UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Storytelling to Succeed: Exploring Resiliency Among
Culturally Diverse First-Generation College Students in Doctoral Programs

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
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in

Education Leadership

by

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The Dissertation of Sinai Cota is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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DEDICATION

I would like to acknowledge my chair Dr. Brooke Soles, who embodies every aspect of cultural proficiency. It is through her holistic guidance that I was able to persist in this doctoral program.

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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to first-generation college students everywhere. To children of immigrants and those who had deported parents and still found a way into higher education. This dissertation is for my Queer and closeted LGBTQ+ siblings in academia. To the dreamers and doers. Si se pudo!

EPIGRAPH

The moment we choose to love,
we begin to move against domination.
Against oppression.
- bell hooks

Once social change begins, you cannot reverse it.
You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read.
You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride.
You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.
- Cesar E. Chavez

Rest is resistance.
Free yourself from grind work
and reclaim your life.
-Tricia Hersey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

iv

LIST OF TABLES

VITA

2014   Bachelors of Arts, Religious Studies, Minors in Communication and Chicano/a/e/x Studies, San Diego State University

2016   Masters of Arts, Higher Education Leadership Studies, (First Generation College Students and Mentoring) University of San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Storytelling to Succeed: Exploring Resiliency Among

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by

Sinai Cota

Doctor of Education in Leadership Education

University of California San Diego, 2024
California State University San Marcos, 2024

Professor Brooke Soles, Chair

First Generation College Students (FGCS) account for one third of all doctoral degree

recipients in the USA, however, very little is known about their educational experiences. Using a

narrative inquiry approach, this study employed a Cultural Proficient framework to explore the

barriers that prevent FGCS from pursuing post-undergraduate opportunities. In an attempt to

expand asset-based research, this dissertation applies Resiliency Lens, Critical Race Theory and

Socialization Lens to the experiences of six participants to showcase how they've overcome barriers in education. Students in this study identified a lack of guidance as a common theme in both their personal and academic journeys. Stories in the form of poetry were an important tool in helping students reflect on their experiences and introduced a new way of analyzing data through Poetic Transcription Analysis. Participants in this study were successful in navigating higher education as a result of relationships and skills learned from their personal and academic networks. It is crucial for educators to understand their role on campus. When student voice is incorporated into academia through storytelling, First Generation College Students can learn to build resiliency and agency from each other. Students are also more likely to be engaged in the classroom and begin to create the necessary relationships with formal and informal leaders to maneuver through higher education and beyond.

Keywords: first generation college student, graduate students, storytelling, student success, resiliency, doctoral students

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"When we don't know each other's stories, we substitute our own myth about who that person is. When we are operating with only a myth, none of that person's truth will ever be known to us, and we will injure them--mostly without ever meaning to." (Wehmiller,1992, p. 380).

First Generation College Students (FGCS) account for roughly one-third of all doctoral degree recipients in the USA, however, very little is known about their experiences (Roksa et al., 2018). FGCS have been defined as 'students whose parents don't have college degrees' or are 'the first to go to college' (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). This student population has been historically underserved, ignored and at a disadvantage in higher education (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). In 2017, the National Science Foundation conducted a study that found that White students were 25% more likely to have a parent with a college degree or higher than Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x and American Indian Students (National Science Foundation, 2017). FGCS are an important part of campus and carry with them multiple intersecting identities and cultural capital that enriches classroom settings, curriculum and research ((Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Yosso, 2005). According to researcher Yosso (2005) cultural capital can be classified into six categories: dreams and hopes, language, family, peer and social connections, navigation and resistance. It is with a student's cultural capital that many of them are able to figure out how to successfully navigate academia without parental guidance.

There are also those students who may self-categorize as FGCS and have parents who have attended a college in another country and therefore did not receive support to guide them through the American college experience. There are also FGCS who are estranged, adopted, or homeless and have parents with college degrees. A number of students also have parents who have taken a few courses at the university level but didn't earn a degree and may not have felt

equipped to support their students through the process of college admissions (Inkelas et al., 2007; Warburton et al., 2001). For the purpose of this study and to be inclusive of students' experiences, I will use the definition put forth by The National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) which states that FGCS "are students lacking the knowledge necessary for college success" (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017).

In an article from The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) (2016), 17% of doctoral students reported having parents who didn't have higher than a high school diploma (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). To help us understand some of the financial responsibilities FGCS face, The Center for First Generation Student Success fact sheet from 2015-2016 also found the median parental income for FGCS was $50,000 less for Non-FGCS parents. In a 2004 report from NASPA, a group of 19,000 First Generation College Students in American Universities made up 65% of enrolled first year undergraduate students. Of this group only 20% of students earned a bachelor's degree within six years while 56% of the FGCS did not receive a credential, decreasing the likelihood of pursuing post baccalaureate opportunities ("First year experience," n.d.).

From 2015-2016, The Center for First Generation Student Success reported, 72% of FGCS nationally pursue a college education, versus 93% of Non-FGCS. Barriers vary from student to student, but universally FGCS tend to have fewer financial resources forcing them to prioritize a paycheck over their studies (Gardner, 2023, Xing, 2020). As a result, FGCS are at a higher risk of not graduating in comparison to non-FGCS due to the lack of support and resources available to them (Davis, 2012; Engle, 2007). A critical look at race and ethnicity shows the difference in Ph.D numbers is much lower for groups who identify as non-White. In an attempt to contribute to asset-based literature, this study will use the term culturally diverse

instead of underrepresented or minority students to define students who come from a wide range of ethnic, racial and cultural experiences and do not classify as White. It is important to look at the racial and ethnic demographics of these students in order to understand what barriers they uniquely face and resilience they can develop (McCoy, 2014).

Educators must also shift their mindsets to an asset-based approach to recognize the cultural capital FGCS come into college with. Research suggests that by creating a space in academic settings to story-tell students will feel valued, engaged and build resiliency to persist (Welborn et al., 2022). Acknowledging FGCS's cultural capital will serve as motivation to see themselves in higher education and motivate them to apply for future academic opportunities, like applying to graduate school (Miley, 2009). National data on FGCS, who enrolled in doctoral programs, reported that planning for their future, learning to set goals and advocate for themselves were among the skills which helped them gain confidence to pursue post baccalaureate options (Xing, 2020). Students who are involved in their own learning are shown to be more engaged in classroom discussions leading to a strong sense of: identity, agency and belonging (Nguyen et al., 2016). When students are able to share their experiences, they almost always share a common goal of giving back to their communities (McCoy, 2015). However, in some instances, goal-setting or thinking of the future isn't enough to get them to persist and engage. Next, I will discuss the problem statement for this study.

Statement of the Problem

In 2015, there was a 3.3% decline noted after years of a steady increase in enrollment and retention among culturally diverse FGCS. FGCS, tend to have lower engagement in student life and don't often have enough time to focus on academic duties due to: coursework, long work weeks and other family, culture, and community responsibilities (Benson & Lee, 2020). Nonetheless, FGCS are an asset in education not only for their diverse perspectives in research,

but because they help generate cultural and financial wealth in many under-resourced neighborhoods (McCoy, 2014). In 2010, the government acknowledged a direct correlation between poverty and lack of higher education. As a result, The U.S. of Education collaborated on a plan with twelve organizations, called *The Completion Agenda*, to raise graduation rates and ensure that by 2025 all students ages 25-34 year-old in the United States would have completed an associate degree or higher (Howard, 2010).

However, doctoral students struggle the most to complete their programs compared to other graduate programs (Castelló et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). It is a failure on the university part to not address the growing diversity within their institutions. First Generation College Students have tirelessly demonstrated a deep desire and commitment to pursue higher education opportunities by the increase in undergraduate enrollment across the nation and their eagerness to give back to their communities by serving in leadership and mentorship capacities (Engle, 2007). Universities are playing a major role in improving the country's economy, bettering a student's future health, increasing their life expectancy, their finances and level of happiness by supporting FGCS succeed in college (McCoy, 2014). As a result, a happy healthy FGCS graduate can create countless sustainable opportunities for culturally diverse communities to flourish. Even though we know the direct impact education can have, culturally diverse FGCS are still under-resourced and neglected (Fentress & Collopy, 2011). For this reason, we, as educators, should respond with more urgency to address the disparities in higher education institutions within our areas.

It is also our moral responsibility to bring awareness to how race marginalizes some students and gives privilege to others (Welbourne et al., 2022). An estimated 55% of FGCS enter college directly from high school compared to 84% of students from higher income levels. Most

FGCS are likely to drop out within six years of their college education, with roughly only 12% successfully completing each year (Pliska, 2012). Finances can create an overwhelming burden for FGCS. The National Association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2015-16) surveyed 89,000 dependent students nationally and found that FGCS parent's had an average of $40,000 salary per year household income in comparison to $90,000 for Non-FGCS. NASPA (2017) shows FGCS who are employed across the nation worked 20 hours in comparison to 12 hours of Non-FGCS. Of these students, 46% were White, 18% Black or African American, 25% Hispanic or Latino/a/e/x, 6% Asian, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native and .5% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Additionally, 20% of FGCS attained a bachelor's degree compared to 49% of Non-FGCS. 56% did not complete a degree compared to 40% of Non-FGCS.

In order to move towards equity, we must examine the relationship between race and power. There are many inequities when we consider race and class in education, and among them are finances (Welbourne et al., 2022). FGCS are graduating with more debt than their Non-FGCS peers, 21% of FGCS accrued more than $30,000 in school debt compared to 16% of their Non-FGCS (Hoffer et al., 2002). Financial burdens create obstacles for students in education preventing many low-income and Non-FGCS students from pursuing graduate school opportunities. In 2015, a 10-year longitudinal study by the NSF, discovered a decrease among First Generation College Students in doctoral students. That number had fluctuated by 10% over the span of ten years, from 29% to 19%. In comparison, the same study saw an increase in enrollment of White and Asian doctoral students who had at least one parent with a college degree (NSF, 2015). Additionally, through the National Opinion Research Center (2002), half of African American, Hispanic and American Indian doctoral recipients in the USA reported not

having anyone to guide them in their college experience since their parents had not attained a college degree. To address the achievement gap that exists currently for FGCS, educators can adopt a Cultural Proficiency framework in schools that can help them develop: a common language, shared vision, and self-awareness of bias needed to address to produce supportive environments in school settings (Welbourne et al., 2022).

