directing and lifelong learning tendencies. Their sample includes 2,633 freshman and seniors, attending one public and one private university in Turkey. Students completed Askin’s Self-Directed Learning Skills Scale and Diker-Coskun’s Lifelong Learning Tendencies Scale. Participants were also interviewed. Askin and Demeril (2018) conclude that students’ motivation, self-monitoring, self-control and self-confidence are above the median. Females, students in Fine Arts and those who planned to attend graduate school are the most self-directed. This study is relevant to this research problem because Askin and Demiril sampled students from both public and private universities, from which they determined there were no differences. While the study captures many variables, the researchers do not explore self-direction of low-income students and/or 1Gs relative to the wider sample.

2.3.4 Factors Impacting First-Generation Students in a High Stress Environment

There is limited research about the specific factors that enable or impede 1Gs in a normal environment, let alone a high stress situation. Since the pandemic is ongoing, this area of study is still in its nascent stages. However, prolonged stress can cause adults to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as sedentary behavior, inadequate sleep, tobacco and alcohol use and high consumption of unhealthy food (Helmbrech & Ayars, 2021). Lack of sleep contributes to stress in first year students (Garett, et al., 2017). While the pandemic has accelerated trends toward increased technology and online learning, it is unclear how remote learning will be perceived by 1Gs post-pandemic. Most of the existing research does not distinguish between low-income students and 1Gs. While there are studies on Black students, the studies that include low-income marginalized students do not look at differences between cultural groups. There is also a lack of
research on what IGs, and their families identify as the supports they need from their schools and whether there are any differences in how public vs. private or elite vs. non-elite colleges address these issues.

2.4 Topic II: Adult Learning Theory

Theory enhances the rigor of this research by linking together what might otherwise be isolated data and using these principles to draw connections from “hunches, anecdotal evidence, empirical support, to questions, methods, and ultimately conclusions” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 23). Forty years ago, Malcolm Knowles (1975) proposed a theory of adult learning which he called “andragogy”. Unlike child learners, adult learners require minimal direction and move toward becoming self-directed. As they mature, they accumulate a collection of experiences that act as a reservoir of knowledge that they can draw upon. Adults become oriented to the tasks they must complete so they can be as effective as possible by applying this new knowledge. Whether in a classroom or at work, it is assumed that adults have an internal motivation to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes. Three adult learning theories are especially relevant to the research problem: LFE, ILL and SDL. In addition, ESM offers insight into the research problem by providing a foundation for understanding how human development is influenced by interdependent systems.

2.4.1 Learning from Experience

LFE is one of the foundational learning theories, with an emphasis on the central role of experience. Unlike other cognitive learning theories which emphasize cognition over affect, and behavior learning theories that deny subjective experience, LFE is grounded in the early experience-based studies by Dewey, Lewin and Piaget (Kolb, 1984).
LFE is a process where prior learning is brought to a new situation based on the individual’s life history. All learning involves relearning by examining and testing assumptions. Since learning is ongoing and does not end with adolescence, learning is continuously adapted. The individual interacts with the environment and creates new knowledge. Reflection helps learners make decisions based on experience and aids in problem solving.

Kolb (1984) built on Dewey’s model by showing how adults learn from concrete experiences and then reflect on those learnings, to form abstract conceptualizations or generalizations. Kolb is differentiated from Perry and Piaget-inspired theories as Kolb’s theory is usually represented by an experienced-based learning cycle that takes adults through 4 phases. First, immediate, or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. Then, reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. Finally, implications can be actively tested and serve as guides for new experiences (Kolb, 1984).

![Figure 1: Kolb’s Learning Cycle](image)

Yorks and Kasl (2002) present a phenomenological perspective on LFE. Phenomenology makes experience a verb, rather than a noun. “Learning-within-relationship” describes the importance of learning events where groups of learners bring diverse experiences to a learning
situation. This alternative approach calls for learning as a felt encounter with affective, aesthetic and cognitive aspects of experiencing in each situation.

LFE has been criticized since its foundations did not consider context, complexity or cultural perspectives. These are important factors to understand when designing programs for low-income students. As adult learners, 1Gs bring their life experiences to the classroom; they are more likely to have faced greater challenges than middle-class students because of their low-income status. For example, lessons learned about time management when balancing schoolwork and a part-time job during high school can be brought forward to college. While 1Gs do not have the ability to draw on their parents’ college experience, they can advise younger siblings or become mentors to freshmen who are 1Gs.

2.4.2 Informal and Incidental Learning

Unlike formal learning, which is highly structured and classroom-based, informal learning is less orderly. The latter is a byproduct of LFE and SDL and usually occurs outside of a formal classroom setting. Informal learning takes place under non-routine circumstances and leads to a greater attention to and awareness of tacit, hidden, taken-for-granted assumptions (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

Informal learning refers to obtaining knowledge, skills, processes and beliefs which may be planned or unplanned, but usually there is some conscious awareness that the learning is occurring. Informal learning is involuntary and is inescapable part of everyday life. Usually, informal learning is a byproduct of interacting with others (Marsick & Watkins, 1997). Since informal learning often occurs in response to actions taken by others, individuals may be unaware of the learning. This learning triggers a fresh look at the situation and therefore, a search for an alternate response, leading to action and evaluation of results.
As a subset of informal learning, incidental learning is a byproduct of some other activity. Incidental learning is largely unintentional, unexamined and embedded in one’s closely held beliefs (Marsick & Watkins, 1997).

The value of formal vs. informal learning has been the subject of debate for many years. Traditionally, formal learning in a classroom setting is valued more than informal learning. However, the ongoing experiment with online learning during the pandemic challenges that assumption. Informal learning is critiqued because it is difficult to measure how the culture, context, processes and practices of an organization encourage or limit motivation, time, resources, expectations and rewards for learning. In addition, informal learning may be so deeply rooted in an action, that it is difficult to explain. For example, a freshman may learn about a work-study job in the dining hall that provides the added benefit of free meals by speaking with an upper classman.

Informal learning is ubiquitous on college campuses. Informal learning is serendipitous and occurs anywhere students gather whether in person or online. This is very important for 1Gs who are usually more self-reliant and unfamiliar with asking for help. For 1Gs who are unable or unwilling to get help from student services offices on campus, advice from upperclassmen is invaluable. It may involve cultivating a friendship with another student in one’s department, learning about the least expensive off-campus apartments, finding a job on campus where one can also do their homework or understanding how a peer developed a case for increased financial aid during the pandemic. Informal learning helps 1Gs build a network of friendships that facilitates coping with additional social and academic pressures during the pandemic.
2.4.3 Self-Directed Learning

SDL is any form of learning where the individual takes responsibility for the identification of their learning needs, plans their learning goals, defines the resources they need to learn, implements appropriate learning strategies and evaluates learning (Knowles, 1975; Merriam et al., 2007).

Knowles (1975) introduced andragogy to explain how adults learn differently from children. As a philosophy, andragogy assumes a) adults need to know why they must learn something and be involved in the planning; b) adults need to learn through experience; c) adults learn best when the topic is relevant and immediately valuable; and d) adults approach learning through problem-solving.

![Figure 2: Knowles’ Principles of Andragogy](Source: Knowles (1984))

Adults are capable of increasingly autonomous thinking and therefore, educators should facilitate learning in a comfortable and safe environment. In practical terms, andragogy means that instruction needs to focus more on the process and less on the content. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations and self-evaluation are effective, with the caveat that they are less useful for certain types of technical subjects (e.g., STEM classes). Individuals become
more self-directed as they mature and self-directed learners are characterized by their initiative, independence, persistence, accepting of responsibility, self-discipline, curiosity, strong ability to learn independently, enjoyment of learning, goal orientation and view problems as challenges. Cross (1981) observed that 70 to 80 percent of adult learning is self-directed.

Merriam et al. (2007) described three main goals of SDL. One is to increase the ability of adults to become more self-directed in their learning, a concept that is grounded in some of the earlier work on SDL by Knowles (1980) and Tough (1979), who suggest that the process is linear. Ideally, low-income students would become self-directed when they are young, perhaps by observing role models such as teachers. The second goal is to foster transformative learning through self-direction (Mezirow, 1985; Brookfield, 1985, 1986). According to Mezirow, learners reflect on their “needs, wants and interests” which helps them become critically aware about their assumptions regarding learning. For example, a teenager who observes their parents working long hours in low skilled, minimum wage jobs concludes that a college degree leads to a better life. The third goal is to encourage emancipatory learning and social action. For example, 1Gs become emancipatory change agents when they try to anticipate and control their everyday lives in response to oppressive social structures that impact their families and communities. However, this is difficult to achieve when the culture of higher education hinges on white, middle-class values and 1Gs struggle to assimilate (Brookfield, 1993; Papadakis, 2017).

According to Candy (1991), SDL is a process and goal, rather than a theory. The goal is autonomy through self-determination and self-management, which are situationally variable and individual. Personal autonomy is an organizing concept for lifelong learning which gives adults the skills and competencies to continue their education beyond formal schooling. Candy (1991) identified about 100 traits that are associated with SDL which can be synthesized to the ability to
be a) methodical and disciplined, b) logical and analytical, c) collaborative and independent, d) curious, open, creative and motivated, e) persistent and responsible, f) confident and competent at learning and g) reflective and self-aware. Candy observed that “self-direction is increasingly viewed not simply as an attribute that people either have or do not have, but as quality that may be present in varying degrees” (Candy, 1991, p. 7). Self-direction is contextual and controlled by the learner.

SDL can also be viewed as aspirational. According to Kaufman (2003), self-directed individuals take responsibility for their learning and embrace individual autonomy and preferences. Autonomy is not free of context, as there is an interplay between personal and situational variables. An individual can be self-directed in certain learning situations, but not in others. Four main variables influence whether learners exhibit autonomous behavior: technical skills; familiarity with the subject matter; their sense of personal competence as learners; and their commitment to learning at that point in time (Merriam et al., 2007). Literature shows that low-income students and 1Gs, became increasingly autonomous and self-reliant in their schoolwork (Covarrubias, 2018; Chang et al, 2020). However, none of these studies examine the unique characteristics and competencies of these learners to assess their self-directedness. An understanding of the characteristics and competencies would help colleges and universities design effective programs to meet the needs of 1Gs and their families.

**Table 1: Characteristics and Competencies of Self-Directed Learners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set clear goals for themselves</td>
<td>Ability to have respectful relationships with other learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape learning processes in line with goals</td>
<td>Ability to establish trusting, cooperative relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor learning process</td>
<td>Ability to take responsibility for determining one’s learning needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate outcomes of own learning</td>
<td>Ability to set goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>Ability to plan, implement, evaluate learning activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivated</td>
<td>Ability to help learners to self-direct their learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to learning</td>
<td>Ability to be a facilitator and source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Ability to effectively work in small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to learn</td>
<td>Ability to evaluate learning processes and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-controlled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take initiative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adapted from Knowles (1975); Brocket and Hiemstra (1991).*

There are many critiques of SDL theory. Self-direction is not as predictable or planned as some models suggest and may fluctuate over time. For example, a low-income student may be very motivated at the start of their freshman year but grow disillusioned as they become aware of privileged classmates who take their circumstances for granted. Self-direction is not “all or nothing,” but rather learning styles may vary for individuals and situations. A student may be self-directed about finding the most affordable apartment, and yet put off writing their paper until the day it is due. Self-direction is typically measured with SDLRS, which takes a point-in-time measurement; this may produce misleading data as self-directedness should be viewed as a continuum rather than a dichotomous model. In addition, it is difficult to measure how much of SDL is informal or incidental learning. Self-direction is also culturally dependent where individuals are more likely to be self-directed if they are from cultural groups that nurture and value self-direction. Another criticism of SDL is that the theory ignores the relationship between the individual and society; it does not address collective action or human interdependence. SDL assumes the learning contract is neutral and that the teacher and student learn through a shared development approach, which is not always the case. Brookfield (1986) advocates for an emancipatory form of self-direction that results in social action and requires engagement with others. Brookfield observes that one can be a self-directed learner in some learning domains,
such as goal setting or instructional design, and simultaneously fail to critically challenge the learning experience. For educators and learners to combat against an oppressive learning environment, they must be able to recognize, acknowledge and challenge the current cultural and political status.

SDL provides insight into how 1Gs are managing the impact of COVID-19 as it amplifies existing stress while they pursue a degree. Whereas taking responsibility for one’s learning goals is important for any undergraduate, it is more important for students who cannot fall back on advice from parents who graduated from college. Since the pandemic will have lasting effects on the economy, society and higher education, 1Gs will need to become even more self-directed in their education and career goals.

While there are many studies on SDL in higher education, it is noteworthy that there are no recent studies on self-directedness in low-income students, 1Gs or communities of color during the pandemic. The research on undergraduates does not consider context and none of these studies address how high stress situations impact self-directedness. The patterns in the literature on SDL in undergraduates show positive personality traits, autonomy and interest in lifelong learning enable self-direction. Research studies rely primarily on SDLRS, and interviews are used to a limited degree.

2.4.4 Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory provides a foundation for understanding how human development is influenced by a series of cultural, social, economic and political systems (1974). While his early work focused on child development, Bronfenbrenner expanded his multi-layered theory to show how humans are influenced by their changing immediate environments over the lifespan (1977). ESM enables the study of individual development that is
not restricted to a single setting or environment. Both ESM and IIL show that individuals are influenced by multiple systems, although ESM defines 4 interdependent systems: Microsystems; mesosystems; exosystems and macrosystems, with the individual at the center. Microsystems represent the people within one’s immediate setting. Mesosystems include the relations among two or more settings, which may conflict or converge. Exosystems are settings that do not include the developing person, but the place where events occur which affect the person. Macrosystems are defined as the overarching patterns of the culture or sub-culture and associated beliefs about lifestyles (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

![Ecological System Theory of Human Development](image)

**Figure 3: Ecological System Theory of Human Development**

Source: Bronfenbrenner (1977)

While Bronfenbrenner made important contributions to the understanding of developmental transformations through the interactions with multiple systems, ESM has many critiques. The model is broadly constructed based on separate systems, whereas these are neither distinct nor static. ESM tends to view people as objects and seeks to define a common equation for humans and their environment. Since much of Bronfenbrenner’s research was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, when culture was viewed as less critical to understanding human
development, the model places culture as a separate system even though it influences everyday life (Velez-Agosto, et al., 2017).

Despite these criticisms, ESM provides a foundation for exploring influences on 1Gs’ college experiences in normal and high stress situations. In the context of this study, microsystems may be either academic or social and include classrooms, dormitories, social clubs, jobs or families. Mesosystems can be explored when different systems interact, such as when students balance demands from their families with their schoolwork. Exosystems, such as financial aid or first-generation student services, influence 1Gs even though they are not members of these systems. In the context of this research, macrosystems may include societal beliefs about the value of higher education as a pathway to economic advancement, cultural values of the group over individual, inaccessibility of quality healthcare for minorities or recruitment of low-income marginalized students. These 4 nested networks can change over time as certain systems, like families, peers or university advisors become more of less important to 1Gs.
Figure 4: Ecological System Theory Adapted to Research Study

While there are some studies that use ESM as a foundation to understand gifted education for communities of color, it is noteworthy that there are no recent studies that use ESM as a basis for understanding the interdependent systems that influence low-income undergraduates or more specifically, 1Gs.

2.5 Summary

Over the last decade, research on low-income undergraduates, marginalized students and 1Gs’ experiences in a normal environment has increased, although inconsistent definitions of low-income and first-generation students make comparisons more complicated. However, there is a scarcity of literature on factors that impact low-income, students of color or 1Gs in periods of high stress.

The literature review focused on how in a normal environment, 1Gs’ access to higher education is affected by family interdependencies, durable class structures and cultural mismatch since higher education is based on white, middle-class values. In periods of high stress, 1Gs’ access to an advanced degree is under further pressure due to familial interdependencies and economic issues that make it more difficult to continue their education which could limit their ability to climb the economic ladder. The review drew comparisons between the Financial Crisis in 2008-9 and the ongoing pandemic. Also, during periods of high stress, students have increasingly pursued graduate school and therefore, delayed entering the workforce. The review covered various factors, such as coping mechanisms, autonomy and self-direction, which both aid low-income students in a normal environment and prevent them from asking for help; there was a lack of research on factors that specifically impact 1Gs. The necessity for support services
to induce 1Gs to continue their education, despite obstacles raised by the pandemic was also discussed.

There are several gaps in the literature, which underscore the need for a better understanding of what enables and/or impedes 1Gs’ access to higher education, how it has changed because of the pandemic and how elite and non-elite universities responded to student needs during the health crisis. Thus far, most of the literature on undergraduates is narrowly focused on predominantly white, middle-class students. While there is research on low-income students and 1Gs, there are few studies which aim to compare the experiences of multiple ethnic groups. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature on the experiences of 1Gs at public vs. private institutions and elite vs. non-elite universities. In addition, the current body of research on autonomy and self-directedness in undergraduates does not consider income level, ethnicity, family circumstances or being the first in one’s family to attend college. Furthermore, none of the studies consider how a global event, such as the Financial Crisis or even a personal crisis (such as an illness or death) would impact low-income students’ pursuit of a degree. Because COVID-19 is such a nascent catastrophe, there is limited knowledge about how it affected low-income undergraduates and their parents, who play a major role in decision-making. If the pandemic prevents 1Gs from completing their degrees thereby suppressing their economic mobility, they and the greater society will suffer. These issues warrant further research.

The researcher presented a narrative on three adult learning theories that help shed light on the research problem. Among LFE, IIL and SDL, the latter provides the most direct applicability to 1Gs by offering insight about how these students navigate the pressures imposed by the pandemic. Meanwhile, ESM makes important contributions to the understanding of 1Gs’ transformations through the interactions with complex interdependent systems.
2.6 Conceptual Framework

The literature review contributed to the conceptual framework which presents a high-level design of the study. The conceptual framework can be viewed as a plan that provides focus, shows interconnections and sets boundaries for the study. The framework has 4 main elements: factors enabling 1Gs access to higher education prior to 2020; factors hindering 1Gs access to higher education prior to 2020; factors impacting 1Gs because of the pandemic; and experiences of 1Gs at elite and non-elite universities during the pandemic. These 4 elements are based on the literature review, feedback from the informal test and the researcher’s own experiences. A graphical depiction of the conceptual framework follows.

![Conceptual Framework Diagram]

**Figure 5: Conceptual Framework**

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore with 27 1Gs the factors that impacted them in their pursuit of a college degree prior to and during the pandemic. Many of these stressors
simultaneously enabled and impeded 1Gs, and as the health crisis entered the third year, these issues shifted in relative importance. The objective of this research was to understand how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus since it further intensified their existing pressures as they pursued a degree. This research is expected to inform students and their families, colleges and universities and education policymakers about the needs of 1Gs. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide university administrators with evidence-based recommendations for programs that will help 1Gs complete their education. To shed light on the problem and to carry out the purpose of this research study, the following questions were explored:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs’ pursuit of higher education; and
4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

Therefore, to answer the above research questions, this chapter describes the methodology that will be used to accomplish the research purpose. This chapter includes the following topics: the Study Design; Overview of Information Needed; Overview of Research Design; Research Sample; Method of Data Collection and Literature on Methods; Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis; Ethical Considerations; Issues of Trustworthiness; and Limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the topics.
3.2 Study Design

This study followed a qualitative research approach which allowed for consideration of human interaction and social situations. The study was enhanced by a combination of verbal and non-numerical data, with inductive logic through data collection that led to theoretical ideas and concepts. The study also benefited from rich demographic and statistical data about the participants and their families. In addition, this qualitative research considered context, researcher-participant interaction and flexibility of the design approach. The characteristics of qualitative research were appropriate for this study’s objective to understand how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus since it further intensified their existing pressures while they pursued a degree.

3.2.1 Rationale for Qualitative Exploratory Study Design

Exploratory study research is used in a variety of academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology and political science, as well as a range of professions such as business, education, healthcare and social work, among others (Yin, 2018). Case studies may be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory or a blend of two or more approaches. The exploratory study approach was identified as appropriate for this study because the researcher had no control over the participants’ behavior and the focus was on a contemporary event in a real-world context, using multiple sources of evidence. According to Yin (2018), a contemporary event is one where the events are “a fluid rendition of the recent past and present” (p. 12). The purpose of this study was to explore with 27 1Gs how the ongoing health crisis influenced their pursuit of a college degree prior to and during the pandemic. While an exploratory study approach makes sense when the main research question is “how” or “why,” many studies, like this one, asked “what” questions designed to obtain background information about the factors that aided or
hindered 1Gs prior to the pandemic. While exploratory research presents a risk of overgeneralization from a minimal number of cases and has been criticized as a “soft option” that is a precursor for a more direct survey or experiment (Robson, 2011), these risks were mitigated through triangulation of interviews, the focus group and analysis of documents related to the topic. Multiple sources of evidence provided substantial data to meet the study’s objective of understanding how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus while they pursued a degree. Consequently, this study was well aligned to the exploratory research approach.

3.3 Overview of Information Needed

The exploratory study included interviews with 23 1Gs, a focus group composed of 4 1Gs and an analysis of documents. The objective of this research was to understand how 1Gs were managing the impact of the virus since it further intensified their existing pressures while they pursued a degree. To answer the research questions, 4 types of information were required: contextual; demographic; perceptual; and conceptual.

3.3.1 Contextual Data

Contextual information explained the environment or context in which the study was conducted. Because the pandemic has lasted longer than anyone expected, the study was conducted while the participants continued to face a high level of uncertainty. The place where 1Gs lived during this period, at home, in college dorms or in apartments with friends, was part of the context. This data was obtained through published reports on college enrollment, occupancy of on-campus housing and the Demographic Inventory Forms completed by participants.

3.3.2 Demographic and Statistical Data

Demographic and statistical data included information about age, race, gender, parents’ education, family income, type of college, employment status, foreign-born parents, attendance
status (full or part time), type of school (public or private) and field of study. This data was obtained through the Demographic Inventory Form (Appendix G) completed by the participants and select data can be found in Appendix J.

3.3.3 Perceptual Data

Perceptual information included the participants’ responses to the interview questions and their perceptions of the role of formal, informal and self-coping systems prior to and during the pandemic. Like the exosystems described in Chapter 2, 1Gs are not members of these formal systems, but they benefit from them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Examples of formal systems included university first-generation student offices, financial aid offices, career services, health clinics, social communities or clubs and academic advisors. Informal networks, like Microsystems, included family members, roommates, peers and co-workers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Self-coping systems included these informal social systems, as well as self-reliance and avoidance (Hyland-Russell, 2011). It was likely that participants had perceptions of the relative value of formal services provided by their universities as opposed to informal support from friends or self-reliance. Perceptual data was gathered from interviews, a focus group and document analysis.

3.3.4 Conceptual or Theoretical Data

Throughout the study, the researcher drew upon literature about 1Gs and adult learning theory, included in Chapter 2. The selective literature review helped identify the research design and methods to answer the research questions and to synthesize the data collected from which conclusions were drawn. The data collection table maps the literature review topics, research and interview questions and data collection methods.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Review Topical Areas</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping Mechanisms</strong></td>
<td>1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation factors prior to 2020?</td>
<td>1. Before we get into details, I’d like to explore your journey. Could you tell me a little about how and why you decided to attend college?</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Group, Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Safe Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. What was it like for you when you commenced college? Related to that what do you think your college thought first-generation students needed and how did it align with your needs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy and Self-Direction</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. What were the most important outside influences (or external forces) that helped you on this journey?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. What were the most important personal factors that helped you in college?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. In what ways did any of these (internal or external) factors become more or less important over time?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Durable Class Structures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. What were the most important external (or outside) factors that influenced you in a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Mismatch</td>
<td>2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| COVID-19 Victimization of Undergraduates | 3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs pursuit of higher education? | 1. How has the pandemic changed your attitude about the relative importance of a college degree?  
2. What factors have become more or less important as a result of the pandemic?  
3. What was it like for you to take some or all of your classes online and lose face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers?  
4. What actions have you taken related to your pursuit of a college degree as a result of the pandemic?  
5. How and what have you learned | Interviews, Focus Group, Document Review |
in order to be successful during the pandemic?

| Universities as “Safe Havens” | 4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities? | 1. How would you describe the support services you received from your college during the pandemic? 2. What supports did you need from your college that were unavailable? 3. If you had the opportunity to develop a program at your university for first-generation students, what would it look like? | Interviews, Focus Group |

### 3.4 Overview of Research Design

The researcher conducted an exploratory study following the action steps summarized below.