Additional findings show that a student's ability to adapt is critical in successfully navigating academic settings and gaining the confidence necessary for agency and self-direction (Hoffer et al., 2002; McCoy, 2014). Other factors that supported FGCS enrolled in doctoral programs according to a summary by the PhD Completion Project, included: family encouragement, institutional financial support, and advising (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009). Research shows FGCS are helping to create meaningful networks to successfully navigate higher education, without parental guidance (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). These relationships are all the more important to underrepresented students who are often under-resourced in their communities at home and lacking awareness of what is available to them in higher education (Hoffer et al., 2002; McCoy, 2014). A FGCS biggest resource in navigating college are relationships, whether at home, on or off campus. Storytelling in this setting can be used as a tool to help FGCS build community, agency, and resilience (Miley, 2009). In the upcoming section, I will briefly review storytelling as an asset-based approach.

Storytelling

Stories have been studied extensively in the fields of sociology and psychology, and are relatively new in higher education (Polkinghorne, 2013). Storytelling, for the purpose of this proposal, is reflecting and sharing personal testimonies that document the lived experience of a group of people (Jehangir, 2010). It is an important tool for FGCS because it allows others to understand a student's background and encourages educators to have an asset-based mindset

(Miley, 2009). Often educator bias, whether unconscious or conscious, disregards the strength and benefits of culturally diverse students and communities. When a deficit mindset shows up in school settings, it can deeply affect the success of students in the classroom because it does not include their voice (Welbourne et al., 2022). It is dangerous for students to be in spaces where a single story is told about their identity that does not serve to empower them to do better (Adichie, 2016). Sharing power with students in the classroom, can lead to success especially among students who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. The power of storytelling has proven helpful to students from these groups to remain resilient, develop growth mindsets, adapt, and thrive in academic spaces that were not intended for them (Aguilar et al., 2014; Farnsworth, M., 2021). Storytelling also encourages students to speak in open dialogue with themselves and others, making meaning together of one's own beliefs, identities and relationships (Jehangir, 2010; Magdola, 2008).

Furthermore, storytelling bridges the gap between school and home so that students can appreciate the diversity in wisdom and knowledge they, themselves, and others bring to academic settings (King et al., 2017; Rendon, 2009; Yosso, 2005). This type of approach helps to reinforce a student's sense of belonging, persistence and resilience (Davis, 2012). A student's academic success and motivation is greatly impacted by validating their experiences, especially in the case of FGCS with other culturally diverse identities (Jehangir, 2010; Warnock & Hurts, 2016). Many FGCS with diverse racial identities often encounter doubt when they don't see students like themselves in their classes (Anzaldua, 2012; Mlynarczyk, 2014). Consumed by college responsibilities, FGCS also encounter feelings of isolation and guilt in being absent from their families (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Learning how to tap into their cultural capital from multiple groups in college may teach FGCS how to fit in (Yosso, 2005). FGCS students

7

carry with them cultural capital from both their experiences on and off campus, but become their life-line when learning to navigate higher education institutions. Universities must then work to understand the value in cultural capital and how to encourage the exchange of it for FGCS to succeed (Yosso, 2005).

FGCS experiences are culturally rich and can be both celebrated and incorporated into the classroom through storytelling. Researcher Leila Moayeri Pazargadi (2019) did just this at a summer bridge program in Nevada State University: *Nepantla*, Nahuatl word for in-between-ess, works with up to 60% First Generation College Students. In this program, students were asked to reflect on their past experiences and how they had navigated academic and personal challenges. Pazargadi, recorded this process as most helpful for students from diverse backgrounds in helping them understand the in-between that exists at different stages in their lives (Pazargadi, 2019). This narrative approach can promote a safe place for students to share out-loud, ask for help, and be receptive to receiving the support needed to succeed in college (Farnsworth, 2021; Polkinghorne, 2013). However, educators must prepare to have an open line of communication with students, and be vulnerable in their exchange to create trust and meaningful relationships with FGCS students (Miley, 2009).

Storytelling validates students' experiences and allows them to find resources simultaneously developing a sense of agency in the process. According to an article published in the Journal of Poetry exploring the relationship between storytelling and resilience 845 college students surveyed in Western and Eastern continents, linked strong relationships between values, storytelling and resilience (Nguyen et al., 2016). Research also found that students who felt isolated were often those who come from FGCS status in their collegiate communities, and were majority from private institutions (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). In these cases, students did

better because of their connection to mentors, like faculty, who provided consistent support to help them push forward. According to Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) FGCS students overall report a lack of sense of belonging and have less support from their parents, (having never experienced college, parents do not know how to support them, and encounter less assistance in being prepared for college). While most students were successful with staff and faculty relationships, FGCS from low-income backgrounds struggled the most to cultivate these relationships (McCoy, 2014).

Cultural Proficiency (CP) gives educators the framework to create change by developing a common language for access, opportunity and equity. CP plays a key element in showing educators the value of culture, helping to build trust and integrate it into the curriculum to positively impact low-income students in how they teach, implement policy and interact with families and students from different backgrounds (Welbourne et al. 2022). In order for CP to be successful, researcher Lindsey (2019) states these five core elements should be adopted (also called tools): (1) Assessing cultural knowledge, (2) Valuing diversity, (3) Managing differences, (4) Adopting diversity, and (5) Institutionalizing cultural knowledge. All these tenants can be achieved through storytelling. By assessing cultural knowledge, educators can take inventory of their own bias and what bias school systems reinforce that create barriers for certain students.

It also means acknowledging that educational leaders can never fully understand the experiences of students who come from diverse backgrounds or be the sole-knowledge holders in the classroom, they can however value all students' diversity. Valuing means respecting those differences, cultural beliefs, seeing them as an asset and including them in school leadership discussions. Educational leaders can manage these differences by including others in the process of making school wide changes in the classroom or outside. Adopting diversity in a school

setting, means that educators are making every effort to recruit, retain, and graduate diverse students. Finally, institutionalizing cultural knowledge, includes the cultural knowledge that students, families and communities bring to the school shaping opportunities to create policies and practices that celebrate these differences (Lindsay et al., 2019, Welbourne et al. 2022). In this next section, I will review the purpose of the study and research questions.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is twofold: 1. To capture the stories and counter-narratives of culturally diverse First Generation College Students in doctoral programs, 2. To examine the barriers and how they've overcome them. This study acknowledges that Whiteness permeates academia and the systemic barriers it creates, makes it difficult for Non-White students to succeed. A majority of colleges and universities were built for White men (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). As a result, this study will adopt the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Socialization, and Resiliency to 1. Invite culturally diverse FGCS to reflect on their experiences to make meaning; 2. Provide narrative documentation through poetry to celebrate and acknowledge their unique journeys, and 3. Analyze themes that can identify resiliency factors. Moreover, this study seeks to answer the following question:

1. How do culturally diverse FGCS overcome barriers in doctoral programs?

2. What are those barriers?

This study employed a narrative and qualitative approach with a focus on counter-narratives as defined by CRT (Delfano & Stefancic, 2001). Qualitative Research as defined by Shank (2002), is a method in which researchers aim to understand the world experiences of certain individuals and investigate how they make meaning of those experiences. The purpose for utilizing qualitative research in this project was to: 1. Help provide a more detailed account of a person's experience, 2. Allow for the research to evolve and adapt, 3. Create an opportunity

to study the meaning behind said answers, and 3. Develop new ideas and theories (Shank, 2002). Narrative Inquiry, furthermore centers the voice of the participants, gives power to the interviewee, and allows them to share their unique perspectives and lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). This study was conducted in a semi-private setting giving the participants an opportunity to share and find common themes within their experiences in real time. The data was gathered through one focus group and poetry prompts collected from the participants' lived experiences. The focus group research method allowed for culturally diverse FGCS to be observed in a moderated setting and gave participants the opportunity to explore their thoughts, values and experiences without feeling isolated in their account.

Finally, data was analyzed through two modes: Narrative Analysis and Poetic Transcription Analysis. A Narrative Analysis (NA) allows for the researcher to gather key themes and elements to understand how to sum up the story of the participants (Creswell, 2008). The main analysis I conducted through writing prompts. Codes were not pre-conceived, but instead allowed to flow out of the raw data. Hand coding was used to analyze the focus group and categorize the data according to the research questions asked (Saldaña, 2009). Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA) is known as experimental analysis as a way of formulating a type of poem from the testimonies of interviewees. Poetry can offer a new lens into which data can be analyzed. This mixture of art and research challenges the norm of how data should be analyzed. After reviewing the data several times and coding themes, 15-20 lines were identified to form a story that can sum up the overarching themes of participants. The poem was edited in order to find a rhythm and remove any identifiable data (Glesne, 1997).

Participants had an opportunity to create their own poems and counter-stories. A counter narrative challenges a main story, typically written by a dominant group (Yosso, 2005). Given

the institutionalized racism that has existed and continues to permeate education, culturally diverse FGCS have lived their entire lifetimes challenging stereotypes in academia meant to keep them out (Bonilla-Sylva & Peoples, 2022). But culturally diverse students can regain power when they are given the opportunity to take control of their own narrative and find other people with similar identities and challenges on the road to success. FGCS students depend on relationships to gain the knowledge necessary to navigate college and the hidden curriculum. If FGCS are able to build connections and trust early on, then it will set them up to be more engaged and experience a sense of belonging in the classroom later on (Miley, 2009). In the next section, I will describe a sense of belonging and why it's important for FGCS.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging means feeling connected on campus and they happen through relationships (Nunn, 2021). Though, many students do not need to feel like they belong in higher education in order to persist and graduate. However, when students are invited to connect their past experiences in school settings they will gain a greater sense of belonging, contributing to their success in the classroom (Jehangir, 2010; Museus & Chang, 2021; Gopalan & Brady 2020). It is important to think of ways we, as educators, can better serve First Generation College Students and help them bridge the world of academia with their cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Takimoto, Garcia Peraza, & Azmitia, 2021). Research suggests that when students experience some form of belonging, they do better (Nunn, 2021; Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; Zumbrunn, et al., 2014). It is in these spaces where they find connection, that they make meaning of their experiences (Nunn, 2021).

Sense of belonging is important if we care about providing holistic support for students and we give attention to graduation and retention, we must also to joy and wellness. Some

students will persist with or without us, but whether they do that in a healthy way is really up to us (Jack, 2019). We need to examine what challenges they are encountering, and then provide specific support connecting them to networks and resources, but first we must develop trust and respect for one another (Strayhorn, 2018; Jack, 2019, Nunn, 2021). Most importantly, bringing the experiences of FGCS to the forefront are crucial in helping them belong and it ties back to the human experience (Strayhorn, 2018).

One national longitudinal study explored the likelihood of first generation low-income students and their pursuit of a college degree based on their gender, race and sense of belonging in high school. The researchers found that if females had a greater sense of belonging than it directly correlated whether they attended college (Lecy, 2021). Another study examined the relationships between sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and mental health for Latinx FGCS. The mixed-methods, cross-sectional study found that where students experienced higher levels of sense of belonging through the university there was also higher levels of academic efficacy. When students experienced alienation, isolation and other negative feelings, this contributed to depression (Takimoto, Garcia Peraza, & Azmitia, 2021).

Up next, I will briefly preview the significance of Resiliency lens for this study.

Resilience

Resiliency is described as the ability to overcome barriers (Bernard, 1993). Resilience has been studied at great lengths in children's psychology, but only in recent years has academics started to acknowledge resiliency as a framework in higher education and the important role it plays in the success of college students, especially for those who come from underrepresented backgrounds (Jehangir, 2010). Researcher Bernard's definition can be (1993) categorized into four parts: 1. Social Competence, 2. Problem Solving Skills, 3. Autonomy, and 4. A Sense of Purpose. Teachers must understand that students show up to school doing the best they can with

what they know and that there are a number of external factors affecting how they perform inside

of a classroom (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). If there is a way to teach resilience,

perhaps through storytelling, then we, as educators, must move to create instances to interact and

learn from each other's social perspectives, critical thinking skills, agency and purpose (Jehangir,

2010; Baxter, 2008; Yosso, 2005). In the next section, I will discuss the importance of this

study.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to understand what factors contribute to the success of FGCS and how

educators can intervene earlier in students' academic journeys, to ensure more equitable

classroom practices and environments (Soles et al., 2019). It is also an open call for all who read

this dissertation to look for ways to work together, take up responsibility for advancing FGCS in

doctoral programs ensuring their success. First, utilize Cultural Proficiency as a tool to challenge

the stories that have created inequitable systems and policies in education (Soles & Maduli-

Williams, 2019). Next, we must create inclusive classrooms incorporating FGCS experiences

into the curriculum, allowing them to reflect on their stories, and utilizing their cultural capital

inside academic settings (Lindsey, 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). Second, leaders must

acknowledge they are not the sole knowledge holders on campus and must prioritize the growth

of students by sharing the spotlight with them. If educators are unable to look past their bias,

comfort and traditions, then it may create problems in making change and make progress

difficult to achieve (Nuri-Robins et al., 2011; Phillips, and Horowitz, 2017). Next, educational

leaders have a duty to create strong relationships and lead by example (Lindsey, 2018; Soles et

al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Adopting a CP framework would help provide the necessary

structure to build networks and collaborations with all parties impacted by school decisions and

examine their bias, and invite students into the decision-making process (Lindsey, 2018). CP is a necessary step in supporting FGCS in doctoral programs.

In spaces where FGCS may share feelings of isolation, educational leaders should dedicate spaces to build relationships (Lindsey, 2018; Museus, & Chang, 2021; Soles et al., 2019). FGCS students depend on relationships to gain the knowledge necessary to navigate college. In one national study, research on First Generation College Students found marginalization to be a common theme among current college students (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2018). Socialization is another theory that acknowledges the strength people bring to spaces and the value of a group setting. Socializing can play a vital role for FGCS early on in their college-journey, for students to gain knowledge from each-other (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Lecy, 2021; Viaud, 2014). When students participate in groups, they learn to navigate unexpected situations, adopt good values, attitudes, and the necessary skills to succeed in any given environment or organization on or off campus (Roksa et al., 2018).

A CP framework encourages active listening, inclusiveness and a commitment to creating trust and empathy needed for success (Welborn et al., 2018). It is a shared-responsibility among leaders to create and facilitate services that are considerate of and available to the changing needs of each culture and group (Welborn et al., 2022). However, we see very little of this in education especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math spaces (STEM), where students are often dehumanized in their experiences and only valued for what they can produce (Roksa et al., 2018). Yet, if we can create spaces for FGCS to form connections at the beginning, between what they've learned and their past experiences, then they are more likely to do well in the classroom (Cross, 1989; Miley, 2009; Welbourne et al., 2022).

Educational leaders can step in for marginalized groups and implement the CP model for shifting the culture of the school to value diversity and build a community to address educational gaps based on race and ethnicity (Miley, 2009; Welborn et al., 2022). Closing the gap means understanding our identities and the privileges we carry. It's followed in undergraduate classrooms and looks like improved grades, test scores, graduation rates, and pursuing postgraduate opportunities. It is also a framework which encourages educators to start and sustain changes while building their own purpose in the process and motivate others to do more equity work (Welbourne et al, 2022). Trust is at the center of this process, and when there is a lack of it, leaders take the precautions to keep respect for one another (Cross, 1989).

Through *Talking circles*, for example, a less threatening way to approach students in a non-hierarchical way, can have an equity formatted conversation with people. These are great forms of non-traditional ways of communicating in educational leadership settings. They provide space for people to sit in a circle, promote free speech, and honor each other's presence and perspective. School leaders can engage students by adopting a CP lens and encourage storytelling focused on the experiences of FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds in higher education (Cross, 1989; Mason, 1986).

CP has the power to build trust, resiliency and help FGCS feel encouraged to pursue post-undergraduate opportunities (Cross, 1989; Perna, 2015). Researcher Perna reports that when FGCS go to graduate school, it not only impacts them, but their families, communities and positively transforms their financial status, improving their health, and creating longer life-expectancies, while also lowering rates of unemployment and poverty. Investing in FGCS from low-income families presently, decreases the need for federal welfare programs in the future. This type of investment in FGCS, also increases productivity, and social engagement like voting

(Perna, 2015). Closing the equity gap on higher education, means encouraging and creating space for groups from culturally diverse backgrounds to be able to pursue higher education.

Plain and simply, educators need to care about the students they are working with. Care is truly at the core of CP and its origins being born in healthcare and emphasizing the importance of developing a holistic approach and cultural competence to address the needs of participants (Betancourt, et al, 2005). Researcher Valenzuela from Austin, Texas, explored the ways in which caring impacted high school students from U.S. Mexican backgrounds. In her study, based on observation and group interviews, she found students to have very low achievement levels. The school, faulted this on the students and parents contributing to the story that parents and students simply don't care about school and thus as a result fail out (Fine, 1991; Peshkin, 1991; Noddings, N. (1984). For immigrant students who were in peer groups, achievement was higher and validates the notion of human capital (Yosso, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005). Researcher Valenzuela also develops the term 'subtracting schooling' which directly correlates to the poor academic achievement in students through the act of assimilation (Valenzuela, 2005).

Researchers have found that in higher education a predominantly White, male and heterosexual dominant student population and leadership has caused a failure to be inclusive and responsive to the needs of a growing diverse student population (Wood and Atkins, 2006). CP leaders must then be aware of and acknowledge this fault in the education system and move forward with a commitment to: data driven decision-making, cultural awareness, ethical actions and student-centered inclusive practices (Thackrah & Thompson, 2013). This type of change requires all participants to take up their leadership, not just the ones with the official labels to take up space for a conversation around CP and social justice (Healey et al., 2014). In a higher education setting, a CP approach takes on a critical look at the attitudes and practices of

17

individuals and organizations, as well as policies maintained. Keeping an open mindset to re-evaluate leadership, teaching, advising, strategies and spaces in school is a must to implement and sustain change for the growth of all parties involved (Sobel & Taylor, 2011). Below is a glossary of terms used throughout this paper.

Definition of Terms

➜ First Generation College Students (FGCS): Students who are lacking the knowledge necessary for college success.

➜ Graduate Student: Any person enrolled in a post secondary degree program (PhD, EdD, JD or other specified doctoral degree in the United States).

➜ Culturally Diverse: Refers to the various multicultural identities students hold other than White.

➜ Storytelling: Is a form of using narratives to share an experience.

➜ Counter-Storytelling/Narratives: Is a way to challenge the traditional or dominant narrative.

➜ Student Success: Can be defined as many different things, usually it depends on the perspective of the individual or school. Student Success can often look like getting: good grades, a job, or graduating. For this study, students will have a chance to choose their own definition of success and consider both barriers and the factors that helped them overcome them as doctoral students.

➜ Barriers: Obstacles preventing someone or something from moving forward.

➜ Hidden Curriculum: Hidden Curriculum is the untold lessons about educational values or beliefs you need to do well in school.

- ➔ Cultural Proficiency: Is described as acknowledging and celebrating the diverse perspectives of the students, community and school officials, while including them in the decision-making process affecting their education system.

- ➔ Engaged Pedagogy: Is a holistic approach in which student and teacher form a relationship to work together for student success.

- ➔ Resiliency: Is the ability of overcoming barriers.

- ➔ Critical Race Theory (CRT): Is a lens through which race is analyzed in relation to another topic. Counter-Narratives play a big role within CRT.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

According to Socialization Theory (2011) networks of support should include professors, supervisors, Principal Investigators, and their peers. It would be beneficial to investigate how formal and informal leaders can continue to change the culture of higher education to support the success of FGCS living in virtual settings. If faculty are able to tune into the strengths of the students, then FGCS would feel better prepared to succeed in any academic environment, virtual or not. Teachers are instrumental in helping facilitate non-curricular skills for students to promote opportunities for self-regulation, collaborating, and academic mindsets to help them thrive. In order for FGCS to succeed in academia and beyond, it must then provide sets of people and structures that can support them through different higher education settings.