**Table 3: Research Action Steps**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Topic Identification</td>
<td>The researcher’s studies on the economic impact of higher education, observations of her parents’ experiences as first-generation students and mentoring high achieving, first-generation, college-bound students, informed the selection of a research topic related to first-generation students and the pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Literature Review</td>
<td>Before data was collected, a review of research on low-income and first-generation students and Adult Learning Theories was conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identification of Research Participants</td>
<td>Participants were identified through postings on select websites maintained by universities including Teachers College, first-generation student clubs, Empowering First-Generation Students Facebook group and summer interns at a financial organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Proposal Hearing</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. IRB Approval

The Teachers College IRB approval process was followed, and the required documents preceding data collection were submitted. The researcher completed CITI training. IRB approval was obtained in May 2021.

6. Pilot Tests

Two informal pilot tests were conducted with the researcher friends who were 1Gs to test the validity of the interview questions.

7. Invitation Letter, Demographic Inventory Form, Informed Consent and Participants’ Rights Form

After IRB approval, the researcher contacted potential participants via email to invite them to participate in the study. Upon confirmation of their interest and eligibility, they were sent the Informed Consent and Participants’ Rights Form and the Demographic Inventory Form. The invitation letter informed each participant of the purpose of the research and logistical details. The Informed Consent and Participants’ Form informed each participant about the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, the measures the researcher will take to ensure confidentiality and the participants’ rights during the study.

8. Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants to understand how they perceived the impact of the health crisis on their college experience. The sessions were held via Zoom and were scheduled for 60 minutes.

9. Interview Transcription and Coding

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher and coded using Nvivo software.

10. Inter-Rater Reliability

An inter-rater reliability exercise was performed by having a peer code one interview. The peer is a first-generation college student as well as another doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University.

11. Focus Group

As part of the study’s triangulation strategy, an online focus group with 1Gs was conducted. The researcher contacted potential focus group participants via email to invite them to participate in the study. The session was scheduled to last 60-90 minutes, allowing for logistical issues. Upon confirmation of their interest and eligibility, they were sent the Informed Consent and Participants’ Rights Form and the Demographic Inventory Form. The invitation letter informed each participant of the purpose of the research and logistical details. The Informed Consent and Participants’ Form informed each participant about the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, the measures the researcher will take to ensure confidentiality and the participants’ rights during the study. Six participants were confirmed for the focus group. However, once the session was already in progress, two of the participants notified the researcher by email that because they were ill, they were unable to join the
focus group. Later, one of those individuals participated in a one-on-one interview. During the focus group, participants were asked to discuss three questions chosen from among the interview questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12. Document Review</th>
<th>As part of the study’s triangulation strategy, data on enrollment and demographics in higher education was reviewed to connect the data from the interviews.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. Data Analysis</td>
<td>Data from the focus group and document review were studied in comparison to data from the interviews. Following the roadmap outlined in the Conceptual Framework, all data was coded, analyzed, interpreted and synthesized.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.5 Research Sample

#### 3.5.1 Participants

The participants for both the interviews and focus group were undergraduates whose parents did not graduate from a four-year university or college, or a two-year community college in the U.S. or abroad. There were two criteria for the selection of the participants:

1. A student (or recent college graduate) whose parents never received a degree from a four-year or two-year post-secondary institution in the U.S. or abroad; and

2. A student who was enrolled in college prior to or during the pandemic (e.g., 2019-2020, 2020-21 or 2021-22 academic years) or who deferred enrollment due to the health crisis.

#### 3.5.2 Recruitment Protocol

The researcher used a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. A purposeful sample of students was selected to improve the likelihood of obtaining useful answers to the research questions. The researcher identified potential participants by contacting: select universities, including Teachers College; first-generation student services departments; student-run, first-generation student clubs; the Empowering First-Generation Students Facebook group; and summer interns where the researcher works.
The strength of this sampling approach was that the researcher identified enough potential participants who met the criteria for the study. The researcher aimed for a minimum of 20 students, which was exceeded because there were 27 participants. Another two potential participants who wanted to join the study were ineligible because at least one of their parents received the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree from universities abroad. There were an additional 20 students who were eligible and expressed interest in the study but were unwilling to complete the Informed Consent and Participants Right Form and the Demographic Data Form, so they were not allowed to join the study. They may have declined to complete these forms because they were not comfortable providing personal information. Furthermore, some of the 20 potential participants may have also declined to proceed once they understood there was no renumeration for participation, aside from a Starbucks gift card as a token of the researcher’s appreciation. Had they completed the required documentation, there would have been 47 participants in the sample. The researcher aimed for a diverse sample by gender and race, and participants from public and private universities and elite and non-elite universities. The composition of the sample is discussed in Chapter 4. However, this method of data collection also had drawbacks. Even though potential participants were assured of confidentiality, they may have been concerned about potential backlash if their universities or peers became aware of their participation in this study.

Potential participants who met the two criteria received an email with an Invitation Letter, Informed Consent Form and Participants’ Rights Form and Demographic Inventory Form. Participants completed these forms and returned them to the researcher by electronic means.
3.5.3 Focus Group

The researcher conducted a focus group made up of 1Gs from a mix of public and private universities. Recruitment of focus group participants was like the protocol that was followed for interviews. Potential focus group participants who met the two criteria received an email with an Invitation Letter, Informed Consent Form and Participants’ Rights Form and Demographic Inventory Form. Participants completed these forms and returned them to the researcher by electronic means. Six students were confirmed for the focus group. However, once the focus group was in progress, two of the confirmed participants notified the researcher via email, that they were ill and therefore were unable to participate. Later, one of those individuals participated in an interview and the other student did not participate in the study.

3.6 Methods of Data Collection and Literature on Methods

The researcher gathered data through interviews, a focus group and review of documentation. The process of data triangulation supported the trustworthiness of the research. During data collection, the researcher reviewed the literature related to her topic for emerging research on the impact of the pandemic on undergraduate students. Throughout the study, the researcher was flexible about emerging themes that connected to the applicable adult learning theory. The conceptual framework helped provide a roadmap for collecting, analyzing and synthesizing the data.

3.6.1 Interviews

Interviews are the primary means of data collection for qualitative researchers because they are flexible and adaptable. Types of interviews can be distinguished by the amount of structure or standardization. Fully structured interviews are characterized by fixed questions, in a pre-determined order (Robson, 2011). Conversely, unstructured interviews are based on the
interviewer’s general area of interest and proceed in a conversational manner. Somewhere in between is the semi-structured interview, which was the format used in this study. The researcher developed a list of seventeen open-ended questions that guided the discussion of topics. See Table 2. The wording and order were modified depending on the flow of the conversation, which allowed for more in-depth follow up when needed. Interviews are typically used in exploratory research because they help explain how real-world events, like the pandemic, impact the participants.

The researcher conducted two pilot interviews to “establish the content validity of scores on an instrument; to provide an initial evaluation of the internal consistency of the items; and to improve questions, format and instructions” (Creswell, 2018, p. 154). The two pilot tests were held with individuals who were not included in the study sample. Feedback from these pilot interviews was used to refine the data collection plans, interview questions and overall research design (Yin, 2018).

The interview schedule included introductory remarks about the purpose of the study and the researcher’s background. The participants were reminded that their responses were confidential and that they could ask questions, interrupt or end the session at any time. The researcher also asked interviewees’ permission to make sound recordings of the meetings. One participant declined to allow sound recordings, so with the sponsor’s permission, the researcher proceeded with the interview and took detailed notes. The conceptual framework guided the list of topics and the 4 research questions:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;
2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;

3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs’ pursuit of higher education; and

4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

Ordinarily, the interviews would have been in a setting that was comfortable for both the participant and the researcher to meet face-to-face, although this would have limited the pool of potential participants to students attending colleges in the New York City area. While the ongoing health crisis prevented in-person meetings, the video format allowed the researcher to assemble a diverse group of participants from across the U.S. Video meetings also offered the benefit that the interviewee and researcher could participate from the comfort and safety of their homes. Each interview was scheduled for sixty minutes.

Interviews are the most common method for data collection, especially when participants cannot be observed in the setting where the event occurred. Interviews offer other advantages because they give the researcher some level of control over the questioning and participants can provide background information (Creswell, 2018). This insight is critical for the researcher to understand the perceptions and meanings 1Gs apply to the topic. However, there are drawbacks to this method of data collection. Interviews provide indirect feedback that is influenced by participants’ perceptions (Creswell, 2018). Interviews are normally held in a designated setting, rather than in the natural environment, so it is not possible to get contextual information (Robson, 2011). The necessity of a video interview presents other drawbacks, most notably the difficulty of making eye contact, distractions from others in the setting and technology issues.
Whether the meetings are by video or in person, not all interviewees are equally articulate and forthcoming (Creswell, 2018). Another limitation is that the researcher may bias the answers to questions leading participants to provide responses they think the researcher favors.

### 3.6.2 Focus Group

Group interviews or focus groups are another way to gather data. Like one-on-one interviews they can vary in the level of structure. Traditionally, focus groups are a hybrid of interviews and group discussions. Usually, they are designed around a specific topic(s) and people are chosen because of their shared interest in the problem. The researcher has a dual role of guiding the conversation by posing questions and keeping the discussion focused on the topic. Focus groups are an effective means of gathering data in qualitative research because they encourage participants to explore their perceptions on a specific subject. Meanwhile, the group setting may be helpful for individuals who are less vocal during an interview (Robson, 2011).

The researcher held one focus group conducted via Zoom. The focus group was composed of 41 Gs from a mix of public and private universities. The researcher ensured that the participants did not know each other in advance. The group meeting was scheduled for 60-90 minutes allowing time for opening and closing remarks and any technological delays.

The focus group schedule was aligned with the interview schedule. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and her background. The participants were reminded that their responses were confidential. She asked for permission to make an audio recording of the group discussion. Next, the researcher explained her role as the moderator; she pre-selected three interview questions to corroborate the data collected from the interviews. The researcher introduced each question and gave the group about 20 minutes to discuss each one. She moderated the meeting and offered prompts as needed to keep the discuss on track. After the first
10-15 minutes the participants became more relaxed, and a more natural dialogue followed. The researcher allowed for a few minutes at the end for additional remarks by the participants and questions.

Online focus groups offer many advantages to researchers. They are an efficient and inexpensive way to collect qualitative data in one meeting, from multiple participants who may be geographically dispersed. Usually, they volunteer because they like these types of experiences. Another favorable aspect is unspoken quality assurance because participants are more likely to be honest in front of their peers. Often it is helpful for them to hear the views of the other participants, which may trigger new ideas. A focus group composed of often reserved low-income students is an effective way to draw out people who prefer not to be interviewed because they feel no one will listen. Meanwhile, an experienced moderator can use the focus group to discuss difficult subjects (Robinson, 1999).

There are also several drawbacks to focus groups. Chief among them is that conflicts may arise, and some individuals may dominate the discussion. There is a possibility that participants may view each other as competitors and be reluctant to share their perceptions, so that the data may yield incomplete responses. Since agreeableness is part of human nature, participants may strive for consensus to give the researcher the responses they think she wants to hear. There are no assurances that confirmed participants will show up. Another weakness is attendees may not maintain confidentiality after the meeting. In addition, insurmountable logistical challenges may force the video-enabled focus group to shift to an audio-only session. Finally, facilitation of focus groups is challenging for those who are not experienced moderators (Robinson, 1999).
3.6.3 Document Review

Document analysis was the third method of data collection to achieve triangulation. Unlike interviews and focus groups which involve direct observation or interactions, this method relies on already existing material. A common approach to documentation review is through content analysis of materials that were produced for another purpose (Robson, 2011).

The researcher identified multiple studies and surveys by non-profit organizations and newspapers that examined trends in enrollment in higher education, such as the American Council on Higher Education, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and *The New York Times*. These studies were based on data collected from over 3,600 public and private colleges and universities in the U.S. While the data was gathered for another purpose (such as obtaining more government funding for student education), the data was believed to be accurate and relevant to the research problem. In addition to these documents, the researcher drew upon detailed demographic and statistical information provided by the participants, which was directly related to this study.

The document review offered several benefits. Analysis of the contents provided valuable cross-validation of other methods such as interviews and the focus group. Data obtained from documents was unobtrusive and non-reactive and there was no risk that the researcher caused bias. Documentation can be reviewed repeatedly and is specific in nature (Robson, 2011; Yin, 2018). Data provided by national clearinghouses with a track record of providing educational reporting and verification offered authenticity and accuracy of information. Conversely, pre-existing documents have limitations because they were developed for another purpose, so the researcher was mindful of the contextual nature of these studies which was not fully aligned with her research. In addition, access to the raw data used in these studies was protected information.
and unavailable to the researcher. Furthermore, some studies may have been selectively biased (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018).

3.7 Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis and synthesis of data was a testament to the researcher’s ability to organize and process the information in a useful manner. The process was like the assembly of a bicycle. First, the parts were removed from the box and the wheels were disentangled from the handlebar and the seat. Next, these components were jockeyed back and forth, and when they fit, they were fixed in place by nuts and bolts. Finally, the new owner went for a ride. Analysis of the data was a process of disassembly and reassembly. The researcher started by gaining familiarity with the raw data gathered from the interviews, the focus group and documentation analysis. The researcher looked for common features in the data and organized the data accordingly. The researcher further synthesized the data to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes and relationships. Next, these patterns and ideas were refined again by generalizing about a small group of similarities in the data. Some information was discarded because it was determined to be unnecessary and did not contribute to the findings. Finally, the researcher reassembled these generalizations and linked them to the theories related to the topic to add to the existing body of research (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Coding is a way to organize data in qualitative studies, by assigning a word or phrase that captures the essence or evocative portion of language-based data (Saldaña, 2016). In this study, Nvivo software was used to sort the data into groups that exemplify a similar idea (Gibbs, 2007). As the researcher familiarized herself with the raw data, concepts surfaced and were grouped into categories that were identified with initial process and emotions codes symbolizing the data. Data analysis was not a linear process; instead, the researcher continuously reassessed the areas
of importance, adding and subtracting and arrived at a small number of identifying codes that were supported by data. These codes were used to create a roadmap for exploring, describing, summarizing and interpreting the patterns in the data (Robson, 2011).

In this study, the researcher collected the data from the interviews, the focus group and document review. The conceptual framework was used as a roadmap from which to organize and code the data. The researcher personally transcribed each interview; even though this was time consuming, the researcher insured the accuracy of the transcripts. After the researcher completed several interviews, she selected one transcript for initial coding. She tried several coding methods that were appropriate for ontological questions about the participants’ realities, before settling on process coding for first level coding, followed by emotional coding. According to Saldaña (2016), process coding is intertwined with time and the sequence of events, which was appropriate to understand the participants’ journey to higher education, from the time they began thinking about college, through their college initiation prior to the pandemic and finally, their experiences during the pandemic. Emotional coding was appropriate to understand intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, such as relationships with faculty, advisors and roommates (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher reviewed her code book with her sponsor, before coding the remaining transcripts. An audit trail was maintained by having a peer, who is another doctoral student at Teachers College and a first-generation student, review the coding methodology and then, code an interview. There were no material divergent views. However, the peer reviewer recommended some new sub-codes, and the researcher made those adjustments.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

During the preparation of the proposal, the researcher consulted with her sponsor and reviewed the American Educational Research Association’s Code of Ethics, to ensure that the
highest ethical standards were applied to preserve each participant’s rights both during the study and after its completion. The researcher filed the research plan with Teachers College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtained approval for this study on first-generation undergraduates.

3.8.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent is a basic tenet of qualitative research on human beings. The researcher followed several steps to obtain informed consent from all participants. The researcher explained what the study involved and checked to ensure participants fully understood their role in the study and any implications. Participants were given ample opportunities to ask questions. They had time to think over whether they wanted to participate. If they wanted to proceed, participants were asked to sign Teachers College’s Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights Form which explained in plain language the purpose of the study, the benefits for participating, the type of participation, what the results will be used for, guarantee of confidentiality of the participant and assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time (Cresswell, 2014). Twenty potential participants who were eligible and initially wanted to proceed, decided against joining the study after receiving the Teachers College Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights Form (Appendix E and F) and the Demographic Data Form (Appendix G). The researcher was respectful of potential power imbalances and made sure that participants felt appreciated. The interviewer endeavored to ask open-ended questions, avoid leading questions and refrain from offering personal beliefs. The researcher tried to gain trust by listening more and speaking less. She checked in with participants during the interview and focus group and at the end of the session to see whether they had any further questions about the study.
3.8.2 Confidentiality

The researcher protected the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Personal information about participants was kept confidential. The personal identities and research data were not disclosed. The researcher used a system of numbers for individuals and their respective colleges and universities were described in a general way, such as Midatlantic University or New York State College, to protect the identities of the participants (Figure 9).

3.8.3 Data Retention and Disposition

All the data and records from interviews, the focus group and the document review were stored in a safe manner in an electronic, password-protected folder that was accessible only to the researcher. There were no paper copies of any of the documents. Since both the researcher and the participants should benefit from the study, once the study is published, the researcher will share the abstract from her dissertation with the students.

3.9 Issues of Trustworthiness

The establishment of trustworthiness in qualitative research creates some unique challenges that do not exist in quantitative research, where fact-checking can be easily accomplished. Lincoln and Guba (1985) prefer the terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to describe trustworthiness, whereas Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) focus on credibility, dependability and transferability. Regardless of the adjectives used to describe trustworthiness, qualitative researchers, with the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection, need to take special care to operationalize valid and reliable research, while controlling for overgeneralization.
3.9.1 Validity

In qualitative research, validity means determining whether the findings are accurate, correct or true. While, triangulation is strongly favored by researchers, there are other measures to ensure validity: avoidance of imposing meaning; member checking; detailed descriptions of findings; clarification of researcher bias; presentation of negative or discrepant information that runs counter to themes; prolonged time in the field; peer debriefing; and external audit (Robson, 2011; Yin, 2018). The researcher took several steps to ensure the validity of the data. First, the researcher conducted two pilot tests to ascertain the clarity of the interview questions and practice minimizing reflexivity during the interviews. Before the commencement of interviews, the researcher reflected on her biases and documented these in a journal that she kept throughout the study. During the next stage of the study, the researcher engaged with the participants over an extended period, to explain the research and then obtain their consent prior to the interviews and any follow up. Finally, once the interviews were complete, the researcher ensured validity through focus group and data triangulation, disclosure of any contrary findings and regular debriefings with peers. Throughout the process, the researcher checked in with her sponsor to keep him apprised of her work.

3.9.2 Reliability

Qualitative researchers ensure the consistency and stability of their research approach by carefully documenting the procedures of their case studies. Yin (2018) recommends using a detailed protocol and database to achieve reliability of results so that the study can be replicated by another researcher and yield the same conclusions in the future. The researcher personally transcribed each interview and the focus group. She checked transcripts for accuracy, consistent
coding, peer coding and triangulation with interviews, a focus group and a document review to achieve good qualitative reliability.

3.9.3 Generalizability

The intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings to individuals, sites or places outside of the study (Yin, 2018). The value of qualitative research rests in its focus on the particularity of a situation or internal generalities, as opposed to wider conclusions beyond the context of the study. The researcher was careful and honest in carrying out the work, by providing a rich description of themes and findings developed in the location of the research and the culture of the institution. Detailed descriptions of these observations will allow future researchers to make personal judgments about the transferability of these findings beyond first-generation undergraduates who were pursuing higher education during the pandemic. Overgeneralization was minimized through a detailed audit trail and from the advice of the researcher’s sponsor and second reader.

3.10 Limitations

Qualitative research is ideally suited for studies that explore social or human problems. This method of inquiry is effective at gathering information in a natural setting, by speaking to the participants and adjusting the interview questions as data is collected. However, this approach is also critiqued for being too “soft” and overly complicated by strategic, ethical and personal issues (Creswell, 2018). The researcher was able to obtain a sample of racially diverse 1Gs from multiple public and private, elite and non-elite universities which was a potential limitation first identified in her proposal. Other limitations, such as researcher bias, small sample size, participant reactivity and self-reported data bias were remedied through triangulation and the researcher documenting biases, keeping a journal during the study, reflecting on the impact
of their role as the primary research instrument, practicing interviewing skills and taking a holistic approach to develop a complex picture of the issues under review.

3.10.1 Researcher Bias

In qualitative studies, the researcher engages in an intensive discussion with the participants that may cover sensitive topics. This introduces a range of issues that are not present in quantitative research, such as the researcher’s values and personal background (e.g., gender, family, culture, socioeconomic background) that influence and shape their interpretations (Cresswell, 2014). The researcher avoided this tendency by limiting reflexivity. In this study, the researcher neither knew any of the participants in advance nor worked in higher education.

3.10.2 Small Sample Size

The researcher commenced the study with a plan to obtain a minimum of 20 participants. The actual number exceeded the original goal, with a sample of 27 individuals. The researcher identified an additional 20 individuals who met the eligibility criteria and wanted to participate. However, by declining to complete the required documentation, they were ineligible to proceed further. The sample size was effectively a tradeoff. A large sample will almost always be better because the researcher can make conclusions across a wider population. However, a large sample is time consuming and expensive when there is one researcher who will conduct and transcribe all the interviews. A small sample limits the ability to draw conclusions across a broad population. However, the sample in this study was still large enough from which to make evidence-based recommendations for programs that will help this population. This limitation was further minimized using triangulation with the focus group and document review.
3.10.3 Participant Reactivity

Qualitative research is usually conducted in a setting where the participants experience the issue. Ordinarily interviews for this study would have taken place on or near a college campus, perhaps in the student union, library or lounge. However, the ongoing pandemic impeded the ability to hold in-person meetings. Therefore, all interviews and the focus groups took place using video technology. While this format allowed for a larger group of geographically dispersed participants who joined from the comfort and safety of their homes, there were drawbacks. There were some minor technical issues related to unreliable internet connectivity during a few interviews. Although all participants kept their cameras on, it was more difficult for both researcher and participant to interpret reactions and expressions since they were not in the same room. This increased the possibility that the researcher unintentionally influenced or misunderstood the participants’ responses. To address these concerns, the researcher encouraged the participants to approach the session as a conversation; she wore casual attire and endeavored to use friendly body language, such as smiling, looking at the camera on her computer screen and projecting an open posture. In addition, the researcher documented her biases in her proposal and maintained a journal during the study.

3.10.4 Self-Reported Data Bias

Self-reports contain revealing insights that cannot be corroborated (Yin, 2018). Therefore, researchers engaged in qualitative studies should remember that memories are malleable and that humans are not very good at remembering details accurately. Most adults are influenced by unconscious biases. In addition, they are inclined to give socially acceptable responses to questions that show their conformity to group norms. Some participants may inflate their reported power, influence, knowledge or prestige when responding to questions. To address
these limitations, the researcher approached the meetings in a non-judgmental way, by asking open-ended questions or where appropriate, asking participants to rank their options. Furthermore, participants were assured that all responses and data were strictly confidential.

**3.11 Summary**

This chapter describes the methodology the researcher used to collect data, along with the rationale behind her qualitative exploratory study approach to seek answers to the 4 research questions. The chapter began with a description of the overall study design and the information that will be needed. The researcher described the sample and recruitment protocol. The chapter detailed how triangulation of data was achieved through the collection of data through interviews, the focus group and document review. The researcher explained how these data collection methods were supported by the literature and the steps that were taken to analyze and synthesize the data. Next, the researcher discussed ethical considerations and actions designed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study so it would meet the high standards of the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University. The chapter ended with a discussion of the limitations of the research.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impacted 1Gs in their pursuit of a college degree. Many of these factors simultaneously enabled and hindered 1Gs, and over time, these issues may have shifted in relative importance. To shed light on the problem and to carry out the purpose of this research study, the following questions were addressed:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;

2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;

3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1G’s pursuit of higher education; and

4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

This chapter commences with a discussion of the composition of the sample to set the stage for a presentation of the findings for each research question. The researcher describes a broad range of experiences starting from the time these students first began contemplating higher education, and thereby allows the reader to better understand the reality of a first-generation student during the pandemic. The emphasis is on allowing the participants to tell their own stories through direct quotes from the interview and focus group transcripts. The intent is to capture the richness and complexity of the participants’ experiences because of their first-generation status. When appropriate, select data provided by the participants from the Demographic Data Form is woven into the discussion of the findings.
This chapter presents the 4 major findings identified through this research study which are:

1. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.

2. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as hindering their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times that they struggled as undergraduates.

3. Participants identified that the pandemic caused them to rethink the value of a college degree, because the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted their education. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic led to new learnings about how to be successful.

4. All participants identified that their needs changed during the pandemic, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in experiences at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material difference in experiences during the health crisis at public vs. private universities.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

4.2 The Setting: Demographics of Sample

The sample was composed of 23 individuals who participated in one-on-one interviews with the researcher and another 4 who joined one focus group that was moderated by the
researcher. They came from all regions of the country and ranged in age from 18 to 27. Seventeen graduated during the pandemic, in 2020 or 2021, respectively. Among the graduates, 15 received their degree at age 22 or younger, which is consistent with the average age of full-time students in the U.S. (NSCRC, 2021). The two outliers were students who took 6 and 9 years, respectively, to complete their degrees because of health and financial issues; one of them took additional courses to meet the requirements for a second bachelor’s degree. Therefore, nearly all the participants were traditional aged students, between 18 and 22, like their continuing-generation peers.

Nearly three-quarters of the sample identified themselves as female and 11 percent described themselves as male. The remaining 15 percent identified themselves as cisgender or cismate, queer or non-binary. While the researcher attempted to enroll more males, the high level of participation by women was reflected in reports of familial concerns among several participants. Overall, the gender identity of the sample generally tracks national averages on undergraduate enrollment, which shows that females make up 59.5 percent of undergraduates, compared to 40.5 percent for males (NSCRC, 2021).

![Gender Identity of Sample](image)

**Figure 6: Gender Identity of Sample**
Participants’ sexual identity was more diversified than gender identity. Sixty-two percent described themselves as heterosexual, followed by the next largest group, which was bisexual, at 19 percent. This data was collected to try to understand whether sexual orientation had any influence on participants’ experiences in higher education, often viewed as a bastion of white, heterosexual male privilege.

**Figure 7: Sexual Identity of Sample**

The sample population represented multiple ethnicities, with the largest participation from Latinos/Latinas, who were primarily Mexican and Asians, of which the majority were of Chinese descent. Participation by Blacks and whites was equally balanced.

**Figure 8: Racial Identity of Sample**
4.3 Universities and Colleges

To maximize diversity in responses to the research questions, the researcher recruited participants from a range of private and public universities, with both selective and less selective admissions practices. The participants attended 15 schools that ranged in size from less than 2,500 to over 20,000 undergraduates. The schools were in urban, suburban and rural settings, of which seven were in New York State, three in the Mid-Atlantic states, two in the Midwest region and three in California. Eight were private institutions and seven were public.

The figure below shows that participants attended a balanced group of public and private colleges, as well as elite and non-elite or other schools. Thirteen participants attended private universities, while fourteen attended public institutions. Fourteen participants enrolled in elite schools, while thirteen attended less selective universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIVATE: Non-Elite/Other (5 Participants)</th>
<th>PUBLIC: Non-Elite/Other (8 Participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYS University (1)</td>
<td>NYS College #1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest College (2)</td>
<td>NYS College #2 (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NYS College (2)</td>
<td>Midwest University (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CA University (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic University (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>NYS University (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIVATE: Elite (8 Participants)</td>
<td>PUBLIC: Elite (6 Participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA College (3)</td>
<td>NYS University-statutory colleges (4)¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS University-endowed colleges (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS University (1)</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic University (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic University (1)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA University (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: University and Colleges Represented by Sample

¹ One of the private universities has statutory colleges which receive funding from the state. Since students at the statutory colleges receive access to the same services as the students at the endowed colleges, for the purpose of this study and to avoid double-counting, the university was categorized as private.
4.4 Research Finding 1

Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.

Participants were asked to describe their path to college, from their initial thoughts about attending college to preparation in high school and finally to their arrival on campus. The students discussed that before the pandemic, there were factors that helped them in their undergraduate studies because they were first-generation students. The majority of the participants described intentional preparation for college, in some cases going back to childhood. Most of the participants credited their college support systems and their friends for their adjustment to higher education. In addition, their personal motivation and ability to manage their time further aided their pursuit of a college degree.

The following table shows the finding for research question 1 and the analysis that follows weaves in the corresponding demographic and statistical information, provided by the participants, that supports the finding.

**Table 4: Outline of Finding 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 1: What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding 1:</strong> Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intentional preparation to attend college:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Helpful teachers, guidance counselors and coaches (79.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Degree as path to upward mobility (62.5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Parental encouragement (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorable environmental factors in college:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- College support system (95.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Emotional support from friends (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorable personal traits aided pursuit of degree:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Highly motivated (87.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intentional Preparation to Attend College

**Helpful teachers, guidance counselors and coaches.** A common thread among many students (79.2 percent) was they were beneficiaries of support from teachers, guidance counselors and coaches in high school. These supportive adults encouraged them to consider attending college, by helping them research universities, edit essays and complete financial aid applications. A few of the participants, who were academically gifted, were put on a college-track as early as elementary or middle school. One student who attended a selective university attributed some of their success to their teachers and advisors who recognized their potential:

> I would hang out with a few teachers…and they would be totally okay with it. We would just talk and get to know each other, and they know my story quite well. They would guide me and help me throughout my time through high school. There were also a few coaches, like my debate coach and a few others, that I would hang out with, just to learn more about what I should be doing academically and my future. So come senior year, the branch of adult guidance counselors was opened up to us….There was one in particular…who really helped me get into…by helping me with my essays. (Participant 6)

Another student observed that their high school had special programs dedicated for college-bound students:

> When I entered high school, I entered a science and engineering program. Freshman year you're taking advanced placement calculus and biology and sort of fast tracked you to a STEM university program….That program helped me develop essential time management skills, study skills, study habits….If you don't go to college, then these past 4 years of going through this magnet program were a waste. By not going to college, you're sort of a burden on society, you're not doing the best that you can. I feel those programs really set me up for challenging myself and taking advantage of the opportunities. (Participant 11)

One participant received tangible advice and support from a non-profit organization that helped low-income students apply to college. The student continued to remain in contact with their coach throughout college:

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2 Each participant is identified with a number. See Appendix J for summary demographic data.
There was a nonprofit program that provided us with a coordinator, who would then have us fill out surveys….We would be paired with somebody who was going into our field or was related to our field….They would help us fill out all of the applications, look into colleges or go forward with some career paths. The coordinator for the program, he actually helped me a lot, too. He helped me apply for scholarships and we were also very close, and I still remain in contact with pretty much everybody that helped me in high school. (Participant 22)

Another high-achieving student benefited from supportive teachers, college advisors and a non-profit college advisory program. While in high school, this student was actively recruited by an elite university, which offered them an expense-paid trip to visit the campus:

I had good grades in high school. I did a lot of extracurriculars so almost all of my teachers expected me to apply to good schools, to go to college. I did have a lot of support from them and also in high school, we had a college advisor from a new program that came to my school. So, my junior year…reached out to me directly, because I was on track to be the valedictorian. She helped me a lot with college prep and she was a big influence in my decision to attend….She helped me a lot with the general applications. (Participant 21)

Degree as path to upward mobility. Many participants (62.5 percent) reported that they were highly motivated to pursue a degree, primarily because it provided a path for economic security (50 percent) that their families did not have. More than half of the participants (57.2 percent) chose STEM, economics, business or political science majors because they lead to higher starting salaries directly after college. Meanwhile, some students (42.8 percent) who majored in the social sciences, like psychology and teaching, and liberal arts also identified that a graduate degree was necessary to obtain a job, although this is not unique to 1Gs.

Many parents encouraged their children to select majors that offered them a pathway to well-paying careers. This resonated with some of the participants whose parents emigrated to the U.S. specifically so they would have better lives:

It’s a no brainer for me, because basically my parents, just moved here, for that better opportunity for both me and my brother. A lot of Asians kind of do the trifecta either medicine, law or engineering…which is because all of them are like really good in
terms of career stability and also income. I kind of discovered the fourth route, which is business….If you do get into like the private sector, for example, investment banking is my goal, it provides a lot of income. I feel like it's both competitive and I want to give bragging rights to my mom because she didn't experience it. (Participant 3)

One recent graduate, who earned two bachelor’s degrees and was 27 when they graduated, observed that jobs with good career potential became available simply because they had a degree:

I don't doubt that I've gotten the opportunities…like my current job now….I got a job that's secure, but what about the upward mobility? If you don't have a degree, you're going to have to put years into experience. Whereas someone with a degree can maybe get a promotion….Then, while you're waiting to gain those years of experience without a degree, why are you not pursuing if you're able to? (Participant 16)

One student who immigrated to the U.S. in high school noted that they wanted to pursue a career in healthcare to help their family:

I knew that the Northeast is a hub, as far as medical care. There are so many opportunities here, especially with the colleges. It was really just me, knowing that I wanted better for myself and better for my family and the people around me as well, to be able to get that education somewhere. (Participant 8)

Another participant observed that since high school did not prepare them for a career, a college degree was effectively the baseline to join the middle class:

I mean definitely you can still have a job without going to college, but I think that in current society, most jobs with higher pay would require a college degree. Also, I don't really think I learned a lot in high school regarding very specific fields, so a college degree will allow me to dig deeper into different fields and see what I really…to do for my life. Going to college was a learning and deciding period of my life to figure out what I wanted to make the future. (Participant 17)

**Parental encouragement.** Half of the participants across all the ethnic identified their parents as important boosters even though they never attended university and had limited personal experience with the education system in the U.S. The presence of a supportive adult, whether it was a parent, grandparent or teacher, favorably impacted 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree. While their parents were unable to help them academically and were often unaware of
college programs for families, like Parents’ Weekend, they provided emotional support. From
the raw data supplied by the participants, the researcher identified that 55.6 percent of the sample
had at least one extended family member who had at least a bachelor’s degree, so their parents
had some awareness of the benefits of higher education. One recent graduate observed that their
mother was one of their biggest cheerleaders:

I would say there's been some external integration from my mom. We moved to
the States years ago and education was her primary reason for bringing us here. She's
always been behind me, cheering me on through every single acceptance. She's been
cheering me on and saying, “Make the decision. It's your academics. You've got a future
now.” (Participant 25)

Another recent graduate, who was raised by their grandmother, was always
expected to earn a degree:

She was just always very proactive. I didn't really feel she encouraged me to
continue my education, but I definitely think she expected me to. That was
encouragement.….You're going to do it….I didn't realize how big of a deal it was for her
to see me complete my education. If I didn't have her, I don't know….I didn't realize how
proud of me she was. (Participant 16)

One participant noted that even though their parents did not attend school in the U.S.,
they made sure that their child attended a magnet school starting in elementary school:

I think I am really blessed with having been through the…since fourth grade. I
was honestly college bound starting in primary school. My parents were very much about
where can I put my kid in the best schools…because they did not have the chance to
pursue higher ed in Mexico. (Participant 11)

Favorable Environmental Factors in College

College support system. Once enrolled, all the participants identified favorable
environmental factors on campus, of which 95.8 percent attributed this to helpful college support
services, notably first-generation student organizations, professors and mentors. This is further
corroborated by raw data from the Demographic Data Form, on which participants were asked to
rate their knowledge of first-generation student services, counseling services, academic
advisement, international or cultural clubs, social clubs, sports groups, career services, health services and financial aid. The participants identified themselves as knowledgeable or very knowledgeable about academic advisement (63 percent), career services (59.3 percent), financial aid (59.3 percent), counseling (51.9 percent) and social clubs (51.9 percent). Some services, such as social clubs and organizations tend to be more highly valued by traditional age students like the participants in this study. However, membership in clubs often requires applications and personal connections which may put 1Gs at a disadvantage.

One recent graduate noted that they lacked the social capital to navigate ordinary situations, like how to dress for a white-collar job. Informal learning through observation helped them gain confidence when dining out:

> We have this wonderful club at…called First-Gen and it's great. They do little things like teach you how to dine at a fancy restaurant…where people dress up and dine together…..I remember I didn't even know how to use a fork and a knife correctly and my friend taught me. I didn’t even know how to dress. I remember how stressful it was trying to learn about business casual. First-Gen has a little event where they teach people what business casual is and even help them pick out clothes. (Participant 15)

Another student explained that the first-generation office was a safe space to get help when they had nowhere else to go:

> I think people who went through it and got the help that they needed, whether it be financial, whether it be just for the social aspect, getting to know others who are similar to them or talking to the professionals that worked in the office, it definitely helped quite a bit, more so than if you were on your own or trying to navigate college without any kind of service. It was definitely a lifesaver in many aspects of my own life or degree saver. (Participant 6)

One student reflected on the extra academic support they received from their professors:

> Especially during the time where I felt like I wasn't doing my very best and my grades weren't showing that. I would talk to my professors, and I would ask them if they could grant me extensions, or if they can tutor me or if there were other ways which I can try and catch up in class. My professors were very understanding and they were very willing to help. (Participant 22)
Some students observed that when parents or friends were not fully supportive, professors or other advisors filled that void. A recent graduate observed that professors provided much more than academic support:

I developed, to this day, bonds with a lot of my professors. I would consider that, like a first-generation service in a way, because a lot of my professors appreciated the struggles that I was going through. They worked with me outside of class and honestly, sometimes they were sounding boards for me and offered me advice outside of academics. (Participant 19)

One student explained that after they transferred schools, they developed a relationship with a professor who became a mentor:

I had a couple of professors, one in particular. She's a Philosophy professor. I would go to her house for dinner and have a mentor basically….I had these professors who were more than people who were lecturing. They became lifelong mentors that I can still text to this day and get advice from. I feel they really wanted to get to know me. (Participant 19)

Other participants found mentors through relationships with upperclassmen and clubs.

One student, who is gay, found acceptance in a program for LGBTQ+ students:

I was in two specific mentorship programs, one for Latino students and another one for LGBTQ+ students. Because I identify as a gay Latinx man, I really want to seek out these two specific communities and be more involved ….By building community and finding friendships with other Latino students and other first-gens, as well, that's what really helped me ground myself and guide my studies. I also think because within those two mentorship groups, there were a lot of first-generation college students as well, and so they are also very willing to provide career advice and also advice on academics. (Participant 11)

**Emotional support from friends.** Many participants (67.7 percent) identified emotional support from their friends as the second most important environmental factor, after college support services. Students who lived on campus (48.1 percent) were more likely than commuters to form close friendships. Some students explained that they developed a network of friends who came from similar backgrounds. Several participants turned to their peers, rather than their parents, because their classmates could easily relate to their struggles:
I would say my classmates, like my peers around me, because everyone was in the same boat. A lot of us, we were navigating college being the first in our family to do so. That was comforting to have people I could rely on. (Participant 20)

Another participant noted that although they attended a small private college with an affluent student body, they bonded with friends who shared similar financial concerns:

I was kind of lucky, because a lot of people from…, because it's a private liberal arts school and the nature of recruitment, come from like really nice schools…are usually well off here. I came from a public school and I wasn't necessarily super-wealthy growing up either. I found a group of friends who were also financially not super well off, but in that way, we could talk to each other about financial aid. (Participant 15)

One participant’s roommates, who came from middle-class families, introduced them to different perspectives:

When I moved in with a group of women that were not struggling financially, we also became best friends, so it was nice to see both perspectives and it made me become more goal driven. I was lucky to be able to live in a dorm and see a lot of these students because they're not first-generation college students. They have knowledge on what college is about. (Participant 18)

Another participant transferred from a community college to a large university with a group of friends, who were also first-generation students. However, after the participant settled into their new university, their support system expanded to include classmates from more diverse backgrounds:

I actually started going to a community college and I transferred to …with some people that I knew. So having that support at…was really helpful…. Knowing people on the campus that also have a similar background to you or experiences like was really, really helpful. But then also having a mix of friends that maybe don't have that…you have a different network of people to rely on when you need help or if you have a certain question. Just having a diverse network of people, I think is really helpful, but also people that are specific to your identity. (Participant 25)

**Favorable Personal Traits Aided Pursuit of Degree**

**Highly motivated.** Overall, most participants (87.5 percent) noted that motivation was their most important personal trait contributing toward their self-direction, nearly sixty points
ahead of the next distinguishing characteristic, which was time management. Among the 17 participants who graduated during the pandemic, 88.2 percent completed their degree within 4 years, which exceeds the national six-year completion rate of 62.2 percent for all students and 50 percent for 1Gs (NCES, 2021; NSCRS, 2022). Nearly all the students explained that college represented a turning point in their lives, a time when they experienced personal growth and self-motivation. Several students observed that as emerging adults, they became comfortable with who they were, which was especially important for some participants who did not conform to heterosexual norms. None of the participants who identified as LGBTQ+ expressed that their sexual identity adversely impacted their experiences in college. One recent graduate explained how they became more comfortable with their sexual identity:

“I'm happy that I came out, especially now with my older age and experience. I just see you know, especially to my students that had suicide ideation and me dealing with that and helping them cope with….That could have very easily been me if I didn't have the self-awareness or the opportunity to witness them going through that and figure out resources to help them deal with that. (Participant 16)

Another participant noted that having personal agency and a willingness to ask questions helped them grow as students:

“I think for a personal trait, agency was really big….If you have an issue it could be difficult as a first-generation to admit that. You do need help on certain things because you're just so used to doing things yourself and being hyper-independent….Also another trait would be not being afraid to ask questions and being inquisitive. I guess having a growth mindset when it comes to a lot of aspects of your life that will come at you. (Participant 27)

In contrast, another student emphasized that in college they had independence and because of ingrained self-reliance and a reluctance to ask questions, they learned informally through trial and error:

“In college, there's a lot more independence on things that you could choose to do, and you're not forced to do anything you're not interested in. So there was a lot more like picking and choosing and figuring out what's most time effective and all that stuff. I feel
during a lot of my college time I discovered more about myself. It was a big period of a lot of personal growth. (Participant 4)

One student described how they adopted a coping strategy by always thinking ahead about the opportunities offered by their university:

…Need for me to prep and always be ready for the next steps. This really made me look through the vast resources and the network and just reaching out to professors and ask them to give me any advice. As a student what should I be doing now and what's beneficial for me to do. (Participant 5)

Students consistently reported that they overcame many personal obstacles through self-reliance. One participant, who moved to the U.S. during high school, noted how much they had achieved in such a short period and described how they were striving for perfection so they can attend medical school:

I would say motivation has definitely been a big factor for me and having that independence to make sure that I get every single thing right, so I can get to the goal that I want definitely motivated. This was useful to keep doing what I think is best for my academics. Even other advisors who are supporting me, I’ll take their advice lightly, but also see where they’re coming from…. The motivation has definitely been a reason as to why I’ve come this far and look forward to going as far as I can…. (Participant 25)

Another student reflected on how hard they worked to attend college and despite challenging academics, they refused to give up:

I tried because there were moments, where I felt like I wasn't going to pass or I felt if I dropped out in this very moment, then everything would be fine. But, I felt I couldn't do that because I had literally been preparing for college my entire life. So, when I finally got there, I was like no, I cannot fail now, so I tried to stay….Beyond that everybody else was in and I needed to do this for me and try and remember why I was there in the first place. (Participant 22)

**Successful time management.** Most students (92.6 percent) received financial aid and worked while attending college. While it was common for some of their colleges to limit work-study jobs to ten hours a week for freshmen, participants often had extra jobs off campus where the hours were unrestricted. Consequently, time management was an important skill which some
participants (29.2 percent) felt they mastered. One student described their strategy for choosing work-study jobs where they could also do their homework:

I've always been really good at time management….And so having to go to classes on time, manage the amount of time spent doing homework and taking on extracurriculars, as time progressed, proved really helpful. As a junior and senior, I was a peer mentor….In terms of balancing, I think it was fairly easy to manage being in an office, because I was able to do homework there. (Participant 21)

Another participant carefully arranged their class schedule, so they had more time to work:

I would try to develop a block schedule, where I would have classes let's say Mondays and Wednesdays, so that I could be free to work Tuesdays and Thursdays. It definitely caused me to develop my sense of time management and plan everything I'd have to do just to stay on top of everything and just be more organized. (Participant 20)

Some participants used multiple methods of tracking classes, assignments and work, through calendars and a system of reminders on their devices. One student described how they took a very analytic approach to juggling academics and social activities:

I didn't even have the time really when I crunched the numbers and I saw the other things that I had to do. It became a little bit more difficult to keep up with a social life, but I still did. I just wasn't going out to dinners or going to the movies or doing anything really every single weekend. I'll just be doing it every once in a while, when I had a chance, or a free weekend. (Participant 8)

4.5 Research Finding 2

Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as hindering their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times they struggled as undergraduates.

Participants were asked about factors that hindered them in their undergraduate studies because they were first-generation students, prior to the pandemic. Most of the participants identified impediments, such as unsystematic or haphazard preparation for college, unfavorable environmental factors in college (related to college supports and relationships with peers,)
unfavorable personal traits and struggles (related to mental health, academics and family stress).

Without a stable foundation or a well-established support system, one of the stories that has emerged from the research is that 1Gs faced challenges as they navigated college even prior to the pandemic.

The following table shows the finding for research question 2 and the analysis that follows weaves in the corresponding demographic and statistical information, provided by those participants, that supports the finding.

**Table 5: Outline of Finding 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 2</th>
<th>Finding 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ 2:</strong> What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020?</td>
<td><strong>Finding 2:</strong> Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as hindering their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times they struggled as undergraduates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Unsystematic preparation to attend college:**
  - Parental indifference or opposition (41.7%)
  - Misalignment of student and college’s expectations (37.5%)
  - Lack of knowledge or understanding (33.3%)

- **Unfavorable environmental factors in college:**
  - College support system (75%)
  - Relationships with peers (70.8%)
  - Families lack of understanding (50%)
  - Inadequate academic preparation (37.5%)

- **Unfavorable personal traits impeded pursuit of degree:**
  - Loneliness (41.7%)
  - Avoid asking for help (33.3%)
  - Feelings of not belonging (33.3%)
  - Feeling overwhelmed (33.3%)
  - Unsuccessful time management (25%)

- **Struggles:**
  - Mental health (41.7%)
  - Challenging academics (37.5%)
  - Family stress (25%)
**Parental indifference or opposition.** Demographic and statistical data about the participants’ families provides insight into their parents’ lack of knowledge about higher education in the U.S. Eighty percent of their parents were born outside of the U.S., with 26.8 percent from Mexico, 24.3 percent from China and the balance from nations in African, Asia, Europe and the Dominican Republic. Eighteen languages were spoken across the households, although the most common were English and Spanish. However, English was not spoken in 11.1 percent of the homes, so those parents were unable to communicate with their children’s teachers, forcing them to become more independent at an earlier age. While 37.3 percent of the parents had the equivalent of a high school diploma, 33.3 percent of the parents had less than a high school education. Among the parents who did not graduate from high school, 47.1 percent came from Mexico and 29.4 percent from China. At least seven parents did not complete elementary school.