Conclusion

Through storytelling we have the opportunity to change the narrative from passive to engaged and from surviving to thriving for students who do not normally get a chance to be included in leadership conversations. Connecting these students with the curriculum is an accessible way to help them and their communities do well (Miley, 2009). First Generation College Students come with a wealth of culture and knowledge. It is important that as educators

and leaders, we collectively acknowledge, center and celebrate these diverse perspectives to help students feel engaged and valued in higher education (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Adopting a Cultural Proficient mindset to include formal and informal leaders into the conversation allows for educators to create inclusive practices and spaces where students can talk with each-other, share experiences openly, adopt a growth mindset, build a sense of community, adapt curriculum and bridge pathways for cross-collaborations to the benefit First Generation College Students in doctoral programs (Perna, 2015; Soles et al., 2019). Utilizing a Cultural Proficient framework and the lenses of: Resiliency, Socialization and Critical Race theories, this paper will make an argument for storytelling and resiliency as necessary and beneficial tools for FGCS success. In the next section, I will provide a literature overview as background for understanding FGCS experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines and promotes the resilience of FGCS in doctoral programs across higher education institutions in the United States (Boden et al., 2011; Soles et al., 2019; Weidman et al., 2001; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). I will also cover the benefits of applying both a growth mindset and storytelling to promote resiliency and list some challenges FGCS doctoral students face. (Aguilar et al., 2014; Miley, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2016; Pazargadi, 2019; Potts, 2014; Rhew et al., 2018; Yosso, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2010). This literature review utilizes Cultural Proficiency as a guide to address the achievement gap empowering both formal and informal leaders to take up ownership over their own learning and navigate education together (Carpenter & Pease, 2013; Cross, 1989; Lindsey, 2018; Ramos, 2019; Sobel & Taylor 2011; Welborn, 2022; Wood & Atkins 2006). In this next section, I will review some barriers for FGCS.

Barriers Among First-Generation College Students in Doctoral Programs

Many FGCS do not make it into doctoral programs due to race, ethnicity, income level, overwhelming debt, and/or parent's educational background. If they do make it into graduate programs, additional barriers exist for them if they identify as culturally diverse and First-Generation College Students. Those challenges can look like: cost of tuition, entrance exams, mental health disparities, and/or family responsibilities (McCoy, 2014; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Viaud, 2014). In a literature review conducted by researchers, Roegman, Kolman, Goodwin & Soles (2021) Whiteness was identified as a barrier to learning. White educators had a harder time seeing beyond themselves to critically analyze systems outside of their scope that contributed to harmful stereotypes in educational settings. White educators seemed to lack in some instances the courage to talk about race in class for fear of being wrong. Additionally, out

of an abundance of precaution, White educators hesitated to speak about race to not anger people

of color. For White educators and White students, emotions like guilt and anger were described

as a trend and common barriers to learning about race in schools. White teacher candidates were

easily frustrated, feeling agitated when talking about race (Roegman et al., 2021).

Finding representation on campus is essential for student success especially for racially

underrepresented FGCS (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Soria, 2015; Vivid,

2014). A *Stories Program* was launched in 2011, at a public university, for First-Generation

faculty and student organizations to validate their cultural capital in a university setting. It was an

hour-long panel, held during class sessions and each participant had approximately ten minutes

to share their stories. Students speakers and those in the audience were then guided into small

group conversations to discuss salient topics and themes.

Research suggests, by placing importance in a student's story: empathy, connection, and

awareness, can lead to improved academic performance and engagement (Adichie, 2016; Baxter

Magdola, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). This program helped to create meaning-making for both listener

and presenter in the audience (Nora et al., 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Rondini, 2018). Students

felt valued and validated as an integral part of the campus community (Jehangir, 2009; Luthar,

2000: Miley, 2009). New faculty-student relationships emerged as a direct result of the *Stories*

Program, (King et al., 2017; Luthar, 2000; Adichie, 2016; Anzaldua, 2012).

Stories help FGCS normalize their unique experiences and shared obstacles in an

accessible way (Mlynarczyk, 2014; Ramos, 2019;). These studies also demonstrate the power of

capturing student voice and the crucial exchange of knowledge that occurs through storytelling

(Cassidy, 2016; Ramos, 2019). FGCS in this study stated feeling empowered to play an active

role in their college-journey with the guidance of relationships that occurred within their

educational environments (King et al., 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). This study also found that students Socializing in groups helped them navigate the educational environment of their professional programs, an important insight to consider for those who don't have immediate family to guide them through college (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Lecy, 2021; Viaud, 2014).

Literature indicates that students who are supported by one or more people while they were enrolled in their doctoral program helped them gain the necessary information to persist in any given environment or organization (Museus & Chang, 2021; Roksa et al., 2018; Takimoto et al., 2021). When exposed to diverse networks, FGCS demonstrate an enormous amount of resilience in academic spaces that are drastically different from the ones they grew up with (Hoy, 2022; Romero, 2014; Soles et al., 2020). Maintaining personal relationships intentionally inside and outside of school requires a lot of work, but has proved to be instrumental in the retention, resilience and matriculation of Black and Hispanic FGCS (Hausmann et al., 2007; Lecy, 2021; Rondini, 2018; Viaud, 2014). Next, I will define and review the concept of Hidden Curriculum.

The Hidden Curriculum

In the Ted Talk: *Privileged Poor,* researcher and practitioner Anthony Jack (2019), argues that access and inclusion within the scope of higher education are not the same. Access provides opportunity and privileged students are given many more opportunities to be successful than their counterparts (Capannola, & Johnson, 2022; Holley, & Gardner, 2012). Inclusion on the other hand means they are made to feel an equal and valued part of the group (Kentli, 2009; Museus & Chang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). First-Generation College Students often report feeling: isolated, lost, and discouraged in academic settings unknowingly facing access without inclusion (Fine, 1991; Peshkin, 1991; Valenzuela, 2005). So what does access without inclusion mean?

The Hidden Curriculum as defined by Kentli (2009) is a silent or invisible set of rules in a school setting that some student groups have access to, while others do not (Adichi, 2016; Bonilla-Sylva & Peoples, 2022; Brown, 2014; Hall, 2006; McIntosh, 1998). These rules impact a student's academic and long-term success (Gair & Mullins, 2001). The Hidden Curriculum (HC) is different from formal curriculum, where a student may receive a syllabi with explicit rules, policies and expectations (Jack, 2019; Kently, 2009). The HC consists of learned behaviors, perspectives, or habits that are needed to do well in college (Jack, 2019; Kently, 2009; Wiedman, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001). For example, in most American classrooms raising your hand before speaking is a learned behavior, but if an international student in an American school setting were to speak out of turn and get reprimanded, this would not be their fault unless it was explicitly said in the syllabi or elsewhere (Kentli, 2009; Gair & Mullins, 2001; Wiedman, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001).

In higher education, for example, *Office Hours* are seen as part of the Hidden Curriculum (Jack, 2019; Kently 2009). In this case, students may not know what that term actually means if they're FGCS (Holley, 2019; Capannola & Johnson 2022). There is a privilege from knowing the term: *Office Hours* and how to use them. The students that Anthony Jack (2019) engaged with, who were low-income FGCS, assumed that office hours were private time for faculty not to be disturbed (Jack, 2019; Kentli, 2009). When a faculty member mentions they have office hours, but do not explain what that means, they assume that all students come to college with the same level of knowledge and preparation, which is not always the case (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Goddard et al., 2001; Hoy, 2002). In many cases, students from culturally diverse backgrounds do well to benefit from asset-based approaches like Cultural Proficiency, Socialization, Resiliency and Growth Mindset theories (Aguilar et al.,

2014; Cassidy, 2016, Lindsey et al., 2018). In this next section I will review the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, a Cultural Proficient framework is used to understand the experiences of FGCS (Cross, 1989, Lindsey et al., 2018; Soles et al., 2020; Welborn et al., 2022). Cultural Proficiency (CP) as defined by Welborn et al. (2022) is described as valuing and including the diverse perspectives of the students, community and school officials, as a part of the decision-making process in educational settings. CP acknowledges the differences of all its members and the richness in their experiences (Cross 1989, Lindsey et al., 2018). It invites everyone to work together towards the success of its students in a harmonious union of shared power, authority and responsibility (Daly & Finnegan; 2012; Hoy, 2002; Soles et al., 2018). Care is at the core of Cultural Proficiency (CP). Its origins were born out of a healthcare system emphasizing the importance of developing a holistic approach and cultural competence to address the needs of patients (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Park, 2005). Schools therefore must adopt a Cultural Proficient approach to adapt to the diverse and always changing needs of the student body in an inclusive manner (Adichie, 2016; Hausmann et al., 2007; Jehangir, 2010; Martin, 2013).

To successfully implement CP in school settings researchers Cross et al. (1989) identifies and defines four phases for educators to go through, described in the literature as tools, they are: *Overcoming, Relying, Collecting, and Planning* (Appendix: G). Tool is used to describe the process which guides leaders through reflections of their biases. During the *Overcoming* phase, groups take a critical look at the behaviors, habits, and practices that are unhealthy and may create challenges to the organization's growth. During the second phase, *Relying*, leaders depend on the CP framework to create more sustainable and equitable changes regarding policies and practices. During the third phase, *Collecting*, leaders collect data on policy, practice, and

behaviors of the organization to understand the existing inequities and create solutions collectively. Finally, during the *Planning* phase, leaders create an action plan to promote equity, access and inclusion with students' direct input and best interest (Cross, 1989, Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022).

Much like Socialization Theory, leaders can learn by analyzing problems and scenarios by applying an inquiry-based learning method in groups while adopting CP (Weidman, 2010; Welborn et al. 2022). Cultural Proficiency requires leaders to reflect deeply individually and connect in groups to enact change (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Daly, & Finnigan, 2012; Valenzuela, 2005). This type of ongoing dialogue will help produce a shift in mindset for educators (Welborn et al., 2022). Additionally, a CP approach will help students play an active role in transforming organizations, increasing equity and overcoming barriers like: oppression, privilege, and any resistance to change (Casey and Welborn, 2020; Maslow & Lewis, 1987; Nadal, et al., 2014; Thackrah, & Thompson, 2013). The overall goal, therein lies to achieve social justice for our students to achieve, succeed and thrive in the settings we create as educators. Next, I will outline how to overcome barriers through CP.

Overcoming Barriers Through Cultural Proficiency

Cultural Proficiency acknowledges the cultural component in schools and works towards centering students' stories, and highlighting their diverse experiences to shift the culture of the school (Lindsey et al., 2018). CP challenges traditional and archaic school structures to allow for student groups on campus to create a cultural understanding with empathetic dialogues. Research indicates a strong correlation between student achievement and being a part of the decision-making process. CP model forces leaders to take accountability for their decision-making process by making it truly more democratic and inclusive through the participation of both

informal and formal members of the community to take part in the decision-making process (Cross; 1989; Lindsey, 2018; Welborn et al., 2022; Welborn et al., 2022).

In a higher education setting, a CP approach means taking a critical look at the attitudes and practices of individuals and the whole organization. It also calls for a review of policies in place, an open mindset to re-evaluate leadership, teaching, advising, and spaces in school to best serve its community (Sobel & Taylor, 2011). Students' cultural capital must be considered and their voice incorporated into the decision-making process. CP leaders must then be aware of and acknowledge faults in the education system and move forward with a commitment to: data driven decision-making, cultural awareness, ethical actions and student-centered inclusive practices (Thackrah & Thompson 2013). Educators and mentors are an important part of student success because they can provide resources and regular check-ins to help students maneuver higher education barriers. During these touch-points, educators and mentors can enable students to look for other opportunities to develop agency. Through CP, universities can and should foster spaces where authentic relationships can also be built between students, staff and faculty in order to help students persist (Carpenter & Pease, 2013; Lindsey, 2018). Learning to create a strong network of people to provide support and guidance helps students build resilience and persist in diverse college settings and prepare them for life after higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2016).

According to researcher Terry Cross (1989), who first introduced CP, some of the barriers that may present themselves while implementing change are: current systems of oppression, preconceived notions of privilege, unawareness of need to adapt, and a resistance to change. We must address these openly and collaboratively in order to create and sustain positive change (Cross, 1989). Privilege is a barrier in Cultural Proficiency that can lead to unexamined

bias in school settings affecting student performance and sustaining racist school policies and procedures in place (Hoy, 2002; Lindsey et al., 2018; Nadal et al., 2011; Soles et al., 2020; Welborn et al., 2022). Additionally educators may hesitate to change due to their inability to acknowledge ownership for a student's poor student outcomes (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022, Zamudio et al., 2011). A good place to start to address barriers is by centering student voice through storytelling in the form of dialogue, interviews and focus groups to help drive student outcomes and teaching practices for educators (Goddard, 2001; Hoy, 2002; Jehangir, 2010; Farnsworth, 2021; Phillips & Horowitz, 2017; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Soles et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

CP also recognizes that some students do not come into college with the same base-knowledge as others (Jack, 2019; Kentli, 2009). It also acknowledges personal and group identities (Allen & Lee, 2021; Anzaldua, 2012; Jehangir, 2012;). CP leaders must then do the work to step in and guide culturally diverse groups to implement this model and shift campus culture to value diversity (Daly, & Finnigan, 2012; Lindsey, 2018; Soles et al., 2020). This is also a model that can be applied on both an individual and systemic level to enact change. Each system must facilitate services that are considerate of and available for the diverse needs of each culture and group (Museus; 2017; Nuri-Robins, 2011; Peshkin, 1991; Valenzuela, 2005; Welborn et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005).

Building Trust in Schools

Another challenge in systems is a lack of trust and communication. Trust is an element of social capital and is critical to the wellbeing of an organization (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Fukuyama, 1995). Trust plays a crucial role in enacting change within educational institutions, but is quite hard to obtain (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). Trust in definition is being vulnerable with another group and being confident that they will reciprocate

safety, reliability, honesty and openness (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). If people in an organization feel safe, then they are more likely to innovate and take risks (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Ed-mondson, 2004; Moolenaar et al., 2010; Tscharmen-Moran, 2004). It is important to note that researchers have suggested that trust can only thrive in environments where competition is not present, and as a result will lead to more collaborations overtime (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy,2002; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

There is little research on schools and trust, however studies suggest that trust is correlated with student performance and outcomes (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Goddard, et al., 2001). When there is a lack of trust, members of the organization can start to experience isolation, anxiety, and estrangement (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Trust is necessary to empower educational leaders, find new ways of collaborating and decision-making as well as new leadership styles (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008). There is value in being real and authentic in conversation with each-other about what is working and what is not in a unique offering to learn from our mistakes and move forward together (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008)

In the article titled:*"Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform"* 400 Chicago elementary schools were observed over ten years. Through these observations: principals, teachers, parents and community leaders attended meetings, events, interviews and focus groups to talk about the role of trust in school reform. This study found: trust in school settings are more likely to occur in a small size of 350 students or less (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Recognizing that most schools, especially those that are in low-income neighborhoods, are crowded and under-resourced, parents and students really need to take up agency for their education (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003; Daly, & Finnigan, 2012). Researchers Bryk & Schneider (2003) argue that

engaging parents from underserved communities can help improve the students' academic

performance and need to maintain: mutual respect, personal regard, acknowledgement of core

responsibilities, abilities, integrity and trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Rodriguez et al., 2003;

Rondini, 2018; Tschannen, 2001).

In, *Hood to Harvard*, Roland Fryer, noted that Black high-school students with good

grades had less friends than those with mediocre ones and that the reverse was true for White

students (Fryer, 2015). Fryer, having come from an impoverished background, knew money

would be an incentive for students to work harder. As a result, in his study, he offered a

monetary incentive to motivate students to participate in the classroom and as a result, a 10%

increase in payments led to an 8.7% increase in more effort (Fryer, 2015). Engaging students in

the classroom leads to success. Bryk & Schneider (2003) found that a stable school community

positively affected relationships and involvement of parents and children with school

administrators Rodriguez et al., 2003.

Voluntary association was a factor that impacted how parents perceived choice and

involvement in the relationship (Gofen, 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). If parents and

students are shown that they are a valuable asset to the conversation, then parents would be more

inclined to participate as would students in college settings (Lindsey et al., 2018; Gofen, 2009;

Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Often, in college, First-Generation College Students will hold

multiple jobs and juggle several identities like being: caretakers for their children, younger

siblings or elderly parents and grandparents, presenting it difficult to both attend college, work

and do the latter (Gofen, 2009). In order to advance and support FGCS, more key stakeholders

must be identified and show a commitment to individual growth for systemic growth to occur in a professional community (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2018).

Dr. Adan Sanchez (2021), local researcher and higher education practitioner in southern California suggests supporting faculty and staff with a variety of trainings will help support students managing their intersecting identities to be a part of the dialogue (Bandura, 1982; Lecy, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). In his research, Sanchez states that faculty will be better prepared to engage with students and their identities if they invite them into a conversation, which will create a welcoming and inclusive environment to storytell (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). There should also be an effort to collaborate across departments, to share responsibility, knowledge and provide the same level of consistency to all students (Sanchez, 2021).

Being Culturally Proficient is an investment that will create equitable opportunities for diverse groups (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). First-Generation College Students come with a wide array of perspectives and values that are impacted by their identities and upbringing (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Yosso, 2005). This affects all aspects of their lives including: their learning, their dreams, goals and school behavior (Bandura, 1982; Cassidy, 2016; Ramos, 2019). Our responsibility as educators is to believe that all our students are capable of learning and to create open shared experiences, trust, and curriculum that reflects their culture and experiences (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Perna, 2021; Soles et al., 2020). Narrowing the educational gap means adopting a growth mindset, creating opportunities for sense of belonging, storytelling and developing resiliency (Baxter, 2008; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Southwick et al., 2014; Welborn et al. 2022). Next, I will review how socialization plays a role in FGCS success.

Lens of Socialization

Socialization is defined by researchers Boden et al. (2011) as the ability to adopt the skills necessary to adapt and become efficient contributors of society (Weidman, 2010). Socialization theory explains that graduate students can only become proficient after they interact regularly within academic and professional networks including their peers, faculty, and other professionals (Weidman et al., 2001; Hoy, 2002). It is suggested that Socialization can occur in phases. The first phase occurs while students are researching college admissions and location, next when they arrive on campus, learning to become familiar with academic expectations and expanding their networks (Gardner, 2009; Jack, 2019; Kently, 2009). In the second phase, students start their coursework, research and join a lab. Additionally, during this stage, students will take exams, find their committee members, and select their research topic. In the final stage of Socialization, students start to contemplate their future and aspire to careers, publications, and the transition that comes with defending and leaving their doctoral programs (Boden et al., 2011; Wiedman et al., 2001). While peers and other members of the academic community impact the Socialization process, faculty are considered key in the development and success of the doctoral student as researchers (Hoy 2002; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Lee, 2012).

Doctoral students have reported that the relationships they made and Socialization they experienced earlier in their academic careers highly impacted their choice to remain in their programs (Kokotsaki, 2023; Ramos, 2019). Additionally, researchers have found that students that were integrated into their department early on did better than those who did not attend opportunities to network and build community with the department (Lovitts, 2001). However, according to some researchers, opportunities to participate have been inequitable for culturally diverse students (Jack, 2019; Kently, 2009; Valenzuela, 2005). For example, in comparison to male White students, women and diverse racial and ethnic groups said Socialization experiences

had been more negative with several inequities overall in their doctoral program. This consisted of missed opportunities to participate in professional development, publishing or presenting at conferences, where it was noted that there was not an equal distribution of genders and ethnic groups (Millet & Nettles, 2006). However, more studies are needed to examine the relationship between FGCS and continuing students to fully understand the differences and similarities between their Socialization experiences. Next, I will discuss overcoming barriers through socialization and the support of Non-Formal and Formal leaders.