Their parents’ lack of education, language barriers and general unfamiliarity with the education system in the U.S., caused some participants (41.7 percent) to feel their parents were indifferent or actively opposed their pursuit of a college degree. The most common explanations for their parents’ lack of support were attributed to traditional family values, the cost of higher education and prioritization of family responsibilities over college. One recent graduate described that while their mother was indifferent, she did not oppose her husband’s strict beliefs:

> It was kind of strange for me growing up, because even though I was a good student, my parents weren't really advocates for college. It's not that they were anti-college, but they weren't pro-college either. I think my dad was anti-college because he didn't want me to go. Well, he was against me going away to college. He didn't want me leaving our town. So, it was toxic for a while, because he was very resentful and that made it hard. I think the reason is because my dad grew up in a small village in Pakistan…very traditional. (Participant 19)
Another participant explained that their father did not support them because he did not understand the value of higher education and although their mother was indifferent, she followed his lead:

My mom is on the more supportive side I would say. But she's not supportive. She’s is just kind of okay. But then for my dad, it seems like it's never good enough….I think it's because he doesn't have any idea about higher education and whatnot because he never attended college. (Participant 26)

While none of the participants in the study were parents, the gender imbalance was illustrated by some females (14.8 percent) who had childcare responsibilities. Meanwhile, none of the male participants mentioned responsibility for siblings and none of the participants described caretaking responsibilities for elderly relatives or their parents. One student described how their parents did not understand when they prioritized academics over family:

…Watch the kids during my free time…she doesn't understand the coursework that I have. She doesn't understand I have like 100 pages to read because I’m a psychology major. She doesn't understand that a paper or…a test does not only take three hours. She doesn't understand that 20-page papers requires a lot of commitment. And she also doesn't understand that when I study, I need a very quiet environment....She sees me being lazy because she didn't know what I was doing when I spend all day in my room instead of coming downstairs to help her with chores. (Participant 17)

**Misalignment of student and college’s expectations.** Some 1Gs (37.5 percent) arrived on campus without a clear vision of what to expect in terms of academics or social experiences. One participant explained their college did not appreciate how lost they were as a freshman and the college did not proactively contact them with support:

I think it was understood somewhat. During my first year, I should have received a little bit more support. I got it in one class. I wish…from the Dean of Students Office…“Do you need any extra support or how's it going?” I never really got that….A lot of my friends who were first-gen quit or transferred. Some took a semester off. (Participant 12)
A recent graduate was unsure whether their college understood their needs during their freshman year. They focused almost exclusively on academics, whereas the university offered an array of clubs and social activities they expected traditional-aged students to join:

I am unsure, but for me, it translated into being academically rigorous. So, I spent most of my time studying and doing homework. But...has a big focus on getting involved in the various organizations that are available to us. I think my freshman year I did not take advantage of that. In a sense, academically I did try to align my expectations of being a freshman to what I believed… expected from every student. (Participant 21)

Another recent graduate discussed the trauma they experienced after leaving their family and the lack of cultural awareness from their college:

Everyone was telling me how could you be leaving the family. So that was really emotional for me because I thought that I was doing something horribly wrong. Not that a college needs to be able to deal with this or maybe they do. I don't think that level of like emotional trauma was something that my college understood, because it was so specific to my identity. I think everyone was like oh, you're so excited to get to college, be away from family or set off on this new adventure. But for me, it was like I'm doing this horrible thing. (Participant 15)

**Lack of knowledge or understanding.** While some participants (33.3 percent) had been preparing to attend college since they were young, others arrived on campus without even the basic knowledge of how to select a major:

I have no idea what major I want to do. Nothing. I just know this is kind of nice. I don't really know what to do in my life, so I'm gonna continue the process. It was really hard in my opinion. As a first-generation student, I thought I didn't get enough resources. (Participant 18)

Another participant explained they had limited contact with their university after they were accepted. When they arrived on campus, they lacked basic knowledge about how to register for classes or where to buy books:

I had no expectations, and I had no idea what I needed to do even before school started...I wish that from the point that you got admitted, like maybe from May, all the way to August, I wish they sent out more emails and a checklist for students, letting them know first to check your syllabi, make sure you register for classes.... I hope I knew what I was getting myself into. My roommate the first year...before the first day of class, she
already had her textbooks, read the syllabus and already knew her schedule. I don't even know where my classroom was. I didn't know that you were supposed to buy your textbooks beforehand. I just didn't know...there was a thing called syllabus. (Participant 17)

For another participant, college was something one attended after high school, but other than that, college was simply a word:

People know it's middle school, high school and then college, but I really didn't....I didn't really know what college was. I didn't think. I was familiar with the word, and so I applied to the furthest ones away. We did our little orientation and I moved in. I decided, yeah, I'm going to go to college. It fell into my lap kind of.....just me figuring it out a lot. It’s very strange to think about because I had no idea what I was going to experience going in. (Participant 16)

Unfavorable Environmental Factors in College

College support system. While at one time or another, all the participants experienced unfavorable environmental influences in college, 75 percent of the students reported that college support systems failed to meet their needs even before their education was disrupted by the pandemic. Notably, participants identified insufficient support from advisors (45.8 percent), inadequate help for students (29.2 percent) who had doubts about their major and inadequate mental health (25 percent) or first-generation student services (25 percent). One participant explained that since their advisor had so many advisees, he was not helpful:

I was assigned one my freshman year, but it wasn't that helpful when I would go to speak to him, cuz there's a lot of students. I never got the chance to develop that kind of close personal relationship. When I would go in, I felt half the time that he had forgotten me or did not really remember who I am. (Participant 20)

Another person explained that their advisor never tried to develop a relationship with them or explored their background or interests:

I can't even tell you who my advisor was. I don't remember and certainly my advisor didn't bring up the fact that I am the first person in my family to go to college...how does that change my perspective and how is that impacting me. That never came up. Back then, I guess, I was so insecure and so unsupported that I didn't realize that what I was going through was very difficult. (Participant 19)
One recent graduate reflected on their experiences with their advisor. Since they did not get help from the counselor, they became less self-directed and stopped going:

I didn't feel like the...advisors were very helpful. That’s something else that made it pretty difficult to really find the help that I was looking. After I stopped seeing my first advisor, nobody ever reached out to me. (Participant 8)

One participant never had an advisor. Instead, upperclassmen were assigned to help new students register, even though they themselves were ill-informed and coached freshmen to take upper-level classes without the appropriate prerequisites. This led one participant to change majors and lengthened their enrollment by one year:

For the first semester, it was mostly a team of students that was hired by the school for that. One of the big ones was deciding whether the major I was in was right for me. I switched majors which lengthened my time in college by two semesters. The most they did was basically give you a sheet that was a layout of the courses you're supposed to take....Most people just followed that blindly and just copied (that list and registered for those) courses. (Participant 13)

Another participant did not receive support from their university. However, they benefited from a federally financed advisory program:

My academic advisor doesn't really do anything, so I’m lucky to have TRIO advisory council. (Participant 23)

Some students (25 percent) reported that when they turned to their college’s mental health facilities, the counselors seemed overwhelmed. One participant explained that due to their anxiety and depression and their family’s lack of private health insurance, they relied on a therapist provided by the college:

It can take months to get an appointment. So, I just wasn't able to go. I needed to go every week and I was maybe getting an appointment every month. At that point, this isn't really...and then the therapist I had ended up leaving. ....Because my family is low-income, I didn't have access really to health care or consistent therapy. It was take-what-

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33 TRIO is a federally funded outreach and student services program designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress from middle school through college. Colleges receive grants and provide services to eligible students.
you-can-get sort of thing, and so I never was really able to get the care that I needed. (Participant 19)

One student explained that even though they attended a well-endowed private college, the college’s mental health department was so understaffed that they offered group therapy sessions and discouraged students from contacting them unless they had an emergency:

They were over flooded in that moment, with a lot of appointments. They were having open office hours. I did go, but there were maybe 20 people in line, and it was like an open room. It wasn't private and there were two therapists here and they were just talking to students rapidly. They were like I'm sorry that sucks; if you need anything else you can go to the blog or call back if it's an emergency kind of thing. (Participant 12)

Some participants (25 percent) sought services specifically available for first-generation students and were unsatisfied with what they found. One recent graduate was unable to obtain help from the first-generation office even though it was advertised on the university’s website:

Sometimes they gave first-gen the general introductory classes. They were able to find some help from the upper class. It was very difficult to find help and other than that, it's pretty much it. (Participant 7)

One student tried to attend their university-sponsored, first-generation student club and described it as lacking in any formal mission or structure:

Freshman year it was a joke club kind of thing, so I'd go. Then sophomore year like… I would have to like rush out of school. If there was a club after six o'clock then I came back to school and go. During the time, I was working so I couldn't go anymore. (Participant 1)

Another participant explained that even though their public university had many first-generation students, they were unaware of specific supports:

I would say that there weren't any explicit services or it wasn't made clear that there were services being offered specifically to first-generation students. (Participant 19)

**Relationships with peers.** Many participants (70.8 percent) observed that they had negative experiences with classmates and roommates at some point during their undergraduate studies. This was troublesome for students who also lacked supportive parents. Hostile
relationships with peers can lead students to withdraw from social networks. Some students were affected by their peers’ incomprehension of diversity and inclusion, socio-economic differences and commuting. About one-quarter of the participants (25.9 percent) lived with their family, so they spent less time on campus and made fewer friends. All the participants who observed the lack of diversity or experienced micro-aggressions were people of color and expressed that their university culture “glorified” white, middle-class values. One participant, who is Asian and attended a small college, lacked role models in the classroom. They felt that they stood out on a largely homogenous campus:

I've had micro aggressions happen. I had someone tell me I look like their nanny. I’m in class with white males who talk over you. I think we only have two Black professors at…or maybe one, a few Asian professors and I don't know about Latinx professors, but it's really quite a few of them. I think we just need more staff of color as well. (Participant 12)

A recent graduate from a large university also experienced micro-aggressions when another classmate implied, they were only accepted because they helped fill a quota:

In terms of the student body and the university as a whole, I don't think there was much of a regard for the students in terms of educating the whole student body. You'd hear…things like, you're an affirmative action kid, like your brand. Or they would say, you are part of the statistic, like they needed a couple of you. I think I earned my spot, just like anyone, but you know I think that's where the university fails because the Dean or the departments can't really shield you from that….Maybe they do it on purpose, because it’s just life in a way. (Participant 6)

Almost all the participants were the average age of undergraduates and expected they would form lifelong friendships in college. However, commuters consistently felt they missed out on that opportunity:

Then for the social aspect, it was a little disappointing because I was a commuter student. I didn't dorm and I feel I missed out on a lot of those opportunities…to socialize when you just go to your classes and go back home. (Participant 20)
Another participant transferred schools just so they could live on campus and enjoy both the academic and social experiences they wanted. However, as a sophomore transfer, they found it challenging to join clubs:

I was a commuting student at…and as a result, I kind of like gave up the social life aspects of the balance because I had to be traveling home every single day. Then there's really no social life…The first two semesters, I did not plan my way around carefully, so I missed a lot of club application deadlines. (Participant 3)

Other students described the economic disparity with classmates as detrimental to their college experience. One participant explained that because they lived with more affluent friends, they ended up spending more than they could afford by purchasing stylish clothes to fit in:

Bringing it back to living in a dorm, I wanted to spend money. I felt very insecure about myself. You know I live in public housing. I feel really poor, and all my friends have a house or car, so it makes me want to spend money now. I want to start dressing a certain way, presenting myself in a certain way, especially my freshman year. I don't want to go to class….They're all going to Starbucks and everyone's buying coffee. I never bought Starbucks in high school….It was just too expensive. (Participant 18)

Another participant described the culture shock they experienced after moving from an inner city to a small college, with an affluent student population. The student observed that some peers had strong family connections to their college because multiple generations were alumni:

Being from an inner city and then coming to one of the richest schools in the country was definitely a big shock to me. Some of these kids are triple legacy, millionaires. Celebrity kids go here….I’ve been called to teach people what poverty is like…explain what low-income is by giving them real world examples. There have been times where people have turned to me: “Poor people do this.” You’re telling the wrong person because I am “poor people.” (Participant 24)

One recent graduate reflected on how money destroyed their relationship with their freshman roommate, after the other student damaged their commuter and initially refused to pay for the repairs:

She has a lot of money. I guess it was out of her money and she ended up giving it to me, but then when we got back to campus, she didn't really talk to me. That was just difficult…Money ruined our friendship. (Participant 12)
**Families lack of understanding.** Half of the participants identified their parents’ lack of understanding as an impediment, even when they encouraged their children’s pursuit of a degree. Many of these students explained that although their parents encouraged them to pursue higher education, they did not understand their children’s academic pressures or stress with peers. One student was reluctant to share their worries about school because they knew their parents would not understand:

> Sometimes I'll tell them how stressed I am. I don't tell them that much …They don't care if I just don't. Especially since my parents have never been to college, I don't think they understand separate pressure or the type of college stressors that I have. (Participant 23)

Another participant, whose parents did not finish elementary school, felt disconnected from their parents even though they supported their child’s pursuit of a degree:

> So, one of the things I think first-generation students experience a lot is that disconnect with their parents about college life. My mom couldn't understand the college life at all, so a lot of times…she thought extracurriculars were something meant for high school where you're applying to colleges, so they know you're involved. (Participant 3)

A recent graduate identified the cultural mismatch between dominant white, middle-class values in higher education and their culture, where it was expected that adult children did not leave home until they married:

> I'm not only first-generation, I'm also first-generation Vietnamese. Another thing that comes along with Asian cultures, specifically Vietnamese and is this feeling you need to stick with the family….No one else in my family had gone to college, not even my older brother or my older cousins. They were all …with their families. I remember on the first day of school for me, my mom telling me…how can you be leaving the family? So that was really emotional for me because I thought that I was doing something horribly wrong. (Participant 15)

Another participant, who had always been a top student, felt that they could not talk to their mother when they were failing because she would insist, they work harder, rather than offer the reassurance they needed:
Talking to my mom… I feel I can't do it my very first year. She said, you’ve got this. You’ve always been good at school, like it's all in your head…. There's nothing else impacting you right now, because all you're doing is school…. I feel it was a cultural-type barrier that was an influence in a negative way because I couldn't talk to her in that aspect, even though me and her are very close. It's like she was trying to push me to do better, but in that moment, that wasn't what I needed…. That allowed me to not to think about the fact that I can't really count on her too much because she doesn't understand. (Participant 22)

One student explained that when they could not openly share their worries without receiving empty platitudes, they withdrew from their parents:

I went through all college trying to describe the struggles that I was going through to them. I would just get back: you can do this, you know you've done it all, you’ve gone through everything. It’s just another stab…. In those moments, that's not exactly what I wanted from them. I wanted them to understand that it is hard and that no matter what comes of it, it's going to be fine…I stopped thinking of needing to please my parents. I need to make sure that their vision of what I should be isn't as important to me anymore. My parents got the backseat because I didn't want to burden them with my issues and make them feel worse because they couldn't do anything. (Participant 5)

**Inadequate academic preparation.** Many of the participants grew up in neighborhoods where the public schools had limited resources, and some (37.5 percent) students felt their preparation for college was insufficient. One student from a large city observed how their more affluent classmates were better prepared:

They had private education and they were homeschooled with the best teachers that money can provide. I went to a public high school that didn't have enough resources to give me a math teacher my senior year. (Participant 22)

One recent graduate attended a mandatory pre-college program and experienced a heightened level of academic expectations that made them feel inadequate:

One thing that… negative impact on me was the summer program. So, taking the chemistry class with a very, very difficult professor. Never had that competition, even in sports. I always thought I was either average or better than other people. In school, I knew I was pretty good at it. High school for me was not a challenge. But then, when I got to…, it was it was another type of beast for me. (Participant 7)
Another recent graduate, who now attends medical school, felt their preparation in high school was inadequate and their college advisor discouraged their ambitions:

Adjusting to the academic rigor was very challenging for me especially coming from a small public high school….My education to that point had not been at the level that the rigor that…threw us into to be honest. A particular advisor wasn't encouraging definitely, especially when I was struggling academically my first semester. She was like well, maybe you should reconsider medicine or reconsider your career path. You are not able to do it now, and you might not ever be able to do it. (Participant 8)

One participant felt so unprepared relative to their peers, that they doubted whether they even belonged in college:

My grammar was terrible. My brain was terrible. Everyone was doing really great in the class and then you can tell I'm just not doing as well, even going to office hours and getting additional homework assignments….I felt I wasn't catching up and that was very discouraging. But no matter what I did, I felt my level of education or understanding was not the same level as the other students. (Participant 22)

Some participants observed peers who had such difficulty navigating college, that they dropped out or transferred from a four-year college to a community college. One participant explained that it was difficult to watch their friends leave:

A lot of those students…the first couple weeks if not months of class, they dropped out….That was difficult, because you think you're going to come in with a cohort or a group of students and then, you're going to graduate. It was a very hard year. After a year, it seemed like a lot of them just made a mass exodus and I didn't really understand why. (Participant 16)

**Unfavorable Personal Traits Impeded Pursuit of Degree**

**Loneliness.** Some participants (41.7 percent) described feelings of sadness or homesickness that came from isolation which suppressed their self-direction. One recent graduate, who is the eldest of five children, was alone for the first time so they struggled to fill a void:

Because I come from a big family and it's always loud and noisy at home, living by myself, like I was during the pre-freshman summer program. I was in a room by
myself, but in like a suite, so there was like five other people, but none of us actually talked to each other. It's basically like living alone and I hated that. (Participant 4)

One recent graduate discussed that after they became friends with a group of more affluent classmates, they pulled away from their original group of friends which was comprised of other Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) students. Consequently, they experienced profound loneliness even though they had friends:

I'm pulling away from EOP program. I’m starting to not go to my advisory meetings with my EOP counselor….I'm talking to other people in my group less. I'm pulling away and I tried to be someone else. That was very hard, because I’m pulling away from the resources that are actually there to guide. (Participant 18)

Another student explained that they felt very isolated after a friend committed suicide before the pandemic:

I would say I felt really lonely and one of my friends committed suicide, while I was in my first year and the same week, two students died on campus at the same time. This was really, really challenging. (Participant 12)

As described in Chapter 2, it is not unusual for low-income students to feel they are surrounded by a fence that paralyzes them through systemic and/or structural barriers. One student described the days when they did not want to leave their dorm room. Their feelings of isolation were compounded by mood swings and academic pressure:

I'm finding myself alone, not being able to hang out with a friend for say a couple days. That was effective in terms of a negative trade internally. The days where I just didn't do well… I didn’t want to go to class because of just being down. That actually happened even when the seasonal affective disorder wasn't playing, say during the spring where it was sunny and lighter for fuller days. It was due to high stress situations where I had a lot do, and it was like a mountain and I didn't think I could scale it. (Participant 6)

One participant explained they intentionally built an invisible shield as a coping mechanism:

I was feeling very severely that I didn't have any other defense mechanism to close myself off to any other individuals who just didn't look like me, specifically white, affluent students. (Participant 11)
Avoid asking for help. By the time the students enrolled in college, many were already used to making decisions on their own. While their self-reliance was probably an aid in many aspects of their lives, it became a barrier to getting help from their colleges, especially if their schools did not fully understand their needs. Some participants (33.3 percent) explained that until they got to college, they never had to ask for help. Self-reliance and cultural mismatch made it even more difficult for them to seek assistance. One student who was always at the top of their class in high school encountered an entirely new predicament in college:

It was also very hard for me because I had never been the type of person to ask for help….I was always top of my class in high school. So, when I got here, I was one of the people that was literally failing and so it was really hard for me to have to go up to a professor and say I don't understand what's going on. (Participant 16)

Another student learned that their insecurity made it very difficult for them to seek assistance:

Being first-generation, there's already this lack of self-confidence and then you need to be able to take initiative to go to these sorts of clubs and ask for help which is already hard in itself. (Participant 15)

A recent graduate attributed their reluctance to seek help to their discomfort with networking:

I was very bad at networking. I didn't know how to really talk to people. To be able to get the help that I needed. It actually took me quite some time to be able to build up the courage to do that because I’m not really sure why. I guess in high school I didn't really have to ask for help that much. Usually, it came pretty naturally to me. (Participant 8)

Another participant explained that although they knew the university had resources, they felt uncomfortable having to ask for help during the first two years of college:

There were other resources, but you needed to go and ask them. That’s something I didn't actually do as much at school because I couldn't. I never actually had to ask for help in my life before…. It felt weird for me to ask for help, a guy like me. (Participant 7)
**Feelings of not belonging.** Several participants (33.3 percent) felt they did not belong in college because of imposter syndrome, negative relationships with peers, hiding their first-generation status and not fitting in with wealthier classmates. There were many ways to feel alienated, but fewer ways to really belong. The perception of durable class structures was an underlying explanation for why several participants struggled to fit in. One student, who experienced imposter syndrome, thought they tricked the university into believing they were smarter than they were:

> I think there’s the fear of imposter syndrome of not being good enough. I don't know what to tell my professor since I didn't do all the reading so I'm scared that I might sound stupid if I go….It seemed like the white students weren't scared to have a relationship with the professors. Even in class, one time I counted how many times women spoke versus the two white men in my class. The two white men spoke more than the white females. (Participant 12)

Another student expressed they were not as competent as their white classmates and therefore, less deserving of a coveted place at a selective university:

> I felt like I wasn't on par with the rest of my classmates. It was hard to feel a certain type of way about asking for help when you feel like everybody else really doesn’t need that help that you need. It was kind of a little bit of imposter syndrome, on top of not really knowing how to ask for help. It was a constant feeling of not being good enough or feeling like I wasn't good enough for where I was. I felt like everybody else around me was doing perfectly fine and I felt like I was drowning. (Participant 8)

One participant believed they were behind their wealthier classmates because their parents never graduated from college:

> A lot of people have imposter syndrome beyond first-gen students. …thinking because I'm first-generation, even the fact that I always compare myself. Oh, my God, that person gets help from their parents on their thesis. Like my thesis is so horrible…I think my thesis was just as good as anyone else’s regardless of the fact that I didn't have help from my mom….I'll think if my parents helped me with this, I bet I'd be getting good grades. Instead, I'm worse off. (Participant 15)

One student explained that even though they concealed their first-generation status, they still experienced micro-aggressions:
I didn't apply to be first-gen because one of the first things that happened on campus…I saw this guy and he gave me a huge obvious micro-aggression….I still remember his words and it was like 4 years ago. He said something, like he's talking about another first-gen student, “She only got in because she was first-gen and because obviously, first-gens feel college is valuable.” (Participant 15)

Another participant explained that there were days when they were feeling so insecure that they did not leave their room:

I was very insecure. I tried to hide my background. I don't want people to know I’m first-generation. I don't want people to know that it took a lot to get here. (Participant18)

One student felt like an outsider which took a toll on their mental health:

I think the culture shock was a big part of it. The people that I was going to school with were not the same people that I had gone to school with my entire life, so being around more affluent people was very different…so hearing about people traveling to places super far or doing really expensive things that I didn't necessarily have access to do. (Participant 21)

**Feeling overwhelmed.** Several participants (33.3 percent) expressed that they felt overwhelmed during college. One recent graduate attributed this experience to their difficult childhood that left them feeling insecure when they started college:

If I hadn't gone through a lot of this stuff early on in my childhood and young adulthood…I would have been better at acclimating because I would have had a stable foundation. It's like this emotional roller coaster, balancing everything….It was really hard my first year. (Participant 16)

Another recent graduate reflected on the transition from high school to college, which they felt was more unsettling because of their first-generation status. However, by the end of freshman year, they were able to navigate seamlessly:

It's just that first semester everything is so overwhelming and this transition into college is just so difficult for everyone, and especially first-gen students. It took me a while to really take advantage of all of the…. (Participant 11)

One participant explained that they pulled back from activities and friends when they felt overwhelmed:
I think I'm really good at sensing when I'm overwhelmed and stepping back from it. I remember my freshman year I was really stressed, and I was really overwhelmed, so I took a step back from everything. (Participant 15)

**Unsuccessful time management.** In a society that places a premium on productivity, it is not surprising that several (25 percent) participants had some difficulty managing their time, especially as freshmen. One student explained that they had trouble balancing classes, jobs and clubs:

Really, my first year, I was really big on struggling with time management, because I…to do everything. Still also today. I’ve gotten better….I had a job at 5 AM and then a 7 AM class. Then, I have back-to-back classes after work and then eat. Then, I end up taking a two-hour nap….I tried to throw myself into all the clubs that I wanted to join professionally, which isn't a bad thing. (Participant 23)

A recent graduate expressed that they also struggled managing classes and work, which was further compounded by the hours expected of leaders in student-run groups:

I want to do everything at the same time, and that stretched me out throughout certain periods of time. I find myself sometimes balancing like a course load, working 20 hours a week and then also extracurriculars. Trying to be in a leadership position through various clubs…. (Participant 11)

**Struggles**

Insufficient preparation to attend college, negative environmental factors and unfavorable personal traits culminated in periods of struggle for 83.3 percent the participants. Students reported that they had very little or no knowledge about mental and physical health services (58.1 percent), first-generation student services (37 percent) and international/cultural services (37 percent). If the students knew about these services, these supports may have helped them with their struggles related to mental health, academics and family stress.