Overcoming Barriers through Socialization and the Support of Non-Formal and Formal Leaders

A Socialization lens validates that the support FGCS receive from peers, faculty, and staff networks help them transition and adapt to their academic programs and careers (Daly & Finnigan,2012; Noddings, 1984; Peshkin, 1991; Valenzuela, 2005). Socialization Theory explains that graduate students can only become competent after they interact regularly with their academic and professional networks (Weidman et al., 2001). Formal and informal school leaders must partake in all decision-making, this includes students and families (Lindsey et al., 2018; Saeb et al., 2022; Welborn et al., 2022). Research indicates that over time interactions lead to positive language, behaviors, and practices to help enact and sustain change in those schools (Lindsey et al., 2018; Soles, 2020; Welborn et al, 2018. However, some barriers may halt change in schools, like when students experience microaggressions when teachers shut doors on students who were late to class. This created an unwelcoming space for students to be on a regular basis (Nadal et al., 2011; Soles, 2020; Welborn et al, 2018). When students experience fewer stereotypes in academic spaces, they have higher self esteem and lower depression symptoms (Saeb, Solano-Humérez & Soles, 2022; Romero, Edwards, Fryburg & Orduna, 2014). Formal and informal leaders have the ability to contribute to lower perceptions of the self among

students, and this affects performance in the classroom (Romero, Edwards, Fryburg & Orduna, 2014).

Schools have a responsibility to help students feel safe (Saeb, Solano-Humérez & Soles, 2022). There is a shared responsibility educators need to understand to create equity and access, across all classrooms and campuses. If situations like these continue to be ignored, the results could prove catastrophic for our culturally diverse students FGCS, preventing them from completing an undergraduate education or pursuing postgraduate opportunities (Allen & Lee, 2001; Goddard et al., 2001;McCray, & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Staff and administrators must create a safe environment for an exchange of stories and experiences to overcome barriers and create practices and policies that sustain these changes over time (Adichie, 2016; Farnsworth, 2021; Jehangir, 2010; Muñoz & Maldonado 2012). This means continuing to include everyone in the process with special attention to all informal leaders and community members like parents and students (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). As well as seeking allies and collaborations with other formal leaders within the education system to create counter-narratives as motivation (Welborn et al, 2018; Zamudio et al., 2010). In this next section, I will discuss the benefits of applying growth mindsets in academic settings.

Developing a Growth Mindset through Socialization

In a *Physics Today* article called "*Psychological Insights for Improving Physics Teaching*" by Lauren Aguilar, Greg Walton and Carl Wieman (2014) write of ways to support students from under-served populations in physics. For example, faculty: hosted weekly help sessions, and provided positive reinforcement when students asked questions in class (Hoy, 2002). But most of these efforts to support students usually backfired. According to social psychology, there are many obstacles that should be taken into consideration that go beyond attending study sessions or raising your hand in class (Allen, 2001; Fine, 1991; Lecy, 2021;

34

Maslow, 1987; Valenzuela, 2005). The authors argue that four interventions must take place for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Latino, African-American and Women) to succeed in academia: social belonging, growth mindset, values affirmation, and critical feedback with support (Aguilar et al., 2014; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Museus & Chang, 2021, Soles et al., 2020).

'Growth Mindset' is defined by researchers Yeager & Deck (2012) as the ability to learn to be smart under the right guidance and support (Weidman et al., 2001). In contrast, others believe that intelligence is an inherited trait and cannot be learned, this is called a 'fixed mindset' which also mirrors White Supremacy frameworks that support deficit thinking about culturally diverse groups (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006; McIntosh, 1998). Faculty can challenge negative stereotypes about intelligence in classroom settings by adopting and teaching about Growth Mindset (Aguilar et al., 2014; Hoy, 20023). When students can begin to adopt a new mindset that teaches them that their minds are something that can strengthen and grow over time, just like muscles then intelligence becomes something attainable. Students who identify within marginalized groups (Women, Black or Latino, etc.) often face more stress and insecurities because they struggle to connect with their White peers while also battling stereotypes (Aguilar et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2011). If students are unable to trust the people they work with or share their stories with them, then they will begin to build barriers that will cause them to disconnect from coursework, peers and teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Edmondson, 2004; Hoy, 2002).

Not all students arrive with the same language and knowledge to understand how to succeed in higher education (Jack 2019; Kentli, 2009). Educators must think of interventions for

culturally diverse groups such as a Growth Mindset (Aguilar et al., 2014; Weidman, 2001). If the school affirms the belief that only some students are smart, then it becomes a dangerous and scary space for students who may feel excluded in their abilities (Adichie, 2016; Valenzuela, 2005, Nadal et al., 2014). This would then result in students feeling disengaged in their classes (Lecy, 2021; Nunn, 2021). If all students are afforded the privilege and opportunity to learn, grow, make mistakes in a safe environment, they may feel more motivated to continue practicing their skills until they achieve their desired outcome, supporting retention and gradation efforts (Ramos, 2019; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). For example, if a student receives a bad grade on a test, a 'Fixed Mindset' will tell them they're incompetent and won't ever do better in the future. This could lead to decreased effort, engagement and a poor academic record. A 'Growth Mindset' would tell them they can improve and do better with more time and proper support & guidance. This would increase their effort, encourage them to ask questions, ask for help and ideally do better (Aguilar et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

If faculty choose to have a Fixed Mindsets, and refuse to change curriculum to fit the needs of each student group every year, for example, then they won't be able to support struggling students in reaching their full potential (Hoy, 2002). Educators must change the way in which they think and interact with students on a daily basis (Cross, 1989; Lindsey et all., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). It is of the utmost importance to offer different touchpoints for students to feel safe and brave enough to try new things without the fear of failing and being berate for their gaps in learning (Aguilar et al., 2014; Pajares & Schunk 2001). Educators must be self-aware of their bias to implement successful classroom interventions Lindsey et all., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). This can include making time for storytelling and gaining the student's perspective, or offering an exchange of perspectives and sharing knowledge about how

intelligence is attained (Baxter Magdola, 2008; Mlynarczyk, 2014; Miley, 2009). Instead, some educators knowingly contribute to the equity gap within education because it's easier to ignore it then change it (Aguilar et al., 2014; Pajares & Schunk 2001; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

A student's mindset is most crucial during transitions from high school to college and college to graduate school. Research shows a strong sense of belonging for students to positively affect their perspective in the classroom and create better future experiences in the long run (Museus & Saelua, 2017; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). FGCS should be encouraged to share parts of their story to faculty and staff and be guided with reflective questions for meaning-making (Hoy, 2002; Lindsey et al., 2018) . For example, faculty can ask their students to identify their strengths and write letters to themselves as a reminder that their brains, like their bodies, are always evolving and growing (Aguilar et al., 2014; Hoy, 2002).

Students' understanding of how they learn significantly impacts their academic success. Chilean researchers studied the relationship between national test scores and a student's belief or understanding of a 'Growth Mindset'. Those students who had learned about a Growth Mindset had a twenty percent higher test score than those who believed in a 'Fixed Mindset' (Aguilar et al., 2014). Similarly researchers have discovered that while providing a space to discuss Growth Mindset is important, just as much needed are specific strategies for developing their intelligence (Farnsworth, 2021). When this space is held, researchers have found that grades and test scores rise (Hausmann et al., 2007; Zumbrunn et al., 2014).

Parents, families and loved ones also play an important role in a student's mindset by helping build it or break it down (Gofen, 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez, 2003; Yosso, 2006). Families and loved ones in turn, can help build resilience and a Growth Mindset by cheering on the process rather than the immediate end result (Aguilar et al., 2014; Pajares &

Schunk 2001; Walton & Cohen, 2011). For example, if a student receives a high letter grade of A+ on a test score, instead of focusing on the actual grade, they should emphasize and cheer on the improvement (Aguilar et al., 2014). This will change the minds of both family members or loved ones and the student, placing importance on the process versus the end result (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). It is through the collaboration, support and equal responsibility of all stakeholders, in this case: students, families, and educators, that we can help implement change in school settings (Daly, & Finnigan; 2012; Soles et al., 2020). In this upcoming section, I discuss how to create agency and resiliency through storytelling and collaborations.

Building Agency & Resiliency through Socialization and Storytelling

First-Generation College Students with identities that put them at risk and who come from marginalized groups often carry with them trauma that are both seen inside and outside classroom settings (i.e. school shootings, racial discrimination, and abuse or neglect) (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Allen & Lee, 2001; Fine, 1991; Hausmann, 2007; Nadal et al., 2014). Stories help develop meaning-making and advocacy in school settings (Anzaldua, 2012; Baster, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). This can be achieved through reflective practices, creating purpose, noting strengths, resilience, values and more (Aguilar et al., 2014; Farnsworth, 2021; Ramos; 2019). Authors Carpenter and Pease (2013), argue that more responsibility and support should be given to students in the form of deeper learning to develop resilient abilities. In order for students to be more successful, policy makers and educators must be willing to invest in programs that will help students learn how to: self-regulate, build community and adopt academic mindsets (Daly & Chrispeels 2008; Lindsey et al., 2018; Soles et al., 2020; Welborn et al,. 2022). Self-regulation is the ability of one's self to gain control of his or her responses in order to pursue and realize their goals. For this to occur, a student must feel confident enough to take ownership (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). For example, students should be encouraged to create their own

schedules so that they feel in control of their own time. Teachers can help by offering more trust and opportunities to collaborate and build community within smaller groups in the classroom (Carpenter and Pease, 2013; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Edmondson, 2004; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Fukuyama, 1995).

It is through storytelling that teachers can learn from the students and understand where they're coming from and how much support they need (Baxter, 2008; Jehangir, 2010; Farnsworth, 2021). Collaboration is also a skill that not only impacts students in educational settings, but in real world situations when dealing with people from different backgrounds than themselves (Carpenter and Pease, 2013; Lindsey et al., 2018). Learners who engage in effective cooperative activities with their peers can benefit from better academic performance, stronger relationships and greater individual psychological well-being (Carpenter and Pease, 2013; Nadal et al., 2014; Noddings, 1984; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Though collaborations are an important aspect of being successful as a student, the reflection portion is just as important. Helping students process the experiences that they just went through is where the learning occurs (Baxter Magdola, 2008; Carpenter and Pease, 2013; Mlynarczyk, 2014; Miley, 2009; Polkinghorne, 2013). If students can then harness and share this knowledge with their FGCS peers, they could feel more supported and empowered to maneuver through college together instead of alone (Palmer & Young, 2008; Pazargadi, 2019; Weidman, 2010).

Instilling purpose, is also a strong motivator behind persistence and resiliency (Malin, 2018). When students encounter stressful situations, they usually investigate to understand why it occurred. If a student has a solid foundation in their beliefs and purpose, they will enter problem solving mode in order to navigate said obstacles (Riff, 2016). Educators should be encouraged to provide safe spaces where students can reflect, self and peer assess one another through a

39

strengths-based approach (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). Non-traditional approaches such as a Growth Mindset should be adopted to influence student's beliefs about their success and academic outcomes (Aguilar et al., 2014). Performing successfully in a classroom is about engaging with and learning new content that allows you to challenge the curriculum and not just learn the rules of the game and assimilate (Carpenter and Pease, 2013; Lindsey et al, 2018; Soles et al., 2020; Welborn et al., 2022).

Power is given to the storyteller by allowing them to choose their own language and giving them the space to connect with others on similar experiences (Anzaldua, 2012; Miley, 2009; King et al., 2017; Tyson, 2016). Utilizing stories to help students become aware of their strengths and shared experiences, helps them gain confidence in who they are to feel like experts (Baxter, 2008; Polkinghorn, 2013). Two common story types among Narrative Inquiry includes: *The Success Story* and *The Quest Story* (Chase, 2005). In *The Success Story*, the main character is triumphant in achieving their goal and successfully overcoming their obstacles. In *The Quest Story*, the highlight is finding a sense of purpose and meaning through specific challenges. In applying Growth Mindset, *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell (1973), in which the hero grows through many trials and is victorious at the end, will eventually go through four phases. In this story, they are: *Origins*, *Falling into a Well*, *Climbing Out of a Well, and Returning with an Elixir.* Hearing a story like this would help students relate in the sense that their end goal can be achieved with the overcoming of certain obstacles (Farnsworth, 2021; Jehangir, 2010; Mlynarczyk, 2014). Yet, trust plays a key role in becoming vulnerable and accepting the guidance of certain characters in order to feel safe enough to persist (Chase 2005; Campbell, 1973; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Edmondson, 2004; Hoy, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). In this

next section, I will discuss the importance of applying an asset-based approach to the experiences of culturally diverse FGCS.

Lens of Resilience

A Resiliency Lens is used to help us understand how students engage and process certain experiences in school (Masten, 2011; Cassidy, 2016; Kokotsaki, 2023). Resilience in children and families through psychology has been studied at great lengths, but resiliency in schools has only been studied recently (Block & Kremen, 1996; McCray et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2012; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Other researchers have hypothesized that to develop resiliency, students must be able to go through adversity first to learn to adapt (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Martin, 2013; Rogerson & Ermes, 2008 , Southwick et al., 2014 , Kiziela et al., 2019). Over time there have been many studies done on resilience, and although some differ by diversity of participants and topic of study, many have come to the same conclusion that resiliency is taught over time rather than off of one event (Garrett, 2016 , p 191). In most cases, students will learn how to cope with stressful factors from their families, an environment which if taught at an early age, can lead to successful peer and mentor relationships (Gofen, 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez, 20023; Rondini, 2018; Yosso, 2005).

When students are asked who is a positive role model in their lives most likely than not they choose a parent, second to them is a teacher. Schools and teachers hold an enormous amount of power to impact a student's life for the better (Bernard, 2017; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez, 2002; Rondini, 2018). Students are shown to work harder when they love and trust a teacher. Meeting this basic survival need of nurture among FGCS is a holistic acknowledgement of their person, that they are not just showing up to class to be taught or fixed, but that they are going to be cared for as a whole (Bernard, 2017; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990).

For this study, resiliency is viewed as a learned ability (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008, p. 30; McCray et al., 2016: Shin et al., 2012). We consider one framework of resilience according to the theory of researchers Masten et al. (1990): resiliency is seen as the ability to overcome risk or 'adversity'. For people who come from marginalized groups and do well against other obstacles, it is a result of other skills and networks that have been developed along the way (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Capannola & Johnson, 2022). They are more open to asking for and receiving help. These students will keep persisting until their goals are met (Cassidy, 2016; Kokotsaki, 2023; Masten, 1990).

Students who are resilient, understand their own responsibility in their success and the importance of relationships (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Sorensen, 2016). The resilient student is able to bounce back from difficult situations, but can also advocate for themselves and believe in one's self to keep pushing forward utilizing their networks and resources (Bandura, 1982; Allen & Lee, 2001). For a group of people who are able to learn to adapt such experiences learned through Socialization and mastered being able to code switch no matter the setting or circumstance (Block & Kremen, 1996; Gofen, 2009; Shin et al., 2012; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Sometimes, however, peers, educators and parents can negatively affect the resiliency of students. These groups have the ability to harm or empower them by passing on learned behaviors through social and emotional experiences (Rondini, 2018).

Educators can help by creating: 'resilience fostering universities' for students to feel safe and discuss strategies for building resilience in academic spaces (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, p. 2). However, researchers note that building resilience can look a little different from student to student and institution to institution depending on the opportunities they have available. For example, creating programs and events that foster meaning-making, self-reflection, goal-setting

and relationships can bring academic, personal and professional success among racially diverse groups (Muñoz S. M., Maldonado M. M. (2012); Rodriguez et al., 2003; Walten & Cohen, 2011).

Moreover, resilience at some universities can also look like seeking student programming for mindfulness, empathy and compassion (Brown, 2014; Arizona State University, 2020). Representation is also instrumental in the resiliency of students, peers and educators who understand the unique experiences of culturally diverse FGCS in academic settings (McCray et al., 2016; Muñoz et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Shin et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). Storytelling and relationships breed resilience and provide an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and monolithic narratives in academia about culturally diverse individuals (McCray et al., 2016; McCray, & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Ramos, 2019; Rondini, 2018). Next, I will examine the power of creating Counter-storytelling through a Lens of Critical Race Theory below.

In a 2005-2009 survey administered by an accounting professor, 97% of students reported storytelling to be an important part of engaging in accounting class. 78% noted that stories contributed to a deeper learning of the topic of accounting, which also made it more accessible and relevant (Miley, 2009). Regardless of background, "storytelling validates students' experiences" (as cited in Nguyen et al., 2016, p. 76). Storytelling promotes resilience among many culturally diverse students because it is a practice that has been handed down from generation to generation. In another survey administered to 845 college students (among Western and Eastern continents) researchers found strong relationships between values, storytelling and resilience (Nguyen et al., 2016). Stories are prevalent everywhere and are not a new way of learning. It is most intuitive and accessible showing up in what we watch, read, and listen to.

Allowing students to reflect on their experiences keeps them involved helping to build community, confidence and resilience as they search for resources and develop a sense of agency in the process. It is important to consider ways to bridge the world of academia to the cultural capital that First-Generation College Students carry with them (Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022; Yosso 2005). This way students have the opportunity to link their lived experiences with the curriculum gaining a greater sense of belonging contributing to their success (Gofen, 2009; Jehangir, 2010). Learning communities is also a perfect example of where meaning-making can occur in conjunction with a classroom learning (Nguyen et al., 2016). Students who participated in these types of opportunities found that learning communities were a safe space to engage with each other, their learning and the curriculum (Lindsey et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016Welborn et al, 2022). This resulted in a stronger sense of self and new found confidence on campus to take ownership over their academic careers (Nguyen et al., 2016; Jehangir, 2010; Baxter Magdola, 2008). In this next section, I will highlight the importance of implementing resiliency in schools.

Implementing Resiliency in Schools

Students want to move beyond access to success and educators can help facilitate this by helping them build resilience (McCray, 2020; Ramos, 2019; Holley & Gardner, 2012). Since students have limited knowledge on how to navigate higher education, building relationships becomes a crucial step in their academic careers (Gofen 2009; Rondini, 2018; Wiedman, 2002). Storytelling can help FGCS to create connection, trust, and relationships (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Edmondson, 2004; Fukuyama, 1995; Bryk, & Schneider, 2002). Educators can serve as mentors to help build resilience and make a space to storytell (Cassidy 2016; Hoy, 2002; Mlynarczyk, 2014 ;Ramos, 2019). Additionally, educators can act as mentors to provide advice on: time management, problem-solving, and resources for academics, mental well-being,

personal or financial challenges that may arise (Hoy, 2002; Wiedman et al., 2001). Mentorship is defined as an exchange of advice and support that encourages growth, socialization, leadership, and career development (Johnson, 2016; Hoy, 2002; Wiedman et al. 2001). Mentoring relationships can strongly impact FGCS by helping them navigate on and off campus life. Since FGCS don't have immediate family members to help them with their finances, for example, mentors can help with applying to financial aid and finding college specific resources. A good mentor provides a balanced amount of challenge and support (Sanford, 1962), so that students feel empowered to embrace their own learning, tackle unforeseen obstacles and seek out new opportunities (Jones & Abbes, 2017).

Additionally, teachers and schools can create trust and build resilience through storytelling by: 1. Being interested (asking them about their interests, gauging how they are doing today) 2. Active listening (acknowledge and repeat what the student said) 3. Validating their feelings (they do not always have to feel happy or motivated and that is ok) 4. Getting to know their dreams, strengths, and gifts (Farnsworth, 2021; Jehangir, 2010; Baxter Magdola, 2008). Teachers and educators across the country have the power to transform their classrooms and their students in accessible ways (Lindsey et al., 2018, Welborn et al., 2022). It begins with believing that a student can become resilient and that we, as their mentors, can act as guides (Aguilar et al., 2014; Weidman et al., 2001). For example, for one African American student, who always felt supported by a Black teacher even with a strict teaching style because she always provided affirming words in comparison to her other teachers, who didn't bother to push her because they believed she would never advance in any subject (Bernard, 2017; Hausmann et al., 2007; Nadal et al., 2014).

Educators and mentors are an important part of student success because they can provide resources and regular check-ins to help students maneuver higher education barriers (Hoy, 2002, Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). During these touch-points, educators and mentors can enable students to look for other opportunities to develop agency (Farnsworth, 2021). Additionally, learning to create a strong network of people to provide support and guidance helps students build resilience to thrive in different college settings and prepare them for life after higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2016; Ramos, 2019). Adopting a strengths-focused Growth Mindset framework, like Cultural Proficiency (CP) which acknowledges and values culture will help CP leaders and educators work collaboratively to flip traditional roles, rules, and systems (Aguilar et al., 2014). CP leaders can then produce safe spaces for learning and invite students to write new classroom rules, re-imagine curriculum and school policies to increase sense of belonging and responsibility (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Maslow, 1987; Soles et al., 2020). In this next section, I will discuss how engaged pedagogy can help FGCS succeed.