**Mental health.** Several participants (41.7 percent) struggled with mental health issues that were compounded by the unavailability of counselors on campus. One participant expressed that they used alcohol and drugs to numb the pain:
I became friends with a girl who had an alcohol problem and so that, in turn, made me start drinking very heavily, to the point where we're going out at 4 or 5 PM. Some classes, I wasn't going to….I had alcohol poisoning and I had to be taken out of the dorm in a stretcher, and so my life was put at risk. It was this continuous pattern of getting very drunk and going out. I always felt so empty and unhappy….I dropped out. I was also institutionalized. (Participant 19)

Another recent graduate explained that mental health issues in college were further compounded by financial pressures:

The new environment is more for upper class living, where you had to cook for yourself and everything like that….Because I do my own grocery shopping now…so every single week I’m spending so much money on groceries and have 45 cents in my bank account. I’m stressed out from school. I’m stressed out from working all these hours, but I’m living paycheck-to-paycheck. I’m spending my paycheck before it comes. That was the time that I was really struggling, and it started affecting my mental health….My mental health went down the hill. It was just terrible. (Participant 18)

One participant explained that after the high-pressure environment in the pre-college summer program and a car accident a year later, they began to develop mental health issues:

That class stuck with me for my first few years of school….Because of that, I had a lot of problems like I didn't have before. I didn't have any type of mental health problems, but then at..., I had anxiety. There were a few times I had insomnia, especially during exam week….I was actually in a very deep depression. Because of that, there was like a few times, there wasn't many times, that I was not even going to classes or not even doing my assignments. It was really very bad times for me. (Participant 7)

One participant described how they felt abandoned by their counselor, who was insensitive to their emotional well-being:

I think I was self-isolating myself. It was just a really dark time and I sought counseling at school, but I hated that process. I went to a meeting with a behavioral counselor because that was the process to get a counselor….I hated every second of that meeting. The counselor didn't want to be there, she was just reading a script and that really, really put me down. She can't even pretend to care or listen to what I have to say. I remember, going back to my dorm room after that and just crying because it just didn't feel right. (Participant 5)
**Challenging academics.** Several participants (37.5 percent) expressed that they struggled with difficult courses and competition throughout their college years and especially when they had more challenging classes as upperclassmen:

My classes get a lot tougher, so with those classes…I was debating actually switching majors. I don't know if I should keep doing this…stick to mechanical engineering. The school is getting really tough, for me, but then at the end, I decided to push through it….Glad I did. That would probably be my biggest struggle. (Participant 10)

One student explained that academics were their biggest struggle in college, especially during freshman year:

It was really hard for me because I felt like even after I eventually started going to office hours…started getting help from tutors….I wasn't really changing my study habits…how I approached the coursework. I’d say the biggest challenge I had at….was the academics….I didn't have the fundamentals down, as well as I thought I did, like chemistry and physics. (Participant 8)

Another participant explained that they were demotivated by poor grades during freshman year, which was a humbling experience for someone who was the valedictorian in high school:

When I finally received my midterm grades for my very first term, I had Ds and an F in one course. I was still providing all of the work. It's just that the work wasn't good enough or like up to par….I was just kind of thinking that everything was a lot more different than what I expected. I expect…I was going to do great and college is going to be so easy for me. (Participant 22)

**Family stress.** Several participants (25 percent) experienced family stress from rollercoaster relationships, caretaking responsibilities and overcrowded homes. One student, who commuted also shared a bedroom with their younger brother and had neither a quiet place to study nor privacy:

I realized I’m an adult….My brother has outgrown sharing a room with me and I've outgrown that too. I need my own space, but at this point it's up to me. If I want my own space, I have to leave my family….The reason why it's hard for me to focus at home
and because I have outgrown home. I need to kind of do my own thing, find my own place and there's nothing wrong with that. (Participant 1)

Another participant, who moved home before the pandemic to care for younger siblings, explained that after spending so much time with their family, they lost social connections with peers:

I was focusing too much on family responsibility, so I lost the desire of spiritually connecting with others. I would say that throughout that semester, I always wanted to talk to people. I just didn't have time. (Participant 17)

4.6 Research Finding 3

Participants identified that the pandemic caused them to reflect on the value of a college degree, and how the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted them. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic led to new learnings about how to be successful as students.

Participants were asked to discuss the pandemic’s impact on their undergraduate studies. During the extended period when they were at home, nearly all of them thought about the value of a college degree, although only a minority felt the value of higher education depreciated. During the health crisis, all the participants used some college support services if they were available. However, most students wanted to use support services that were not accessible during the pandemic. Participants’ experiences with online classes were almost evenly balanced, although the level of dissatisfaction slightly outweighed satisfaction, which led to struggles primarily related to family issues. The story that is continuing to develop from this research is that the pre-existing challenges faced by 1Gs were amplified by the pandemic and during the health crisis, they needed to navigate these forces independently if they lacked support from their colleges or families. Consequently, many participants learned new ways to be successful during the health crisis.
The following table shows the finding for research question 3 and the analysis that follows weaves in the corresponding demographic and statistical information, provided by those participants, that supports the finding.

**Table 6: Outline of Finding 3**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 3: How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1G’s pursuit of higher education?</th>
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<td>Finding 3: Participants identified that the pandemic caused them to reflect on the value of a college degree, and how the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted them. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic led to new learnings about how to be successful as students.</td>
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<td>• Perceived value of college degree</td>
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<td>- Rethink value of degree (91.7%)</td>
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<td>• College support system</td>
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<td>- Used available supports (100%)</td>
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<td>- Unavailable supports (79.2%)</td>
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<td>• Experience with online education</td>
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<td>- Satisfaction (83.3%)</td>
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<td>• Ways to be successful (69.5%)</td>
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<td>- Self-awareness (34.6%)</td>
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<td>- New ways of learning (30.4%)</td>
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**Perceived Value of College Degree**

**Rethink value of degree.** The pandemic caused nearly all the participants (91.7 percent) to reflect on their reasons to pursue a degree, although none of them took time off because of the health crisis and 17 graduated during the pandemic. However, several participants (16.7 percent) knew people who dropped out or took gap years because they could not focus during online classes:
When we went online when the pandemic first happened…they couldn't focus on school being online. They couldn't take it seriously, or they didn't see the value of it, especially if they were dorming. They're paying the same tuition for student education, just through Zoom, which they didn't like. (Participant 20)

Another student dropped out because they were dissatisfied with online learning, amidst an escalating substance abuse problem:

Then you go and you don't really know why you're there, but for me I went. I was unhappy…I dropped out, but then I had that gap period of realizing it is important. It benefited me because I see what the alternative could be, and for me personally that's not what I want. I don't want to be working as a server for the rest of my life. (Participant 19)

No change. Half of the students expressed that the crisis had no impact on how they valued the degree. One student believed a degree was always the minimum requirement for people of color and the pandemic did not change their view:

I still believe education is very important, especially for underrepresented communities, minority people of color. We need that degree tied to our name to get recognized and respected, to be able to speak in a room. (Participant 15)

Because the pandemic disproportionately impacted lesser-educated workers, one participant thought the value of the degree either stayed the same or increased slightly:

If you look at it, the citizen-wise job losses tend to be in the service sector, where I guess college degrees aren't. Is it a necessity to have a college degree? I guess it sounds a bit terrible but, like a more prestigious college name makes you less likely to either get fired or at least okay you're less likely to lose your job. Or at least you're going to beat others into a job, so you're still having a job. (Participant 3)

One recent graduate observed that a college degree was the minimum academic credential in the U.S.:

I still think that a college education is exactly what you need to be able to really survive in the American culture and the American workforce. It's what everybody needs to be able to make enough to live economically stable lives. (Participant 8)
**Less important.** Several participants (37.5 percent) expressed that the pandemic devalued a college degree because many careers required neither a college degree nor guaranteed a good income. One recent graduate reflected this perspective when they began looking for a job:

> I guess it made me realize it isn't necessary….I was thinking, for example, about real estate and being a realtor, you don't need a college degree. I am realizing there are a lot of ways right now to make money without having a college degree. I think that growing up low-income, I thought you go to college and then get a good, high paying job. (Participant 12)

Another participant expressed a view that a bachelor’s degree in the social sciences would not allow them to stand out in a competitive job market, so they enrolled in graduate school:

> I always knew that I wanted to go to college and get a bachelor's degree. But during the pandemic I also had the time to look more into options, career-wise, post-grad, in general. I also became more aware of this idea that bachelor's degrees have become the new high school diploma. It is sad, but it also encouraged me to pursue postgraduate education. (Participant 21)

**More important.** Some participants (33.3 percent) believed that the value of a degree increased during the health crisis, which was underscored by one person who decided to earn a second bachelor’s degree during the pandemic. Another participant observed that the pandemic elevated the importance of communication skills which they learned in college:

> I've learned a great amount about communicating….I think, given that we are doing Zoom more or telehealth…you have to communicate well. You have to be effective, with your words. In person, you can add a little bit more flavor to it. You can show with body language…Now, it's just words or a picture and so it is important that you have a college degree to learn those specific skills. (Participant 6)

Another student explained that college broadened their mind by exposing them to different perspectives:

> Well, I feel like it depends on what you want to do in life. I personally think college is valuable because you get to learn by getting exposed to different things and that's personally why I continued my college career. But I personally like college,
because you get to hear these different opinions….You learn about things I didn't know I liked and so that's why I find it valuable. (Participant 1)

**College Support System**

**Used available supports.** All the participants confirmed that they used college supports during the pandemic, even if they were only available online. The most frequently used supports were financial aid (62.5 percent), career services (41.7 percent), advisory services (25 percent) and mental health services (20.8 percent). Most universities abruptly closed their campuses in March 2020, sending students home and moving classes online. Many IGS lost the safety net extended by their universities and found themselves without a safe place to live, a private space for study, textbooks from the college library, free meals, reliable Wi-Fi or on-campus jobs. One student explained how their college helped with expenses, such as rent, food and Wi-Fi:

I asked for funding…working an unpaid internship. It was really hard paying for food there because I wasn't able to use the meal service at school. Then when the pandemic hit, they gave me money for my internship. My father didn't have Wi-Fi either, and I had to use my hotspot. But…luckily to give me money….I needed a printer because in the computer lab, we were able to print things, and so they mailed me a printer for the semester. (Participant 12)

Another participant who lived far from their university received financial help from an emergency fund, so they were able to purchase an airline ticket and store their belongings:

It was a huge struggle to just find the funds. I get help from…. I did get help from…I think as well. I got help paying for my luggage. I got help buying my plane ticket and I think that was it in terms of financial help. (Participant 6)

One student used career services to help them prepare their applications to graduate school:

They were helping me with my resume and personal statement. I was using the Writing Center. They were also very available and helpful as well. (Participant 17)

Another participant received help preparing applications for fellowships:
I was applying to a lot of fellowships and our Career Services Center has someone who specifically works on fellowships. I worked with him quite a lot. He would read my essays. I would talk to him about how to prepare for interviews, for a long time actually. Then, I got my current job because the Career Services Center sent an email, and then I read it, and I applied. (Participant15)

Some students returned home and became essential workers when other family members lost their jobs or could not get jobs because of their immigration status. One participant, who became the sole provider for their family, received extra support from their TRIO counselor:

I was in touch a lot with TRIO. They were helping us, specifically. We would have a lot of meetings once a month to talk about how this has impacted us and how are we trying to adjust. A lot of us did have to go back home to work, because we are first-gen and a lot of us were financial providers in our household. It was comforting…I’m not the only one that's struggling with all of this, like trying to balance it all. But it's also, well you know, we all are going through the same thing and it sucks, so it was just comforting, in a crappy way. (Participant 22)

Even though they were not on campus, one recent graduate received support from their academic advisor who helped them apply to graduate school:

I finally got in contact with my major advisor, and she was amazing. My psych major advisor and social media posts by my advisors are great. They were working with me about grad school, working with my degree. They were making sure that I’m going to graduate on time, so I don’t have to come in. (Participant 18)

Another participant was satisfied that their college tried to meet students’ needs and did a good job providing counseling on a remote basis:

The Dean of Students Office…would send out forms to see if students would like care packages sent to their houses. Twice a month, they sent out a care package with different themes like healthy meals and snacks or facemasks. I took advantage of the 10 paid sessions they offer students every year, but I would say honestly…really did their best to be accommodating of students’ needs. I am overall very, very happy with their response. I don't think there's any service where I wish I would have had access to. (Participant 11)

**Unavailable supports.** Many participants (79.2 percent) did not use services because they were unavailable, such as advisors (37.5 percent), financial aid (20.8 percent) and library services (20.8 percent). Some students (18.5 percent) used no support services during the
pandemic. One participant explained that in the early days of the pandemic, the professors were still trying to learn how to teach and hold office hours online:

    I think for the first few months they didn't know what to do or what to expect….Resources were put on hold because they didn't know what to do. (Participant 7)

One student, who transferred during the pandemic, was unable to get help arranging their new schedule despite contacting their new advisor multiple times:

    I felt like it was kind of not that useful because a lot of them…is like you have to plan yourself and then ask them. They'll answer the question, but they don't really help you with planning out your schedule, so you have to actually plan out and ask. I believe they had a transfer student organization….I think they just completely forgot about during the pandemic so, even while I was checking those newsletters I haven't missed, I don't think I've seen any postings or meetings from them. (Participant 3)

Another participant expressed that they did not have any advisor to contact during the pandemic:

    I feel like during the fall 2020 semester, I was not using my resources to my advantage. It felt like I just forgot, they were there. You know I didn't have an advisor. At times I felt like I didn't really have anyone to reach out….Every time I'd ask them questions, they couldn't really help me out because they weren't focused on my major. It was hard for me to get help. (Participant 1)

One recent graduate explained that they contacted the financial aid office multiple times about incorrect bills until they eventually gave up:

    I was really confused…one time they overcharged me, and that was really stressful. I had to email them a lot and call them on the phone a lot which wasn't pleasant….When I'm at school, I pay virtually nothing because of my first-generation scholarship which is really nice. They pay for my food, my housing and my tuition….During the (2021-22) school year, they said they would give us that funding for housing and they did give me some funding for housing, like a couple grand. When I look back at my financial aid report, I got much more money. I was confused where that money was going and I'm still confused. (Participant 15)
Another student explained that since textbooks were unaffordable, they usually relied on borrowed copies from the library. However, during the health crisis, the library, like other non-academic supports, was inaccessible:

You still couldn't borrow books from the library. They don't want you to be physically touching…resources completely cut out there. You can’t borrow textbooks anymore and I did not buy any that semester, so now I’m begging my professors. They did reach out to the publishers….They asked for a few PDF files, something legal. Some publishers said yes. Many said no. I gotta be honest, I went in the dark with those classes just to find my way through. (Participant 18)

Another student also relied on the library for textbooks, but it was closed:

Definitely the library, that's one of the things that I would have liked to use in person. Some of them weren't available because those are books that you only borrow for hours, and they weren’t available online. (Participant 9)

Experiences with Online Education

Satisfaction. Most (83.3 percent) participants expressed satisfaction with online classes because of their professors’ flexibility (66.7 percent), convenience (50 percent) and the ability to get better grades with less work (20.8 percent). Since nearly all the participants were between 18 and 22 when they pursued a degree, age did not influence satisfaction. However, for students with fixed work schedules or multiple jobs, flexibility and convenience weighed heavily in their level of satisfaction. One participant explained that initially their professors were unsure how to approach online instruction, but as students and faculty settled into the new environment, professors became more understanding about students’ lives outside of school:

It was really great being able to do it virtually and I feel…better connection with my professors. It was less scary to me. It wasn't as formal as going up to an office and knocking on the door….I always went to his office hours. He required them….It forced me to go and prepare for it, and he is actually mentoring me right now. At first professors didn't know so became more understanding about being sick and ill….The professors were much more flexible with deadlines if you missed a class. (Participant 3)
A participant appreciated that one professor was very flexible about deadlines and testing schedules:

In May 2021, I was working at the urgent care, and I was trying to figure out how to take two tests on one day….My other teacher extended the deadline to me because I told him I have work and school….I feel like they were just nice. I feel like there's no reason to not be accommodating during this time and the professors really showed that. (Participant 1)

Another participant, who ordinarily commuted to campus, was relieved that they could attend classes from the safety of their home. Because they saved several hours a day, they were able to take additional credits enabling them to graduate early:

It was convenient to do office hours with professors. I did more office hours during pandemic. Classes are more awkward on Zoom. Breakout rooms are awkward. I like talking one-on-one. I enjoy office hours. I don’t mind losing group interaction. (Participant 2)

Another commuter appreciated the convenience of online classes because they saved 4 hours a day that they dedicated to studying and seeing friends:

I feel I took advantage of office hours way more frequently, because it was easy to wait until office hours started, instead of staying on campus and spending the extra time when traffic is going to hit…going to take an extra hour to get home or something like that. A lot of the times since there was so much time saved during a normal school day, that there's enough time for me to go visit my friends. (Participant 13)

Since many of the participants also worked, they appreciated the convenience of asynchronous learning. One student became the primary wage earner in their family, after their mother lost her job because of the pandemic:

When the pandemic first started, I was working at Amazon in the mornings and that was literally during all of my lecture times. So…my professors I couldn't make any of the lectures. My professors kind of understood that and they were like okay….We're just going to record everything. We're going to post it and you submit everything whenever you can. They made sure to accommodate for office hours and they also made sure that we had their phone numbers. (Participant 22)

One participant preferred online classes because it was a more efficient use of
their time:

I learned how to take college online classes. Personally, I like them better… because we're pretty rural… we have a very large population and I’m graduating with my major, with 4 other people. So, you know, classes, a lot of the time, seem like a waste of time…. I know that we could get it done more efficiently because we don't have that large audience when you're not able to ask questions during the lecture. (Participant 26)

One student moved back home prior to the pandemic to help their mother with childcare. However, once all their classes transitioned online, they preferred the convenience and safety of remote learning:

I will say that the first two weeks of the pandemic, I felt pretty organized because I had two weeks of free time to plan out a schedule of how to homeschool my siblings, I guess kids… just needed a lot of help. I wanted to split myself… at that time... the first two weeks, I had a lot of fun actually…. I was actually very happy that I was able to stay home more all the time to accompany them. There were a lot of things that I wanted to get done in the past, but I couldn't because I was physically away on my campus when they were at home doing homework. (Participant 17)

Other students were satisfied with online instruction because it was easier to get better grades. One participant went from failing classes to the dean’s list during the health crisis:

Honestly, I prefer the online classes than the in person. I thrived in my online classes. I was failing my first two terms as a freshman and when the pandemic hit during the spring term, I ended up finishing the term with straight As. My sophomore year, I was on the dean's list the entire year because I was finishing with almost straight A's. (Participant 22)

Dissatisfaction. Most participants (91.7 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of online learning; notably, they missed face-to-face interaction in the classroom or with friends (70.8 percent) and felt isolated (54.2 percent). Some students learned less (50 percent) and struggled with family issues (45.8 percent).

One participant expressed that they missed interaction in the classroom because they knew that there were few other distractions:

Yeah, I think that face-to-face connection is super important personally to me… Actually, when you're in a classroom, you can only be there, and you can only focus
on what the professor and your classmates are saying. What makes school, school… interacting with your classmates, talking to them, hearing their ideas in the classroom… It's not just about hearing what the professor has to say and what the textbook notes are and a PowerPoint presentation. I think discussion is a big part of learning. (Participant 20)

Another participant missed not only the back-and-forth dialogue that is difficult when everyone is online, but also nonverbal cues:

Even though it's an English class… I still want to be in person, just to see everyone's interactions, like body language. How they talk about stuff makes me learn more. It was harder online versus in person. I think you learn a lot from study groups… Having that sort of sense of connection and that turning into a study group situation is really, really helpful with a lot of classes. (Participant 25)

Another student missed in-person contact with their professors and found it more difficult to develop relationships with the faculty when they were not together:

I like to ask questions towards professors. I would think of challenging questions so that has impacted me a lot. Because I can't do that in a virtual setting and then professors can’t recognize me in that setting because I'm not asking questions… that will require me to unmute and basically everyone's attention will be solely on you, rather in the classroom. (Participant 3)

One student, who described themself as introverted, expressed a similar view that it was more difficult to engage during online classes, because of the lack of accountability and anonymity when students do not turn on their cameras:

I guess you could attribute some of my feelings of boredom with senioritis, but I don't think it was just that. I mostly think it was being on Zoom and not having the in-person interactions and not really being held accountable and just being told you have to read all these pdfs and then we're going to be done. I’m pretty socially anxious and so when I get used to an environment, it's good for me. Being on Zoom, I felt was almost harder for me to engage. Everyone's cameras… off and someone might unmute their mike and then you talk over them. That makes you not want to talk. (Participant 19)

Another student, who described themself as outgoing, was also unsatisfied with online instruction:
It was awful for me because I am extroverted. I like going in person…greet people. It's hard getting connected to just talk to a person…I think it would be easier to be in person, it just made it much harder. (Participant 9)

One student explained that it was difficult to socialize with their friends because everyone was geographically dispersed:

It was really hard. We tried. We did have Zoom friend meetings and stuff like that. I’d like to study with them individually over Google Meets when they can make the best of the situation, but it was it was difficult, because I was at home. (Participant 23)

Another participant expressed that they missed the social interaction:

I mean at first, we were vacation…we'll be back soon. Then we started losing that interaction…and since it was all asynchronous, communication was very superficial. We would comment on each other's Instagrams, but we wouldn't go out to see each other. Honestly, the only person that I stayed super close to was my classmate working the same internship…that kept our friendship alive versus others we all just drifted apart. (Participant 14)

Isolation was another explanation for participants’ dissatisfaction with online learning. Some students had additional responsibilities after they returned home and when combined with front-line jobs or caregiving, they felt even more separated from their peers. One student returned home and immediately became a caregiver:

I think the main, difference of my lifestyle compared to other people my age…I just had a really difficult time bonding with other peers. Their lifestyle was focused on study and partying or even just making connections with people my age, but my lifestyle was focused on going to parent-teacher conferences, communicating with other parents or doing chores like cooking….I couldn't really connect with other people. At the same time, I didn't have a desire to anymore. (Participant 17)

One participant, who was a freshman when the pandemic commenced, felt they never had a normal college experience:

I was a freshman when the pandemic started. It was weird just to begin with. I couldn't adjust and I couldn't make my way in. I couldn't fit in with everybody else, because everyone else already had other resources and they had everything else provided for them. (Participant 22)
Another student, who was a senior when the pandemic began, abruptly left campus with the uncertainty about whether they could return for graduation or even to collect their possessions which were hastily put in storage. As one of the few students who attended from another time zone, they felt isolated:

The time zone difference. I was two time zones away, two hours behind….I was waking up at five o'clock to get ready for my six o'clock class and/or seven o'clock class. It was quite difficult because at that point in time, I wasn't an early riser….The transition was pretty difficult. (Participant 6)

One participant expressed that they were cheated out of a normal college experience during the pandemic:

My last two years were all going to be online. It didn't feel like I was really getting a college degree, because obviously, I'm sitting at home. I'm looking at the computer and doing all the studying….It felt like I was doing homework or you know, I feel like I am going back to high school….In the beginning, I would stay at home, and I did not see pretty much anybody….I was extremely non-social. (Participant 10)

Some students explained that during the early months of the pandemic, learning was put on hold or instruction was rudimentary. One participant explained that they learned less from online classes, and they eventually lost interest:

It wasn't only that I wasn't learning. I wasn't interested in learning because we didn't have that face-to-face interaction. Naturally, I'm very outgoing and I love talking to people. I always sat in the front row of my classroom, like front and center and I always talked to the professors and all that. But then, I felt ever since we started doing class online, I wasn't absorbing anything. Because I wasn't absorbing anything, then I lost interest after that. (Participant 17)

Another participant, who was a second semester senior when the pandemic began, expressed that online class was not worth the trouble or the cost:

It made me realize that taking online classes was not worth it. It made me realize that if I have to actually pay for college, for a recording of a class, for me it’s not worth it. (Participant 7)
One participant’s experience with online instruction made them reflect on the legitimacy and cost of remote learning:

Honestly, it just really goes to show that higher education is just another major business at the end of the day. The price tags that private schools put on their degrees is a scam in a way. I think the pandemic has really made me reevaluate the way we treat or view education. If we could get through a year of online classes that satisfy our degree requirements, why not legitimize online education programs and not see them as inferior? (Participant 11)

The abrupt switch to online classes in the spring 2020 created challenges for universities, faculty and students. Seemingly overnight, the learning environment transformed from the classroom to the student’s bedroom. One student explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, both classes and office hours were disorganized until the faculty learned how to use the technology:

Online office hours were just very disorganized at the beginning, when people didn't really know how to do it. People didn't really know how the technology…It was very unsure for the past year because we were kind of the guinea pigs trying to figure everything out….They wouldn't really show up to the office hours that they were supposed to be in because of technical issues. (Participant 8)

Another student was dissatisfied because they felt unengaged even in small seminars:

I mean it was pretty horrible. I definitely think my learning experience was severely impacted. I felt a lot more disconnected from the material of the lectures because…is set up to be seminar-style classes….I felt okay with the camera off, that let me lay in my bed and just listen. It’s like okay. I am already emotionally disconnected from the material, and I just don't want to put in any effort. (Participant 11)

Another student felt so discouraged that they fell asleep during class, and no one even noticed:

When I wasn't enjoying a class, I'd ask myself why I was so bored or why am I not enjoying this…It just felt like I was kind of just sitting there, kind of watching a YouTube video mindlessly because I was alone. It was so hard to focus on lectures, because at least when you're in person the teacher can see you. I have lectures with 500 people and their cameras would be off…so I really feel I was just sitting there and sometimes I accidentally fell asleep…Most of the time I'd go, then I just rewatch the lectures on my own time. (Participant 1)
Family issues presented additional challenges for several of the participants when they returned home during the pandemic. Students, who were accustomed to private space in their dorms and the convenience of meals in the dining halls, encountered various roadblocks at home, such as inadequate space, lack of reliable Wi-Fi or being shuffled between relatives’ homes. One student returned to an overcrowded apartment in public housing:

My internet was terrible. I did not have this type of issue before, so everything was slow. Everyone else in the family…now there are five people…one bathroom. I shared a room with my brother in the beginning, before my oldest brother finally moved out later on in the pandemic. That was another issue. I didn't really have a workplace. (Participant 18)

One participant, who shared a bedroom with a younger sibling, adjusted their sleep habits so they could study when everyone else in the apartment was asleep:

During the pandemic, I share a room with my little brother and he's growing now. He's starting to need his space….When I started college, he was only nine. He'd play a video game really loud or watch TV. I cannot really do work at home during the day, and I developed this bad habit of staying up ‘til 3 AM to do work or like going to sleep at 10 PM waking up at 3 AM to work. A crazy sleep schedule, just so I could wake up, while it's quiet to work. (Participant 1)

Another participant also returned to an overcrowded apartment. When they went to college, their mother gave their bedroom away and they had no private space for studying, so they joined online classes from their phone and left the camera off:

I had to sleep in the same room with my mom…I would just do my classes on my laptop and sit on my bed, or I would have to sit in the kitchen. There was never any type of space in the house where I was able to do my work….I would leave my camera off, because I would be busy doing something else in the house, but still have to pay attention to the lecture. My mom was trying to be understanding, but at the same time there weren't enough resources financially for me to have my own desk or for me to have my own space. (Participant 22)

**Struggles**
More than half of the participants (54.2 percent) expressed that there were times when they struggled during the pandemic. When the researcher asked the participants to offer an example, the most common explanation for these challenges was family issues (33.3 percent), with the balance spread among mental health (16.7 percent), financial issues (8.3 percent), job search (8.3 percent), time management (8.3 percent) and physical health (4.2 percent). Students explained how they struggled without support from their families and friends who were geographically dispersed. Some of the participants had rollercoaster relationships with their families even prior to the pandemic and the health crisis amplified those disagreements, especially when large families were crowded into small spaces, became ill or lost their jobs.

One participant explained that spending a concentrated period with their parents and three older siblings was difficult. They had regular arguments about finances because the student’s father had a gambling problem and lost the funds allocated for their tuition. Eventually, the student moved out:

I’m different. I think a lot of problems arise in my household and one of them being one of our brothers experienced a separation. He came to live with us. Meanwhile, with my parents, I’m going through financial fights. I was in school. My parents are also superintendents. My dad would ask me to help him out and I would say wait for me, I’m still in class. I’ll help you out…There was a lot of struggle and I think my other brother would see me at home and think I was available to watch his kid. (Participant 9)

One participant described how they moved in with their father and because he could not afford Wi-Fi, they used their phone to create a hotspot:

At my dad’s, it was a little more challenging. He works at Whole Foods, so he doesn’t have a lot of money. He has an air mattress, so I slept on the air mattress with him for a couple of months. I didn’t really have a desk or anything. I just sat in bed doing school. That was really challenging. (Participant 12)

Two of the participants described their college as a safe haven. One student did not return home early in the pandemic, because their family lived in one of the COVID epicenters.
However, the other student received special permission from their university to stay on campus during the spring 2020 semester because of an unsafe home situation. While they were one of just a few students in the dormitory and only left their room for meals, they appreciated the security:

I got very overwhelmed because I can't go home. I am not productive when I go home. I have all these goals I set for myself and if I go home, those goals won't be met. There is a thing about being home in the space that was not a happy place for me growing up and going through all that stress trying to excel and everything. I didn’t want to come home. (Participant 5)

**Ways to be Successful**

Many of the ways participants (69.5 percent) learned how to be successful because of the pandemic were almost equally divided between increased self-awareness and new ways of learning to be effective students.

**Self-awareness.** Some participants (34.6 percent) expressed that the pandemic gave them more time to think and try to become more self-aware, by making better decisions, building more constructive relationships and communicating more effectively. Through informal learning, one participant learned how to focus on self-care by separating academics from socializing:

I was basically blurring those lines, a lot. I realized spring semester, it's a bit more important to get outside and start walking around. It helps your mood a bit more so you often see me like walking outside the apartment taking a brief walk and then come back in. You feel a bit more refreshed and I think it also emphasizes, like in you know exercise a bit more. (Participant 3)

One recent graduate explained that once they realized their college’s financial safety net would end upon graduation, they became more self-directed to learn about money:

I learned self-motivation definitely….You're in the same place all day, so you have to be self-motivated to work. I feel like I've learned that, and I've learned how to invest my money which is a skill I didn't have before. I realized talking to people that I need to start saving now…I'm graduating. It's nice to have savings and an emergency fund. (Participant 12)
One participant, who became the primary caregiver for their younger siblings, learned to be less controlling:

Letting go….That was one main thing. I don't know if that's a good change or not, to be honest, because right now I don't feel so responsible anymore. I feel like I’m becoming a responsible person if I compare myself now to myself during the pandemic. I think it was just too much responsibility and I started to let go a bit…childcare. Before, I wanted to do everything. I want to make sure they’re on top of their stuff….Now, I don't care. That's not my responsibility. (Participant 17)

Another student realized that during the pandemic, it was especially important to make personal connections and realized that everyone was dealing with issues that were not readily apparent:

One thing that I learned has to be the point of having in-person learning experience, to be able to actually talk to people. This is something I actually miss the most during the pandemic. This points to being aware of…other people's problems or issues. The only other thing that I learned was because I've been there, was to go outdoors more (Participant 7)

**New ways of learning.** Some participants (30.4 percent) learned new ways to be more effective students during the health crisis. One student learned how to take better notes, which was more important when they did not have as frequent access to faculty or tutors:

I really had to learn. It was like that continuation of learning…how to take notes. Especially at home, when I was not wanting to take notes outside of my classes anymore, I would have to take really good lecture notes. I'm a person who…maybe looks back at my notes if I missed something. I definitely learned how to take really good lecture notes over break. That was one big academic thing that changed. (Participant 23)

During the pandemic, some students found themselves with unprecedented amounts of free time. They went from having highly structured academic schedules to unpredictable ones, where professors shifted classes and office hours. One participant became more disciplined about their schoolwork, especially when they had so much time on their hands:

I feel like I learned time management and also I learned some sort of structure, focus and discipline throughout the day. It makes a big difference, so not getting distracted and then
setting timeframes for you to work in and then time frames for you to exercise. It leads to less stress, more focus and better productivity. (Participant 10)

4.7 Research Finding 4

All participants identified that their needs changed during the pandemic, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in experiences at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material differences between experiences at public vs. private universities.

Participants were asked to describe how the pandemic influenced their needs and whether there were any material differences in the support received while attending elite vs. non-elite schools to determine whether selectivity impacted their experiences. The research identified that 1Gs’ experiences during the health crisis were remarkably similar notwithstanding exclusivity of the universities. To identify whether endowed schools were more effective at delivering better experiences during the pandemic, than public colleges, the researcher recut the data for public vs. private colleges and again, found no material differences. Therefore, neither selectivity nor public funding impacted the story that has emerged from this research: the challenges faced by 1Gs which were amplified by the pandemic caused them to navigate those experiences with or without support from their colleges or families.

The following table shows the finding for research question 4 and the analysis that follows weaves in the corresponding demographic and statistical information, provided by those participants, that supports the finding.

Table 7: Outline of Finding 4

| RQ 4: How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities? |
| Finding 4: All participants identified that their needs changed during the pandemic, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in availability of |
supports at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material differences between availability of services at public vs. private universities.

- Factors changed in importance:
  - Increased (91.6%)
  - Decreased (50%)
- College support system (elite vs. non-elite):
  - Available supports: elite (51%) vs. non-elite (49%)
  - Unavailable supports: elite (50%) vs. non-elite (50%)

Factors Changed in Importance

All the participants identified that with more time at home, they reflected on what was important to them in the face of widespread uncertainty caused by the pandemic. As a result, some factors, such as relationships, self-care and financial matters became more important, while others, such as university clubs declined in importance.

**Increased.** Nearly all the participants (91.6 percent) expressed that some factors increased in importance, especially relationships (54.2 percent), self-care (45.8 percent) and financial issues (37.5 percent). The gender imbalance was reflected through expressions of concerns about relationships by several female participants. One student explained that although they could have stayed in their apartment near their university, they moved home because of family:

I thought also being closer to my family would probably help me, especially during those scary times...to be able to transition a little bit better to virtual learning, so I decided that I wanted to go home. (Participant 8)

Another participant’s concern for their family’s health became a daily concern:

Keeping my family healthy, keeping myself healthy, keeping my friends I was living with healthy....Staying happy and healthy was really important to me because I was just mostly sitting on the couch....trying to get myself out, trying to do things that make me happy. (Participant 15)

One student explained they were so worried about their family that they flew from New York to California because they feared a lockdown could prevent them from seeing their parents:
In mid-April 2020, I decided to fly back home because…I'm also worried about my family. They work in service jobs. My mom's a housekeeper and my dad's a car washer, so they're very exposed to it. I want to be there… something happens. (Participant 14)

Several participants prioritized self-care during this period. One recent graduate relocated to another part of the country for their first job and made more time for exercise:

I need to take care of myself first. The only other thing that I learned was because I've been there, was to go outdoors more….More people like right now, are becoming more outdoors persons. In my case, I moved from New York to Wisconsin. I think life here in Wisconsin is pretty great, compared to New York. New York is hectic. There's a lot of people and a lot of stress. Here, it's another type of life. It's calmer. (Participant 7)

Another participant spent more time pursuing hobbies because they had more free time:

Well, I guess what became more important to me was finding hobbies to do with all that time…we're just inside. I would read more than I used to. I picked up drawing again. (Participant 20)

Once students left campus, social contact declined to a minimum and sometimes ceased. However, some students came up with innovation solutions to maintain relationships:

We did video chats every other week and find ways to be creative. We also set up random Zoom calls. Then turn off our cameras and stay together, knowing that there's someone there, but aren't necessarily having to engage with them…like having a study buddy…games with each other over Zoom….Also cooking nights and just eating food together was also a way that we stayed in touch and engaged with each other. (Participant 11)

One participant, who was a senior when the pandemic commenced, had to forgo three jobs on campus when they returned home. As they prepared to graduate, they focused on self-care and financial matters:

I think that finding a job…before I started or while I was doing my masters….I make myself busy so that I don't allow myself to ruminate about things….I have improved quite a bit. I do have more free time and I don't ruminate as much unless I've had a bad day….Nutrition, fitness, academics increased so there was nothing that decreased. I did apply for Unemployment….I was getting quite a bit of money from that, $600 a week with whatever I was getting on top of that from the normal unemployment. I
was putting that towards my loans or other things, like if I needed some toiletries or food. (Participant 6)

Another student moved home and worked full time because everyone in their household had lost their jobs during the early months of the pandemic:

I help out with groceries, help them read, and help with internet. My parents, who worked at a bus station company for 20 years, their jobs obviously stopped. Then, when they went back when it's time to open, they were too old … replaced by someone younger. Now, we have unemployment throughout the whole family. (Participant 18)

**Decreased.** Half of the participants identified that some factors declined in importance.

Even though most of the students were the age of typical undergraduates for whom clubs are organized, 33.3 percent reported that clubs were less important because many of them did not easily convert to a virtual environment. One student explained that their clubs effectively ended as soon as their university closed at the beginning of the pandemic:

For the most part, the organizations that I was involved in, the ones that were in person, did not transition really to doing anything virtually. They definitely went to my back burner. I had a couple of leadership positions at the time, and we were talking about how to be able to adjust, but because there was so little time left in the semester, there wasn't really much of a point. (Participant 8)

Another participant also explained they stopped attending clubs even if they were offered online because people did not attend:

I stopped attending clubs in the Spring 2020 (Commuter Students Club, Yoga Club). I am less motivated to join groups. I didn’t go to First-Gen meetings during the pandemic. The first-gens have a program—but I don’t think they did much—just brainstorming. Everyone is on their own and it is difficult to get close to as many people. There should be more social clubs. The clubs are not doing much. (Participant 2)

One participant explained that they were in a club where they mentored children through dance and arts education in an inner city. While this was a meaningful part of the student’s college experience before the health crisis, they found it difficult to keep young children engaged in a virtual environment:
When things did shift to become all virtual, it was really difficult to continue classes over Zoom with the kids. We didn't get as much involvement. Really that environment we had built in person was still important, but it was very different….More difficult to navigate and maintain those relationships, with the children…with the schools. (Participant 21)

**College Support System (Elite vs. Non-Elite)**

**Available.** Details on the specific college supports are discussed in Finding 3. However, there was no material difference in the availability of supports at selective universities compared to the less selective schools. Participants identified available supports 49 times of which 51 percent were available at elite universities and 49 percent were accessible at non-elite schools, so there was no material difference.

Raw data collected from the Demographic Data Forms identified that during the pandemic, students at elite universities were very knowledgeable about first-generation student services (27.3 percent), academic advisement (27.3 percent), social clubs (27.3 percent) and health services (27.3 percent). At non-elite schools, 11.5 percent of students said they were very knowledgeable about first-generation student services, counseling, academic advisement, cultural clubs, social clubs, sports groups, career services and health services.

**Unavailable.** Participants identified unavailable supports 34 times, which were evenly divided between elite and non-elite colleges.

Since there was no material difference in the college support services at elite vs. non-elite universities, the researcher also analyzed the data to identify any differences in supports at public vs. private universities. Once again, the researcher identified no material differences in available supports at public vs. private universities.

Raw data from the Demographic Data Form identified that participants from private universities were very knowledgeable about academic advisement (30.8 percent), first-generation
student services (23.1 percent), social clubs (23.1 percent) and health services (23.1 percent). Only one participant described themselves as very knowledgeable about all services, and this was reported by a student who worked in their college’s TRIO office. Students reported they had no or very little knowledge about sports clubs (46.2 percent), first-generation student services (38.5 percent), counseling (38.5 percent), academic advisement (23.1 percent), cultural clubs (23.1 percent) and health services (23.1 percent).

At public universities, no one described themselves as very knowledgeable about any of the services. In addition, participants had no or very little knowledge about sports clubs (66.7 percent), cultural clubs (50 percent) or first-generation student services (33.3 percent).

4.8 Summary

This chapter presented the 4 material findings that emerged from the research study. The findings were arranged according to the 4 research questions and reflected the participants’ perceptions of their experiences as undergraduates prior to and during the pandemic, which were gleaned during the interviews. Findings from the focus group were consistent with findings from the interviews and consequently were not distinguished between these two groups. The findings were further corroborated by rich demographic and statistical data collected from each participant. As is customary in a qualitative research study, the researcher aimed to accurately represent participants’ experiences through illustrative quotes from the transcripts.

The first finding was that participants were aided by how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits during their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.

The second finding was that participants were hindered by how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of
a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times they struggled as undergraduates.

The third finding was that the pandemic caused participants to reflect on the value of a college degree and how the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted them. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic led to new learnings about how to be successful as students.

The fourth finding was that with extra time at home afforded by the pandemic, participants reflected on their personal circumstances and identified that their needs changed, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in availability of supports at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material differences between availability of services at public vs. private universities. In other words, colleges of all types were successful in supporting only about half of 1Gs.

Multiple stories emerged from the study and through the analysis of the raw data applicable to each finding, the researcher proceeded to address the central question of the study which is how first-generation students experienced college before and during the pandemic. The answers to that central question became the two analytic categories which are aligned to the research questions and findings: supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic and the relationship between 1Gs’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic. These analytic categories were used to frame the findings for analysis, interpretation and synthesis in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Analysis, Interpretation and Synthesis of Findings

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impacted 1Gs in their pursuit of a college degree. Many of these factors simultaneously enabled and hindered 1Gs, and over time, these issues may have shifted in relative importance. The researcher hoped that a better understanding of the perceptions of 1Gs’ challenges prior to and during the pandemic would provide insight about how to encourage and support 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree and help their families and future 1Gs complete their education.

The researcher collected qualitative data from 27 1Gs through one-on-one interviews and a focus group. The data was coded, analyzed and organized first by the research question and then by categories and sub-categories using the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 as a roadmap. To shed light on the problem and to carry out the purpose of this research study, the following questions were addressed:

1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;

2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020;

3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1G’s pursuit of higher education; and

4. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities?

The research questions were satisfied by 4 major findings which are:
1. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.

2. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as hindering their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times that they struggled as undergraduates.

3. Participants identified that the pandemic caused them to rethink the value of a college degree, because the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted their education. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic resulted in new learnings about how to succeed.

4. All participants identified that their needs changed during the pandemic, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in experiences at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material difference in experiences during the health crisis at public vs. private universities.

Through the analysis of the data, multiple stories emerged from the study, although to make meaningful recommendations on how to help 1Gs and their families, the researcher chose to focus on the central story: the pandemic amplified the challenges faced by 1Gs which they navigated with or without support from their colleges or families. The answers to the central question about how 1Gs managed these stressors before and during the pandemic became the analytic categories that were used to frame the findings for analysis, interpretation and synthesis.
This chapter analyzes, interprets and synthesizes the findings and is organized by the following analytic categories which are aligned to the research questions and findings:

1. Supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic. (Research Questions 1 and 2)

2. The relationship between 1Gs’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic. (Research Questions 3 and 4)

Table 8: Research Questions, Findings, Analytic Categories

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Analytic Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020?</td>
<td>1. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as enabling their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic.</td>
<td>Supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic. (Research Questions 1 and 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020?</td>
<td>2. Participants identified factors in how they prepared to attend college, environmental influences after enrollment and personal traits as hindering their pursuit of a college degree prior to the commencement of the pandemic. Consequently, all the participants identified times they struggled as undergraduates.</td>
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</table>
3. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1Gs pursuit of higher education?  
3. Participants identified that the pandemic caused them to rethink the value of a college degree, because the availability of college support services and their level of satisfaction with online education impacted them. As a result of these experiences, over half the participants reported that their struggles during the pandemic led to new learnings about how to be successful as students.

The relationship between 1Gs’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic. (Research Questions 3 and 4)

| 3. How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities? | 4. All participants identified that their needs changed during the pandemic, with some factors increasing in importance and others declining. When the participants turned to their universities for help, there was no material difference in availability of supports at elite universities vs. non-elite universities. In addition, there was no material differences between availability of services at public vs. private universities. |

These analytic categories were derived from the raw data and findings presented in Chapter 4. During the analysis phase of the study, the researcher first aimed to identify patterns, connections and themes within the analytic categories by fleshing out the meanings underlying the findings. Then, the researcher connected the relevant adult learning theory to the research, as themes were compared to issues raised in the literature. Whereas in the prior chapter,
the researcher presented the findings by organizing the data from interviews, the focus group and a document review, the purpose of this chapter is to interpret these findings. While Chapter 4 split apart the data to tease out the story, this chapter is intended to construct a holistic understanding of the complex layers of 1Gs’ experiences. The researcher framed the analysis by a) identifying common threads or patterns among the experiences, b) making use of description from the transcripts and interpretation, c) providing a synthesis to construct a holistic picture and d) summarizing the limitations from overgeneralization of findings. The implications of these findings are intended to augment the understanding of the challenges faced by 1Gs as they pursue a degree. The chapter concludes with contributions to the existing literature and a reexamination of the researcher’s assumptions described in Chapter 1.

5.2 Analysis, Interpretation and Synthesis

Analysis of the findings revealed several common threads or patterns applicable to each of the analytic categories.

Table 9: Analytic Category and Summary of Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Category</th>
<th>Summary of Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic.</td>
<td>The common threads were a) the presence of a supportive adult and b) overcoming self-reliance. If participants did not get validation from a parent, they turned to peers who were perceived as less judgmental. If they lacked supportive friends, they tried to overcome their self-sufficiency and turned to professors and other college supports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The relationship between 1G’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic.</td>
<td>The common threads were a) none of the participants dropped out or took a break even though the pandemic amplified stressors related to family issues and mental health, b) online classes were less preferrable to in-person learning and c) self-care and health were prioritized over academics.</td>
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5.2.1 Analytic Category 1

*Supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic.*
This analytic category examines 1Gs’ responses to research questions 1 and 2. What factors have 1Gs reported as enabling their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020? What factors have 1Gs reported as hindering their pursuit of a college degree because of their first-generation status prior to 2020? Both questions sought to determine what factors helped or impeded 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree before the pandemic.

The common thread among the participants was the presence of someone who aided them along the way, whether that was a parent, grandparent, guidance counselor, teacher or professor, coach or friend. Some of that support was tangible, like editing essays or living with a relative near campus. However, the most valuable support was intangible and came from the people who love them the most yet knew the least about college because they had limited formal education, were raised in another country or spoke little to no English. One of the students (Participant 15), whose mother had an elementary school education, reflected this view when they said, “My mom was like my rock at college, and she was great. When I needed help, she would literally drive, from San Jose or the Bay area in California to southern California.”

Conversely, participants struggled when they did not have adults who offered unwavering support. Ordinarily, students turned to their parents or in some cases, grandparents. One student (Participant 18), whose parents received limited formal education and did not speak English, explained their lack of empathy when they said, “It was hard to tell them, because in my eyes, at that time, I thought they were being very judgmental.”

Roska (2020) expands on the role of parental validation as an important component of success for 1Gs. Low-income and first-generation students whose parents validate their children’s experiences in college have a greater sense of belonging and an increased commitment to their university, which is linked to student success.
In this study, as the researcher analyzed the complex layers of 1Gs’ experiences, she identified that personal connection to the university was an important element because low-income students usually have weaker ties to their colleges than continuing-generation students. For example, as described in Chapter 4, several 1Gs said it was important to develop connections to their colleges through relationships with faculty and advisors, although the pandemic made it more difficult to both form and maintain such relationships. Almost all the participants observed that their parents had very limited connection to their colleges because there were few, if any, events for families such as theirs. Furthermore, their parents’ lack of English fluency, long working hours or the cost to travel to campus, made events like Parents’ Weekend inaccessible. In addition, some participants observed that wealthier peers had strong ties to their universities because they were legacies, or their parents attended family events.

Now, consider the implications of both perspectives, that of students who received support from their family to those who did not. Many 1Gs were very independent and overcame substantial odds to get to college. Family and personal values emphasizing self-reliance and self-sufficiency conflict with university norms of self-expression. This cultural mismatch creates a complex pattern of social support. Layers of complexity are compounded by 1Gs’ consistent pattern of underutilization of formal and informal support services, lack of disclosure of problems, and preferences to seek support and comfort from peers who have shared similar experiences and prioritizing others’ needs (Chang, Wang, Mancini, McGrath-Mahrer, Orama de Jesus, 2020).

The students’ independence makes it difficult for them to ask for help in the first place. Then, if they cannot get the support they need, from the people who have known them the longest, they may turn to peers from similar backgrounds, who they perceive as less judgmental
than other adults. While some of their peers may be roommates or classmates, often they are upperclassmen who have leadership roles in clubs or other social organizations. One recent graduate (Participant 5), whose mother did not have a high school degree and whose father had a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), expressed this perspective when they said, “She was an upperclassman at the time when I was a freshman and I joined…Latinx science group to bond. These are the people that understand…come from similar backgrounds. This is a safe, open space where you know you can trust and learn from each other’s stories and bond with that.”

Conversely, some students had difficulty with peers stemming from incomprehension of diversity and inclusion, socio-economic differences and commuting, as explained in Chapter 4.

Consider the perspective of students who were perhaps hurt and angry after they tried and failed to get the support they needed from family and friends. Consequently, some of them turned to college support services. One recent graduate (Participant 5), who used first-generation student services, reflected this view when they said, “My advisors, they were invaluable to me and my experience. I trusted them with everything, and I called them my…university parents, because that's what it felt like because they just cared so much. It was my same advisors…they carried out with me throughout my whole journey.”

1Gs do not appear to enjoy equitable support from engaging socially in the college setting, even though the participants in this study were traditional aged students for whom these services were directed. While universities try to improve the academic outcomes of 1Gs through social support, many students are unaware of social, cultural or pre-professional clubs. For example, as described in Chapter 4, a few students joined clubs on the recommendations of upperclassmen, while other students lacked advice and were unaware of application requirements. One student (Participant 3), who transferred as a sophomore, missed the deadline
to apply for club membership, so they did not apply until they were a junior. “That’s also one of the hard things about being a transfer student, I guess, because first year students have their first year to make those mistakes and the clubs still look at them. If you’re a sophomore transfer…and you make the same mistakes, you only have two years or one year so you’re not as valuable compared to first years.” 1Gs perceive that they know less about future careers and struggle more academically than continuing-generation students. Simply providing academic support, such as tutoring or office hours with faculty, is not enough because 1Gs need academically supportive activities to improve their performance (Eveland, 2019). Some participants struggled with unexplained changes to office hours and group sessions with professors which they found intimidating because they perceived that their wealthier classmates were more knowledgeable. One student (Participant 13) reflected this view when they said, “Most of the professors that I've had have had open office hours, but there were a couple that neglected their duties to have office hours. And they often didn't respond to emails.”

5.2.2 Analytic Category 2

The relationship between 1G’s needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic.

This analytic category examines 1Gs’ responses to research questions 3 and 4. How and in what ways has the pandemic influenced 1G’s pursuit of higher education? How and in what ways have 1Gs experienced the pandemic while enrolled in elite universities, as compared to 1Gs studying at non-elite universities? The first question aimed to understand how the pandemic influenced 1Gs’ perception of the importance of a degree, the availability of supports and their satisfaction with online education. The second focused on whether selectivity or public funding had an impact on 1Gs’ experiences during the health crisis. The participants expressed that the pandemic amplified their struggles, especially those related to family issues and mental health.
However, from these experiences, they learned new ways to be successful. Furthermore, the research revealed that neither selectivity of the universities nor public funding had a material impact on participants’ experiences over the last two years.

Davis, Hartman and Turner (2021) studied the inequalities faced by 1Gs before the pandemic and compared them to their experiences in the first seven months of the crisis. After those early months of the pandemic, participants reported they were less likely to have enough money to return to college and they were more overwhelmed and lonelier than eight months earlier. Increased family obligations further compounded their ability to pursue a degree. Consequently, in the face of increased uncertainty during the health crisis, many 1Gs began to question whether they should stay in college.

During lockdowns and long periods at home, participants in this study explained they thought about why they were in college. Some participants felt the health crisis only reinforced the importance of a degree because it would help them move into the middle class. One recent graduate (Participant 15) reflected this perspective when they said, “College is how I got my job. I mean one thing that actually is crazy is because I have a college degree, I'm able to go leaps and bounds above what my parents make.”

Other participants harbored some doubts about college, although none of the students dropped out or took a break because of the pandemic. However, several of them reprioritized their own health and that of their families, over school. One student (Participant 23) reflected that view when they explained, “I mean obviously, I haven't dropped out yet. I’m still in school, but it did put into perspective about how some of the things in higher education don't matter as much as I thought they did….I also realized I’m alive and that really mattered…but some things don't matter that much.”
In the spring 2020, when the pandemic first rolled across college campuses, administrators were operating without a “pandemic playbook” and they did not know how to meet students’ academic, health and social needs. During the first two years of the crisis, universities were generally more successful at delivering online classes than some support services, like counseling and social events which are better in person. Professors found themselves in the unusual position of teaching students who were only visible on a computer screen, if they even turned on their cameras. As discussed in Chapter 4, students reported that they learned less and missed face-to-face interaction with faculty and classmates during the pandemic. There was a misalignment between what the universities offered and what 1Gs needed. One of the students (Participant 8) reflected this view when they explained, “It was just very disorganized at the beginning, when people didn't really know how to do it….It was very unsure for the past year because we were kind of the guinea pigs trying to figure everything out. I think the professors would go into the classrooms and then write on the board, but obviously there's nobody in the classroom.”

Despite some of the initial technology challenges, some students appreciated the safety of remote instruction and the flexibility offered by both synchronous and asynchronous classes. Even after faculty and students adapted to the basics of online instruction, students struggled to stay focused. One student (Participant 7) reflected this perspective when they said, “In the two years, I've been at home, there's a lot of other distractions, so I need to mentally prepare to go for online classes. There were more things to learn…to study…more information to understand, but if you wanted to go to office hours, it was a little tricky because sometimes you might have not been at a home.”

By the fall 2020, some universities experimented with hybrid courses, which
presented a new set of challenges for faculty and students. For some 1Gs sitting in a classroom, where everyone was wearing a mask and socially distanced, was almost as impersonal as studying from home. Unable to visualize facial expressions meant that it was difficult to forge connections with professors. One student (Participant 3) had this perspective when they said, “I only remembered once asking my professor a question after class. Otherwise, I haven't because I felt like we still have to get that six feet and it doesn't feel personable. Everyone has masks, so you can't really judge facial emotions because that's how I really respond to a situation.”

After another year of the pandemic, by the fall 2021, most universities returned to in-person instruction. While one would expect students to rejoice about a return to normality, many found it difficult to make the transition, which required them to dress for class, leave the comfort of their bedroom and prepare for a class when hiding behind a computer screen was not an option. Since some of the participants started college only months before the pandemic, they did not have first-hand experience with social and academic connections in a natural setting. One student (Participant 26) reflected that perspective when they explained, “My first exposure to college was online learning and I became very good at it, if that makes sense, just like self-directed learning, online learning. But now that our classes are back in person, it is a real struggle for me.”

Even before the pandemic, many 1Gs struggled with loneliness, anxiety and detachment, that were compounded by family stress and financial pressures. The health crisis did not make any of those stressors go away. Although resilience helped students adapt during the early phase of the crisis (Yang, Tu, & Dai, 2020), as the pandemic stretched on, existing stress points were amplified, and new ones were created. Noteworthy new stressors included isolation from friends, faculty and advisors and the unavailability of critical supports. Stressful relationships with their
families added an additional level of anxiety for some students. One student (Participant 5), who received special permission to remain in their dorm when their university sent students home in the first weeks of the pandemic, reflected this perspective when they said, “I got very overwhelmed because I can’t go home. You see very few people walking around campus. The only time I would leave my room was to go get food at the dining hall because they closed all the facilities. It was just very strange and lots of feelings of loneliness.”

Consider the perspective of other students who were expected at home to care for younger siblings or do household chores. Some of those students were overwhelmed, especially when their parents dismissed their academic pressures, which deepened their feelings of loneliness and anxiety. One student (Participant 17) reflected this view when they said, “I didn't have a desire to see anyone, because I was already so busy with my other responsibilities. I was thinking at first, it was because I'm busy, and then it's because I lost the motivation to talk to people and build that connection”

When low-income students returned home at the beginning of the pandemic, many discovered that their parents lost their jobs. Because some of their family members were low-skilled, undocumented or worked “off the books,” they were ineligible for some public benefits and struggled to find new employment. Some students stayed home after their dormitories reopened, so they could support their families. One student (Participant 22) shared this perspective when they said, “I ended up staying over there with my mom for the rest of the school year, but also it was because I was working full time and I had to provide for the family everything. I was the only one that was able to work, and my mom was able to work in certain places where they wouldn't check that she wasn't documented.”
For most college administrators, who never worried about paying the next month’s rent or buying groceries, it was difficult to understand the reality of 1Gs. Some officials probably expected that 1Gs who benefited from full aid packages, had few financial worries since incidental personal expenses were easily covered by income from work-study jobs. However, the reality is that many students still must pay some of the cost of their education; three participants, whose families earned less than $25,000 per year, took out student loans because they owed between $3,000 and $21,000 per year. Another student was ineligible for a tuition discount at a public college until they changed their residency to match where they attended college. While some students benefited from additional government assistance during the pandemic, these benefits only extended to those who were eligible. For example, one undocumented student was ineligible for any financial aid because of an expired visa that they were unable to renew.

Many 1Gs reported that family members lost jobs during the pandemic, so any savings quickly evaporated. Some students had no choice, other than to become front-line workers. Early in the pandemic when students were sent home, a few colleges wrote sizable checks equal to the value of housing and dining plans in 1Gs’ financial aid packages, so these students were able to help their families. As explained in Chapter 4, some colleges paid for flights and storage, while others shipped printers and textbooks to students’ homes. Some participants received assistance through the CARES Act, although these funds were only available to students who met certain eligibility requirements. One student (Participant 18) expressed this view when they said, “I started talking to school resources and emailing them…what's going on at home. Then, they donated a good $800-900 to help pay for the rest of the summer for food, because I was telling them I was paying for groceries.”
Consider the perspective of 1Gs who attended college because they believed it was the best path to a middle-class lifestyle. For those who graduated in the last two years, the pandemic did more than change the senior year they had always imagined. Instead, they searched for jobs without the benefit of on-campus recruiting, compounded by high unemployment during the first year of the pandemic. Although the economy and job market improved throughout the second and third years of the pandemic, many employers were struggling with how to safely bring permanent staff back to the office at least a few days a week, so they were less focused on summer internships. Consequently, even in the second year of the pandemic, students had less access to summer internships which often lead to permanent jobs after graduation. Some participants, who majored in the social sciences, discovered they were only qualified for low wage jobs that did not require degrees, although this is a perennial challenge for all graduates, rather than a pandemic effect. One recent graduate (Participant 18) reflected this perspective when they said, “With my psychology and sociology degree…I don't have any license…it was not enough to let me work at a school right now, which is what I really want to do. The only thing they offered: camp counseling…a job you can do with a high school degree.” Some students lamented that no one advised them about the impracticality of certain majors which made finding any job more difficult. One recent graduate (Participant 4), who majored in Asian Studies, reflected this perspective when they said, “If I had majored in something a little bit more useful, with more technical skills or a more set career path or industry, I would have had an easier time, during the pandemic, to find a job.” Without access to the career center or family connections, 1Gs needed to rely on their own resourcefulness to find a job which is difficult because recruiters often look for applicants who have similar backgrounds to their own (Harvard Business Review, 2022).
5.2.3 Summary of Analysis, Interpretation and Synthesis

The prior discussion illustrates the multifaceted experiences and complex nature of 1Gs’ experiences. The researcher examined the experiences of undergraduates as perceived by 1Gs. Two analytic categories emerged from this research that explained how 1Gs experienced stress before and during the pandemic:

1. Supports and barriers influencing 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree prior to the pandemic.
2. The relationship between 1Gs’ needs and their ability to pursue a degree during the pandemic.

In summary, why some 1Gs progress steadily through college with apparent ease and why others struggle is more likely the result of a complex set of environmental factors and personal traits. The discussion reveals what it is like to be a first-generation student during the pandemic and how they navigated college. It explains why certain supports or barriers impact 1Gs’ pursuit of a degree and what the students feel they need during the crisis.

The process of analyzing the findings was to produce a nuanced and multi-layered, but holistic and integrated synthesis. The challenge in qualitative research is to make sense of a large amount of data, tease out the patterns and present the essence of what the data reveal. The analysis of the findings from this research warrants some caution. First, the study was relatively small with only 27 participants and all of them entered college directly after high school. Second, the participants were highly motivated to graduate within 4 years. Among the participants who already graduated, 88.2 percent graduated within 4 years, far exceeding the national six-year completion rate for 1Gs of 50 percent (NCES, 2021). None of them took time off because of the pandemic and many of them plan to attend graduate school. Third, with the exception of the focus group in early November, the interviews took place between July and September 2021, when vaccines were widely availability and COVID-19 infections rates were declining. At that
time, many in the scientific community were optimistic that the pandemic would soon end and this positive sentiment may have impacted participants responses to interview questions. Finally, the human factor is both a strength and a weakness in qualitative research. The researcher recognizes the subjective nature of the study since the researcher is the instrument, unconscious biases may exist on the part of the researcher and the participant and how she coded and analyzed the data. To minimize these limitations, the researcher engaged in critical reflection, kept a journal throughout, arranged for another doctoral student who is also a first-generation student to review her coding methodology and discussed any concerns with her sponsor. This chapter reflects how the researcher made sense of the data and another researcher might have told a different story. For these reasons, the inferences that can be drawn are specific to the experiences of this sample.

5.3 Contributions to the Literature

The theoretical underpinnings of this study link adult learning theory to the varying levels of support that 1Gs faced throughout their college years. This study not only contributes to the limited research on 1Gs’ experiences during the pandemic, but also shows how adult learning theory can be applied to understanding the stressors faced by 1Gs. This study has made five contributions to the current literature.

First, it is realistic to assume that 1Gs brought forward knowledge from prior life experiences and as low-income students, many learned to be self-reliant long before entering college. High achieving students were unfamiliar with the need to ask for help in an academic setting. Consequently, many participants affirmed that they developed better study habits through trial and error, or as Kolb explained, through active experimentation (1984).
Second, many 1Gs were more comfortable getting help from peers, because they perceived their friends as less judgmental, and able to bring diverse experiences to the situation. During the pandemic, when advisors were less accessible, students were more likely to reach out to classmates for help, form online study groups or schedule video calls where friends would gather informally to study. The participants affirmed what Yorks and Kasl describe as “learning within a relationship” (2002).

Third, the pandemic presented 1Gs with infinite ways to learn about virtual classes, medical appointments and holiday celebrations, which were practically unknown just a few years ago. Much of that learning was involuntary and unplanned, occurring almost without notice. Unlike other types of learning which are more structured, informal learning can happen anywhere and at any time (Marsick & Watkins, 1997). Learning informally also requires individuals to be self-directed through interactions with others. During lockdowns when students were at home, they lost social interaction with peers. This hurt 1Gs students since they were already disadvantaged because their parents did not graduate from college and they had fewer social and academic connections with their universities, so they needed to be more intentional about maintaining relationships.

Fourth, self-directed learners are those who take charge of the learning process and do not rely on others (Candy, 1991). The literature shows that low-income students and 1Gs, became increasingly autonomous and self-reliant in their schoolwork (Covarrubias, 2018; Chang et al, 2020). This relates to the participants’ ability to persevere by overcoming obstacles even before they entered college. Then, these very motivated students navigated not only higher education, but the pandemic, often without adequate support from their families or colleges. Social environments in college influenced 1Gs’ self-directedness. While the participants reported
that their self-directedness waivered at different times during the health crisis, they all stayed on their original path to earn a degree and many of the participants indicated they intended to continue their studies in graduate school.

Fifth, the study showed how ESM can be used to illustrate the influence of social environments on 1Gs’ development. Whereas taking responsibility for one’s learning goals was important for any undergraduate, it was more critical for students who cannot fall back on advice from family members who graduated from college. Participants expressed a preference to avoid seeking help from a pool of available resources, such as advisors or first-generation student services, which is part of their exosystem. On the other hand, 1Gs were more comfortable seeking help from their inner circle or microsystem, composed of friends and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005).

5.4 Assumptions Revisited

The researcher held five assumptions when she commenced this study as described in Chapter 1. The assumptions were based on the researcher’s background and professional experiences. The five basic assumptions are revisited considering the findings and subsequent analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

The first assumption was that low-income students in general, and more specifically 1Gs, were less well prepared for the academic and social rigors of college than students from middle-class backgrounds. This assumption was supported by finding 2. The sample of students expressed that unsystematic preparation to attend college, unfavorable environmental influences in college and unfavorable personal traits contributed to academic and social struggles.

The second assumption posited that low-income students were more likely to experience isolation than wealthier classmates thereby, relying on their own resourcefulness or helpful
peers. This assumption was supported by findings 1, 2 and 3 since 1Gs reported they rarely needed to ask for help prior to college and once enrolled, they felt more comfortable asking peers for assistance. This held true both prior to and during the pandemic.

The third assumption had two parts. First, cultural influences and interdependency between 1Gs and their families were not well understood by universities both prior to and during the pandemic. Second, private and some public, elite universities had more resources, so they were better positioned to meet 1Gs’ needs. The first part of this assumption was supported by findings 2 and 3 because participants reported that their universities, grounded in white, middle-class values, were often oblivious to the needs of low-income, marginalized students prior to the pandemic; then, they were slow to adjust to the changes in low-income students’ lives brought about by the crisis. The second part of the assumption was not validated because finding 4 confirmed there were no material differences in available supports during the pandemic from public, private, elite or non-elite universities.

The fourth assumption posited that because of the prolonged impact of the pandemic, 1Gs were more likely to postpone their pursuit of a university degree if classes were offered only in an online format. While data presented in Chapter 1 reflected that over one million undergraduates left college during the first two years of the pandemic, the assumption did not hold true in this study (NSCRC, 2021). Finding 4 illustrated that while 1Gs reflected on the value of the degree, none of the participants took a break because of the pandemic. In addition, finding 3 provided evidence that universities successfully delivered online instruction and professors were generally commended for their accessibility and flexibility.

The fifth assumption was that 1Gs were willing to discuss their experiences with the researcher who was independent from the participants’ universities. This assumption generally
held true because the researcher was able to assemble 27 participants from a diverse group of universities. The students candidly shared their experiences during interviews, some of which were highly personal, and provided demographic and statistical data that was collected as part of this study. However, the researcher identified an additional 20 students who qualified and were interested in the study, but once they received the required consent and demographic data forms, they declined to disclose personal information and did not participate.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impacted their pursuit of a college degree with a sample of 27 1Gs. Multiple stories emerged from the study, although to make meaningful recommendations on how to help 1Gs and their families and universities, the researcher focused on the central theme: the pandemic amplified the challenges faced by 1Gs which they navigated with or without support from their colleges or families.

This chapter presents the 4 major conclusions which follow the research questions and the findings. The conclusions are:

1. The ways students advance through higher education is a function of their own self-direction and the support they received from their colleges and parents.

2. 1Gs need to take more responsibility for their own learning and voice their concerns when their academic and social needs are not being consistently met by their universities.

3. The pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity for students to reflect on the importance of higher education and despite varying levels of satisfaction with online classes and services and increased stressors at home, none of the students withdrew from college.

4. Higher education did not consistently meet students’ changing needs during the pandemic, notwithstanding selectivity of colleges or their access to public or private funding.

This chapter concludes with recommendations for institutions and education policy makers, students and their families and future research. Finally, the researcher shares her reflection on the study.

6.2 Conclusions

The researcher has drawn 4 conclusions from this exploratory case study.
6.2.1 Conclusion 1

The ways students advance through higher education is a function of their own self-direction and the support they receive from their colleges and parents.

Parents, who listened without judgment and refrained from offering empty platitudes, helped boost 1Gs’ self-confidence more than if they were able to provide academic advice. Even before the pandemic, many students wanted their parents to show empathy, whereas only one student mused about missing the opportunity to get academic help from their parents. Students who did not get validation from their parents, turned to peers and eventually, faculty and other college support services, if they were available.

6.2.2 Conclusion 2

1Gs need to take more responsibility for their own learning and voice their concerns when their academic and social needs are not being consistently met by their universities.

Before the pandemic, students were already encountering various roadblocks on their journey to higher education, such as inconsistent preparation for college, loneliness or negative experiences with support from peers or their colleges. However, these should be perceived as no more than temporary setbacks from which 1Gs can learn through a combination of open-mindedness, willingness to speak up and a desire to succeed, regardless of the obstacles in their paths. Even when colleges appear to be misaligned with students’ needs, 1Gs should assume positive intent and speak to open-minded administrators, rather than suffer in silence.

6.2.3 Conclusion 3

The pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity for students to reflect on the importance of higher education and despite varying levels of satisfaction with online classes and services and increased stressors at home, none of the students withdrew from college.

Despite the amplification of pressures that existed before the pandemic and the creation of new ones, none of those factors outweighed students’ perception of the importance of the
degree. Even though 1Gs had varied perceptions about online classes, they recognized the necessity when it was not safe to gather in person. Despite the challenges with remote education, students continued to view a degree as the minimum requirement to join the middle-class and many of the students explained that they were planning to attend graduate school.

6.2.4 Conclusion 4

Higher education did not consistently meet students’ changing needs during the pandemic, notwithstanding selectivity of colleges or their access to public or private funding.

During the health crisis, college administrators were operating in unchartered territory and were learning in the moment. First, they were more focused on sending students home and moving classes online, rather than offering support services in a virtual environment. Then, after another semester of online learning and lost tuition, dining and dormitory revenues from students who stayed home and lower public funding, they began coaxing students back without a well-developed testing and tracing program. The participants explained that the 15 schools represented in this study did not appear to focus on their academic and social needs during the pandemic, except in a perfunctory way by a limited number of colleges.

6.3 Recommendations for Practice

6.3.1 Recommendations for Colleges and Universities and Education Policy Makers

University administrators and policy makers whose focus is on first-generation students should consider:

1. Establish programs that support 1Gs from the time they are admitted until they graduate. Programs can include an online, pre-arrival orientation program for students and their families that is pre-recorded in multiple languages. During the succeeding years, offer an annual online orientation program for families to keep them apprised of what their children will experience as they progress through college. If feasible, invite families to visit the campus.
2. **Assign advisors to all IGs from freshman through senior year.** Academic advisors can help students with the selection of majors, class registration, understanding academic expectations and time management. Non-academic advisors can coordinate support from various non-academic disciplines, such as financial aid, career counseling, health services and residence life. To the extent possible, advisors should not change during the students’ four years.

3. **Assign first-generation mentors to all IGs as freshman.** Mentors contact students before they arrive as freshman and provide them with the type of advice that continuing-generation students usually obtain from older siblings or friends, like furnishing a dorm and joining clubs. Mentors arrange social activities for students. They can eventually groom IGs to coach incoming students from similar backgrounds.

### 6.3.2 Recommendations for First-Generation Students and their Families

Best practices for communications mean they flow both ways, from student to advisor and from advisor to student. Students should recognize they have a responsibility to reach out regularly to their advisors and mentors, even if they do not initiate contact. Students should be open to mentorships that grow organically from relationships with faculty, other advisors or upperclassmen. Conversely, when advisors and mentors do not hear from students, they should contact them. Therefore, the following should be considered:

1. **Schedule regular meetings with academic and non-academic advisors.** At a minimum, at the beginning of freshman year, students should have a weekly meeting with non-academic advisors who will help them identify and coordinate the services they need. Over time, frequency of meetings with non-academic advisors can be reduced as needed (e.g., monthly.) Meetings with academic advisors should occur at a minimum at the beginning and end of each semester. Meetings with professors should occur as often as necessary. Students should speak to professors or their teaching assistants whenever they have questions, whether through one-on-one meetings or group office hours.

2. **Establish regular touch points with mentors.** These are expected to be at least weekly during the first one or two semesters. Upperclassmen play an important role in social support. However, since the best mentorships usually evolve informally, the university mentorship program would be expected to taper off as students become more acclimated.
3. *Parents should try to attend any family workshops or orientation programs offered by the universities.* This will help them understand the academic and social challenges their children face. Parents should try to keep an open mind about their children’s experiences in college and do their best to support them. When family issues arise, parents should encourage their children to seek out college advisors who are trained to deal with these situations.

### 6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends future research be conducted to develop a deeper understanding of 1Gs’ needs in a normal environment, as well as during periods of high stress, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of why some 1Gs who start college struggle to complete their degree. Therefore, the following should be considered:

1. Based on the limitations of this study and to correct for the researcher’s bias, a study of a larger sample of 1Gs should be conducted to assess whether the same or similar findings would be uncovered.

2. A similar study should be conducted using the same criteria with a sample of 1Gs and continuing-generation students to assess similarities or differences in their experiences while pursuing a degree during the pandemic.

3. A comparative study should be conducted to assess 1Gs’ experiences during the pandemic and college administrators who were responsible for support services. This research should be undertaken to uncover similarities or differences in alignment of expectations of students and colleges.

### 6.5 Researcher’s Reflection

Don’t ever doubt you deserve to be there. Don’t be afraid to try new things. Whatever you do, don’t try to do this alone. Never forget there are so many people who believe in you.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama  
First-Generation College Student  
Princeton University, AB, Class of 1985  
Harvard University, JD, Class of 1988  
From Tips for First-Generation Students, June 2018

As I come to the close of this study, I want to reflect on the experience of conducting the research and writing my dissertation. While I am not a first-generation college student, I chose
this topic because both of my parents were the first in their families to attend college. Their experiences, which were entirely different, had a profound impact throughout their lives. This study was only possible because the participants willingly shared their experiences, many of which were deeply personal. As the researcher, I was grateful that the students allowed me to briefly step into their lives so I could try to understand the multi-layered reality of a first-generation college student. There were many stories that emerged from this research, although what inspired me the most was their dedication and commitment to their education despite every obstacle in their path. They have my profound admiration for their achievements, and I am confident that they will continue to climb more mountains leading to even greater successes. My hope is that the recommendations from this study that will help future first-generation students and their families.
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Appendix A: Conceptual Framework

Factors Enabling First-Generation Students Before 2020
• Intentional preparation to attend college
• Favorable environmental influences in college
• Favorable personal traits aided pursuit of degree

Factors Hindering 1Gs Before 2020
• Unsystematic preparation to attend college
• Unfavorable environmental influences in college
• Unfavorable personal traits impeded pursuit of degree
• Struggles

Factors Impacting 1Gs as a Result of the Pandemic
• Perceived value of college degree
• College support system
• Experience with online education
• Struggles
• Ways to be successful

1Gs’ Experiences at Elite and Non-Elite Institutions During the Pandemic
• Factors changed in importance
• College support system
Appendix B: Coding Scheme

1. Factors Enabling First-Generation Students Before 2020
   - ENAB1 Intentional preparation to attend college
   - ENAB2 Favorable environmental factors in college
   - ENAB3 Favorable personal traits aided pursuit of degree

2. Factors Hindering 1Gs Before 2020
   - HIND1 Unsystematic preparation to attend college
   - HIND2 Unfavorable environmental factors in college
   - HIND3 Unfavorable personal traits impeded pursuit of degree
   - HIND4 Struggles

3. Factors Impacting 1Gs as a Result of the Pandemic
   - PANENAB1 Perceived value of college degree
   - PANENAB2 College support system
   - PANENAB3 Experience with online education
   - PANENAB4 Struggles
   - PANENAB5 Ways to be successful

4. 1Gs’ Experiences at Elite and Non-Elite Institutions During the Pandemic
   - PANELT1 Factors changed in importance
   - PANELT2 College support system
Appendix C: Email Invitation (Interview)

To: [Name of participant]
From: Lauren Silfen
Subject: Doctoral Study on First-Generation College Students

Dear [Name]:
Thank you for interest in my study on first-generation college students’ experiences during the pandemic. I am a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University and I am conducting this research for my dissertation. As someone who was enrolled in higher education during the pandemic, you are an ideal person for my study.

The title of my study is First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will need to commit to a sixty-minute virtual interview. During the interview, you will be asked questions about you experiences in college prior to the pandemic and how the pandemic influenced your experience. An example of the type of question is: When you first enrolled, what did you think your college thought first-generation students needed and how did it align with your needs?

The interview will be conducted by me and your identity and that of your university will be kept confidential. The data will be solely used for educational purposes. The results of the study will be used in a dissertation to be submitted in connection with the completion of my doctorate degree in adult education. I also anticipate that the data will appear in a published journal article and as part of a conference presentation after I complete my degree.

After the interview, you will receive a $10 Starbucks gift card as a token of my appreciation.

If you would like to participate in the study, please let me know. Then, I will email you a consent form and a brief demographic data form which should take no more than fifteen minutes to complete. We would then schedule a date/time for the interview.

Thank you in advance for your support and I hope you will decide to participate in the study.

Best regards,
Lauren
Appendix D: Email Invitation (Focus Group)

To: [Name of participant]
From: Lauren Silfen
Subject: Doctoral Study on First-Generation College Students

Dear [Name]:
Thank you for interest in my study on first-generation college students’ experiences during the pandemic. I am a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University and I am conducting this research for my dissertation. As someone who was enrolled in higher education during the pandemic, you are an ideal person for my study.

The title of my study is First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will need to commit to a sixty-minute 4-8 member virtual focus group. During the focus group you will be asked questions about your experiences in college prior to the pandemic and how the pandemic influenced your college experience. An example of the type of question is: When you first enrolled, what did you think your college thought first-generation students needed and how did it align with your needs?

The focus group will be facilitated by me and your identity and that of your university will be kept confidential. The data collected from the focus group will supplement data gathered from in-depth interviews with approximately 20 students. The data will be solely used for educational purposes. The results of the study will be used in a dissertation to be submitted in connection with the completion of my doctorate degree in adult education. I also anticipate that the data will appear in a published journal article and as part of a conference presentation after I complete my degree.

After the focus group meeting, you will send you a $10 Starbucks gift card as a token of my appreciation.

If you would like to participate in the study, please let me know. Then, I will email you a consent form and a brief demographic data form which should take no more than fifteen minutes to complete. We would then coordinate a date/time for the focus group.

Thank you in advance for your support and I hope you will decide to participate in the study.

Best regards,
Lauren
Appendix E: Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights (Interview)

Teachers College
Columbia University
525 West 120th St.
New York, NY 10027
212-678-3000
www.tc.columbia.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic

Principal Researcher: Lauren B. Silfen, Doctoral Student, Teachers College
917-225-8451, lbs2163@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in this research study called “First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are a) a student (or recent graduate) whose parents never graduated from a four-year or two-year post-secondary institution in the U.S. or abroad and b) were enrolled in college prior to or during the pandemic (e.g., 2019-2020 and 2020-21 academic years) or who deferred enrollment due to the health crisis. Approximately twenty people will participate in this study and it will take approximately 1 hour of your time to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to determine how first-generation students’ pursuit of a college degree was impacted by the pandemic.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? If you decide to participate, the primary researcher will interview you via Zoom, Skype or similar means, unless circumstances exist that allow for us to meet in person, while maintaining social distancing. During the individual interview you will be asked to discuss your unique perspective as a first-generation student at your university prior to and during the pandemic. This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will still be able to participate. The interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time and take approximately sixty minutes. You will be given a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential.

Finally, prior to the interview, you will be asked to fill out a form designed to obtain demographic information about the participants in this study. This will take about fifteen minutes.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced.
as a student. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Your participation in this study may allow you to experience the intrinsic benefits of a) sharing your experiences as first-generation college student, b) aiding other students like yourself and c) helping universities and colleges understand the needs of students like you and provide the necessary supports.

**PAYMENTS:** You will receive a $10 Starbucks gift card to thank you for your participation.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?** The study is over when you have completed the individual interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you have not finished.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY:** The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a drawer in her home. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down and the audio recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. The research data will be kept for five years.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor, and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?** The results of this study will be used in a dissertation to be submitted by the researcher to satisfy the requirements of a doctorate in adult learning. The researcher anticipates the data from this study will be published in journal articles or shared at conferences after the researcher obtains her doctorate. Your identity will be removed from any data you provide before publication or used for educational purposes. Furthermore, your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.

**CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING** Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will still be able to.

______I give my consent to be recorded

______________________________
Signature

_____I do not consent to be recorded

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WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

I consent to allow written and/or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

I do not consent to allow written and/or audio-recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The primary researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

The researcher may contact me in the future for other research opportunities:

Yes ________________  No ________________

Initial  Initial

The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes ________________  No ________________

Initial  Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Lauren B. Silfen, at 917-225-8451 or at lbs2163@tc.columbia.edu. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Lyle Yorks at 212-678-3820.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future employment; student status or grades; services that I would otherwise receive.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at the researcher’s professional discretion.
• If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been
developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my
participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
• Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will
not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as
specifically required by law.
• I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

**My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:**
Print name: __________________ Date: __________________

Signature: __________________________
Appendix F: Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights (Focus Group)

Teachers College
Columbia University
525 West 120th St.
New York, NY 10027
212-678-3000
www.tc.columbia.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic

Principal Researcher: Lauren B. Silfen, Doctoral Student, Teachers College
917-225-8451, lbs2163@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in this research study called “First-Generation Students: Stress Points Before and During the Pandemic.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you a) are a student or recent graduate whose parents never graduated from a four-year or two-year post-secondary institution in the U.S. or abroad and b) were enrolled in college prior to or during the pandemic (e.g., 2019-2020 and 2020-21 academic years) or deferred enrollment due to the health crisis. Approximately 4-8 people will participate in this study and it will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to determine how first-generation students’ pursuit of a college degree was impacted by the pandemic.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? If you decide to participate, the primary researcher will conduct a group discussion with you and several others via Zoom, Skype or similar means, unless circumstances exist that allow for us to meet in person, while maintaining social distancing. During the focus group, you will be asked to discuss your unique perspective as a first-generation student at your university prior to and during the pandemic. This focus group will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will still be able to participate. The focus group will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time and take approximately 60-90 minutes. You will be given a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced as a student. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk
about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Your participation in this study may allow you to experience the intrinsic benefits of a) sharing your experiences as first-generation college student, b) aiding other students like yourself and c) helping universities and colleges understand the needs of students like you and provide the necessary supports.

**PAYMENTS:** You will receive a $10 Starbucks gift card to thank you for your participation.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?** The study is over when you have completed the focus group ends. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you have not finished.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY:** The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a drawer in her home. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down and the audio recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. The research data will be kept for five years.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor, and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?** The results of this study will be used in a dissertation to be submitted by the researcher to satisfy the requirements of a doctorate in adult learning. The researcher anticipates the data from this study will be published in journal articles or shared at conferences after the researcher obtains her doctorate. Your identity will be removed from any data you provide before publication or used for educational purposes. Furthermore, your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.

**CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING** Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will still be able to.

______I give my consent to be recorded

______________________________
Signature

______I do not consent to be recorded

______________________________
WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY
___I consent to allow written and/or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Signature

___I do not consent to allow written and/or audio-recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Signature

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT
The primary researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

The researcher may contact me in the future for other research opportunities:

Yes ________________________  No_______________________

Initial          Initial

The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes ________________________  No_______________________

Initial          Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?
If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Lauren B. Silfen, at 917-225-8451 or at lbs2163@tc.columbia.edu. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Lyle Yorks at 212-678-3820.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

• I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
• I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
• I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future employment; student status or grades; services that I would otherwise receive.
• The researcher may withdraw me from the research at the researcher’s professional discretion.
• If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been
developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my
participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
• Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will
not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as
specifically required by law.
• I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: __________________ Date: __________________

Signature: __________________
Appendix G: Participants’ Demographic Data Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! All the information in this form is completely confidential and will be used only for purposes of this research study as outlined in the Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights Form.

Please complete this form if neither of your parents graduated from a four-year or two-year college or university in the U.S. or abroad and return to Lauren Silfen via email: lbs2163@tc.columbia.edu.

Name (Last, First):___________________________________________________

Email:________________________________Cell Phone:_________________________

Section 1: General Information

1.1 Age:________
1.2 In what type of program are you officially registered? (For example, Associates, Bachelors, Certificate Program).____________________________________________
1.3 Name and location of high school_____________________________________
    1.3.1 When did you graduate? ___________________________________________
1.4 Name and location of university_______________________________________
    1.4.1 When did you first enter college?___________________________________
    1.4.2 When do you expect to graduate?___________________________________
    1.4.3 If you attended more than one college, please provide details on your rationale for transferring. (For example, “I transferred from a community college to a four-year university, because I wanted to study xxx.”) ______________________________________________________________________________________

1.5 What is your area of study?
    1.5.1 Major_______________________________________________________
    1.5.2 Minor, if applicable__________________________________________
1.6 Which of the following best describes your living situation during the academic year? (Mark response with “X”)
    1.6.1 On-campus housing (dormitory, fraternity/sorority, apartment) X
    1.6.2 Off campus/live with friends
    1.6.3 Off campus/live with parents/family
    1.6.4 Off campus/live with spouse/partner
    1.6.5 Live alone
    1.6.6 Other, please specific_________________________________________
1.7 What place (town/city, region, or country) do you consider to be your home? This does not need to be where you currently live. (For example, you may live in New York City, but feel that your home is Puerto Rico.)
1.8 Language(s)
  1.8.1 What is the primary language spoken in your home?__________________
  1.8.2 Do you speak any additional languages? What are they?_______________

1.9 Do you have close friends or relatives who live permanently in the town where your school is located?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>5 or Less</th>
<th>More than 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.10 Do you have any siblings? (If the answer is no, skip to 1.11.) Yes  No
  1.10.1 If the answer is yes, indicate their ages_____________________

1.11 Do you have any caregiving responsibilities? (If the answer if no, skip to 1.12.) Yes  No
  1.11.1 If the answer is yes, please indicate their relationship. (For example, one child, one brother, grandmother)____________________________
  1.11.2 If you have caregiving responsibilities, please indicate who watches them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>While you are studying or in class</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Spouse/Partner</th>
<th>Friend/Relative</th>
<th>Daycare/School</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During evenings (M-F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On weekends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.12 What is the highest level of educational attainment by your parents or guardians?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Guardians/Step-Parent(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (post-secondary) graduate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some post-secondary education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade/vocational diploma or certificate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.13 Please indicate who in your extended family (i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) has attended a 4 year university and whether they received a degree. (For example, my aunt attended for 1 semester, My grandfather received a BS.)

__________________________________________________________

Section 2: Knowledge of Services Available to Students

2.1 On a scale of 1 to 5, indicate how knowledgeable are you about the following types of services that may be provided by your university or college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Not at all (1)</th>
<th>Very little (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat knowledgeable (3)</th>
<th>Knowledgeable (4)</th>
<th>Very Knowledgeable (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation Student Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International/Cultural Clubs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Clubs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Please indicate which if any of the above services you used in the last year.

__________________________________________________________________________

2.3 If you did not use any of the above services, please explain why you did not use them.

__________________________________________________________________________

Section 3: Financial

a. Please estimate your parents’ gross annual income last year.
   i. Under $25,000
   ii. $25,000-50,000
   iii. $50,000-75,000
   iv. Over $75,000

b. Do you receive financial aid? (If the answer is no, skip to 3.3) Yes   No
   i. If the answer is yes, please estimate how much comes from
      1. Student loans____________________
      2. Grants/scholarships from your university____________________
      3. Personal savings/earnings from your job(s)___________________
      4. Financial contributions from your family____________________

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c. What financial contributions do your parents make to your education?

Section 4: Sex, Sexual Orientation
4.1 Please indicate your gender identity.
4.2 Please indicate your sexual orientation. (For example, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.)

Section 5: Geographic, Ethnic and Cultural Origin, Religion
1.1 Where were you born?
1.2 Where was your mother born?
1.3 Where was your father born?
1.4 What were the ethnic or cultural origins of your grandparents? (For example, Mexican, Italian, etc.)
1.5 What race(s) do you identify yourself as a member? (For example, White, Black, Filipino, Latin American, etc.)
1.6 With what religion(s), if any, do you identify? (For example, Christianity, Hindu, Islam, Judaism, Islam, etc.)

Section 6: Comments
Please feel free to tell us more about yourself.

Thank you for participating in this research study!

Adapted from McGill University’s Student Demographic Survey Microsoft Word - Student Demographic Survey - Email invitation Bilingual.docx (mcgill.ca) Appendix H:
Appendix H: Interview Protocol/Schedule

Introduction:
[Insert name], thank you for interest in my study on first-generation college students’ experiences during the pandemic. I am a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University and I am conducting this research for my dissertation. Like you, I was also enrolled in higher education during the pandemic. Before we start the interview, do you have any questions about this research study?

The interview will be interactive and will take about sixty minutes. Your responses are confidential, and you may ask questions, interrupt or end the session at any time. You may notice that I will be taking notes. However, so I ensure that I do not miss anything you say, I would like your permission to record this session. [If permission is granted turn on recording.]

Questions:

1. Before we get into details, I’d like to explore your journey. Could you tell me a little about how and why you decided to attend college?

2. What was it like for you when you commenced to college? Related to that what do you think your college thought first-generation students needed and how did it align with your needs?

3. What are the most important outside influences (or external forces) that helped you on this journey?

4. What were the most important personal factors that helped you in college?

5. In what ways did any of these factors become more or less important over time?

6. What were the most important external (or outside) factors that influenced you in a negative way in college?

7. What were the most important internal factors that influenced you in a negative way in college?

8. Can you tell me about a time when you struggled in college?

9. In what ways did any of these (internal or external) factors become more or less important when you were faced with a challenge? [Before turning to questions on pandemic, inquire whether participant needs a break.]

10. How has the pandemic changed your attitude about the relative importance of a college degree?

11. What factors have become more or less important as a result of the pandemic?
12. What was it like for you for you to take some or all of your classes online and lose face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers?

13. What actions have you taken related to your pursuit of a college degree as a result of the pandemic?

14. How and what have you learned in order to be successful during the pandemic?

15. How would you describe the support services you received from your college during the pandemic?

16. What supports did you need from your college that were unavailable?

17. If you had the opportunity to develop a program at your university for first-generation students, what would it look like?

Closing:
[Insert name], thank you for participating in the interview. Before we close, I want to ask whether you have any questions for me. I will be sending you a Starbucks gift card as a token of my appreciation. [Obtain mailing address.]
Appendix I: Focus Group Protocol/Schedule

Introduction:
Thank you for interest in my study on first-generation college students’ experiences during the pandemic. I am a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University and I am conducting this research for my dissertation. Like you, I was also enrolled in higher education during the pandemic. Before we start the focus group, do you have any questions about this research study?

The focus group will be interactive and will take about sixty minutes. I will be asking three questions and acting as a moderator. Your responses are confidential, and you may ask questions, interrupt or end the session at any time. You may notice that I will be taking notes. However, so I ensure that I do not miss anything you say, I would like your permission to record this session. [If permission is granted turn on recording.]

Before I ask the first question, please briefly introduce yourselves by giving your name, what you are studying and when you expect to graduate.

Questions:

1. What were the most important environmental influences or personal traits that influenced you in a positive way before the pandemic?

2. Can you tell me about a time when you struggled in college during the pandemic?

3. If you had the opportunity to develop a program at your university for first-generation students, what would it look like?

Closing:
Thank you for participating in the interview. Before we close, I want to ask whether you have any questions for me. I will be sending you a Starbucks gift card as a token of my appreciation. [Obtain mailing address.]
### Appendix J: Demographic Data Inventory Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/Program (Public/Private/Elite/Non-Elite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace-Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace-Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education-Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education-Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Annual Gross Income (per year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1 | Private Elite | 21 | Female | Heterosexual | Latina | Spanish, English, French | USA | Dominican Republic | Dominican Republic | GED | Some Post-Secondary | $25-50K | $51K | Economics | Off-campus w/family |
| 2 | Private Non-Elite | 19 | Female | Heterosexual or Asexual | Asian | Mandarin in English | China | China | China | HS | HS | <$25K | $20-30K | Psychology | Off-campus w/family |
| 3 | Statutory Elite | 20 | Female | Heterosexual | Chinese, Asian, Asian | Mandarin in Fuzhou, Chinese | USA | China | China | <HS | <HS | $25-50K | $40K | Applied Economics & Management | Off-campus w/friend |
| 4 | Private Elite | 22 | Female | Heterosexual | Chinese, American | English, Chinese | USA | China | China | HS | Some Post-Secondary | $25-50K | 90% | Asian Studies | On-campus |
| 5 | Statutory Elite | 23 | Female | Heterosexual | Latin American | Spanish, English | USA | Mexico | Mexico | <HS | GED | $25-50K | $45K | Environmental & Sustainable Science | On-campus |
| 6 | Statutory Elite | 23 | Cisgender | Bisexual | Latin American, Mexican | English, Spanish | USA | USA | NA | HS | NA | >$75K | $52K | Human Biology, Health & Society | On-campus |
| 7 | Private Elite | 22 | Male | Heterosexual | Latino | Spanish, Italian | Peru | Peru | Peru | HS | HS | $25-50K | $70K | Biology | On-campus |
| 8 | Statutory Elite | 23 | Female | Heterosexual | African American | Igbo | USA | Nigeria | Nigeria | Some Post-Secondary | Unknown | $25-50K | 100% | Human Biology, Health & Society | On-campus |
| 9 | Public Non-Elite | 26 | Female | Heterosexual | Latina | English, Spanish | Mexico | Mexico | Mexico | <HS | <HS | $25-50K | 0 | Forensic Science | Off-campus w/family |
| 10 | Private Non-Elite | 22 | Male | Heterosexual | White | English, Serbian | USA | USA | Serbia | Some Post-Secondary | Some Post-Secondary | >$75K | $14K (first two years only) | Mechanical Engineering | Off-campus w/family |
| 11 | Private Elite | 22 | Queer | Queer, Homosexual, | Latin American, | Spanish, Portuguese | USA | Mexico | Mexico | <HS | <HS | $50-75K | $50K | History | Off-campus w/family |

---

4 Chart contains select data from the Demographic Data Forms to protect participants’ anonymity.

5 Statutory colleges are a component of a private university and students enrolled in statutory colleges have the same access services as students who are enrolled in the endowed colleges at the university. Therefore, for the purpose of this study statutory colleges were considered private.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (N=27)</th>
<th>School (Private/Non-Elite)</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
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6 Chart contains select data from the Demographic Data Forms to protect participants’ anonymity.
| No. | School (Private/Public) | School (Elite/Non-Elite) | Age | Gender Identity | Sexual Orientation | Racial Identity | Languages | Birthplace | Birthplace-Mother | Birthplace-Father | Education-Mother | Education-Father | Parents' Annual Gross Income | Financial Aid per year | Major | Living Situation |
|-----|------------------------|--------------------------|-----|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------- |---------------- |------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------|----------------|
| 26  | Private Non-Elite      | 19                       | Female | Unsure        | Pacific Islander | Asian White | English Polish | USA        | USA            | Unknown        | Some Post-Secondary | Unknown        | <$25K            | $19K              | Medical Laboratory Science | Off-campus w/partner |
| 27  | Public Elite           | 22                       | Female | Heterosexual  | East African     | Amharic English | English   | Ethiopia   | Ethiopia      | <$HS            | HS              | $25-50K        | $25K              | Political Science          | On-campus         |
Appendix K: Document Review/Analysis Sources

Location and Types of Documents
Names of universities and college were not identified to maintain anonymity.

1. U.S. Elite/Non-Elite and Public/Private College and Universities’ Websites
   a. First-generation/low-income programs’-recruitment materials, summer bridge programs, enrolled-student programs
   b. Financial Aid Offices
   c. University sanctioned clubs

2. First-Generation/Low-Income Websites (without university affiliations)
   a. Facebook Empowering First-Generations Students group
   b. Student-run clubs at multiple public and private universities

3. Demographic Data Forms-completed by 27 participants in research study

4. National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities-data on enrollment

5. American Council on Higher Education-trends in higher education among first-generation students

6. Postsecondary National Policy Institute-articles on first-generation students enrolled in higher education

7. The New York Times-stories tracking impact of pandemic on students enrolled in higher education