Success, Freedom and Engaged Pedagogy

Researcher, educator and Feminist scholar, bell hooks (1994), suggests class has a large impact on the way knowledge is transferred, affecting biases, values, personalities and relationships. hooks (1994) writes about *engaged pedagogy* in her literature as a way to explain a need for both student and teacher to take up equal responsibility in learning. It is a relationship that relies on trust to foster a safe environment to dialogue and question. Being able to openly challenge each-other provides an opportunity to learn and grow (Daly & Chrispeels,2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). This can only be done, however, if there is mutual trust and good communication between those parties involved (Bryk & Schneider; 2002; Edmondson, 2004; Fukuyama, 1995). Teachers must *embrace change* and not classify themselves the *experts* in the

46

room for there is danger in promoting a single story when we call ourselves experts in any setting (Hoy, 2002; Goddard, 2001).

Classifying educators as experts is how we both consciously and unconsciously contribute to the achievement gap. Feminist scholarship states that in order for education to help us gain freedom, old systems should be challenged (hooks, 1994; McIntosh, 1998; Noddings, 1984; Peshkin, 1991; Valenzuela, 2005). It is a betrayal of trust when specific programs, systems, and people promote *access* without inclusion, and use knowledge as a weapon (Daly & Chrispeels,2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). It is also in the hidden curriculum, where FGCS get lost between terms and content. FGCS have to learn and adapt to a completely foreign environment with barely any guidance (Jack 2019, Kently, 2009). In this next section, I will review Critical Race Theory and focus on the power of counter-narratives.

Lens of Critical Race

Critical Race Theory (CRT) brings race to the forefront so that it may be critically analyzed in relation to our society (Delfano & Stefancic, 2001). According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001) CRT is defined as a movement by and for scholars and activists who are actively seeking out connections between race, racism and power. They use CRT to interrogate how White supremacy moves legally through different aspects of our community including: politically and culturally. CRT consists of five tenets: Counter-Storytelling, The Permanence of Racism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Conversion, and the Critique of Liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). This is an important framework to consider because it helps to highlight barriers that exist for students from racially underserved communities in education (Nadal et al, 2014; Rondini, 2018; Saeb et al., 2022).

For this study, a CRT lens will be applied with a focus on Counter-Storytelling and its impact on student success. CRT can be used in higher education to explore the relationship

47

between privilege and oppression in the school system (Delfano & Stefancic, 2001). This can look at: the campus climate, financial support, access to wellbeing resources and the diversity of their peers, staff, faculty, and administration (Hiraldo, 2010; Peshkin, 1991,Yosso, 2005). Counter-Storytelling validates racial groups' experiences in education and provides a tool to tell their story for combating negative stigma associated with their identities in schools (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Rondini, 2018) .

Counter-Stories amplify a person's voice, where they can share their truths as a form of resistance, helping to debunk stereotypes and oppressive stories that have upheld White supremacist ideals and values (Gofen, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It gives racially diverse groups power back to present their perspective and challenge the dominant story. CRT scholars have long worked to topple the dominant narrative and we can do this now through our words in college classrooms no matter the subject matter being taught (Gofen, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Researchers Wood et al (2016), reports that existing literature often puts a blame on "Black men, their families and communities" (p.79), therefore Black men are often discouraged from pursuing higher education and seen in a deficit mindset.

According to researcher Hall (2006) Black men in academia encounter the stereotype of being underachievers and in turn labeled: at-risk, poor, lazy, dumb and incapable. In order for Black men and culturally diverse FGCS to be treated equally in the classroom, a shift in mindset and deficit thinking must occur in and out of the school settings (Hausmann et al., 2007; Nadal et al., 2011; Aguilar et al., 2014) This can only happen when we open up a shared responsibility for learning and facilitate spaces for storytelling to create resiliency (Hoy, 2022; Lindsey et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022).

Black men who have excelled academically have been linked to resiliency as a factor to their success (Allen & Lee, 2001, Martin, 2013; Southwick, et al., 2014: Wood et al., 2016). In a qualitative study with 11 Black male junior and senior students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), researchers Palmer and Young (2008) found that factors that allowed students to become resilient and successfully maneuver through their college journey was 1. Participation in student organizations, 2. Faculty networks, and 3. Advocating for their needs. It was incredibly important to also have a campus community that valued their cultural identity. One student, for example: Malik, commented on his experience in college and developing the confidence to access resources thanks to a summer transition program that believed in him, saw him as an asset and told him he could do anything (Allen & Lee, 2001; Garrett, 2016; Gofen, 2009; Palmer & Young, 2008). Yet many students aren't afforded the same experience. Next, I will discuss the barriers that some FGCS face in graduate schools.

Overcoming Barriers through Counter-Narratives

A counter-narrative challenges a main story, which usually is written by a dominant group. The main story carries with it, a biased rendition of what actually happened, typically defined by the group in power attempting to control the perception of others. Storytelling as a medium is multi-faceted, students can use it as a tool to reframe education systems by forming Counter-Narratives and unleash their creativity through mediums like songs, skits, drawings, dances, paintings, video productions, poetry, or even lab experiments to tell their stories and learn in classroom settings (Anzaldua, 2012; Jehangir, 2010; Baxter Magdola, 2008). Counter-storytelling allows for students to take control of their story and disrupt stereotypes, promote resilience, and rewrite their personal narratives within academia (Gofen, 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Rondini, 2018; Yosso, 2006).

49

In chapter twelve of the book: *Critical Race Theory Matters* (2019), Chicano/Latino/a/e/x parents create a Counter-Narrative when the school believes their lack of involvement in school is because they do not care about their children's education (Gofen, 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Ramos, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Rondini 2018; Valenzuela, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Parents are not regularly seen attending school meetings or participating in parent committee opportunities or pushing their students to do their homework (Anzaldua, 2012; Zamudio et al., 2010). However, this is one story dominating that space, and many hidden barriers lie underneath but creating faculty and staff bias in the parents absence (Hoy, 2002; Nadal et al., 2022). These assumptions about parents not caring, do not take into consideration the financial and familial responsibilities that working families often have when they can't make it to an open house for example (Gofen, 2009; Valenzuela, 2005). Instead, if schools want to support diversity and equity, they must consider providing support like: child care, transportation, and translation services to accommodate working families who would like to attend school meetings (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Soles et al., 2020). If parents do not help their children with homework, it isn't because they do not care, but many have multiple jobs, and/or have not had much schooling themselves and do not know how to support their children (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Ramos, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Zamudio et al., 2010).

The Chicano Moratorium is an important historic example of a Counter-Narrative where more than 30,000 Chicano/a/e/x/Latino/a/e/x students, families, and community members organized walkouts and protests to demand more educational opportunities for their neighborhood (Gofen, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Among one of the requests was for more Latino/e/a/x and Chicano/e/a/x representation in schools. Chicano/a/e/x students made up a large percentage of the school population and young activists took to the streets. As a result, this

strategically affected the school's finances. This brave act pushed the school district to hire more school officials of Latino/e/a/x and Chicano/e/a/x backgrounds (Zamudio et al., 2010). Latinos/es/as/xs and Chicanos/es/as/xs do in fact care about their education and assumptions should not be made about a parents or students involvement without sitting down to understand their stories, the challenges they face and needs they have.

The policies in higher education mirror our local, state and federal laws. School policies are rooted in White supremacy and seen as far back as the birth of the United States (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). Holding space to understand the racist history and impact on racially diverse groups in the United States is of extreme importance in communities where White leaders work with culturally diverse populations. Researchers like Peggy McIntosh, an anti-racist Feminist scholar, have done a good job of creating space for White educators to discuss, analyze, and acknowledge the privileges and bias White educators and leaders carry with them into the world having their identity affirmed regularly (McIntosh, 1998).

Culturally diverse FGCS rarely get to know about the pain and destruction White supremacist groups inflict onto Non-White people, because it is not in their textbooks. Moreover, students are not taught to question systems that continue to oppress Non-Whites, including policies in place supported by racist politicians that work tirelessly to create and sustain laws that deny culturally diverse groups full participation in society. Also limiting access to: voting, health care, tax refunds, and legal as well as financial support for undocumented individuals living in the United States paying taxes. Educators, parents and students need to work together to create inclusive and equitable change especially when leaders may not identify as or know much about

51

the identities and heritage of the parents and students they are working with (Leonardo, 2004; Saeb et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review served to examine how to support more FGCS in doctoral programs. First, we must understand some of the barriers that exist for them at the undergraduate level that can trickle over into their graduate school experiences. Barriers like: lack of communication, poor institutional support, less financial funding, lack of mentorship, or full knowledge of resources, decreased family support, and the absence of community (McCoy, 2014). Literature suggests that developing trust, agency and effective storytelling build resiliency. If students do not trust the environment they are in or people they are around, they will not ask for help. A Cultural Proficiency framework invites students and their diversity into the decision-making process and classifies them as experts in the process.

CP gives educators the tools to look inward within ourselves to examine our bias and outward to critically analyze the barriers in systems that are preventing students from being successful. Finally, channeling the power of storytelling so students can make-meaning of their experiences, learn, and grow while navigating higher education. So few stories are known about culturally diverse FGCS in doctoral programs, storytelling is an important tool to utilize in acknowledging, documenting, and celebrating the testimonies of their experiences. Together, we have the power to shift our narratives and continue empowering one another for a more equitable and diverse future in academia for all FGCS.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study was twofold: one, to offer a scholarly context and two, offer a social justice perspective informing educators and other stake key holders of the barriers that culturally diverse First-Generation College Students (FGCS) face as doctoral students at one predominantly White institution. In the chapters following, I will elevate the experiences of culturally diverse FGCS enrolled in current doctoral programs from one university using a narrative and qualitative approach with a focus on counter-narratives as defined by CRT (Delfano & Stefancic, 2001). I will discuss the data gathered through a focus group and poetry prompts to document the participants' lived experiences. A Cultural Proficient framework and the following lenses will be applied to understand the data: Critical Race Theory, Socialization Theory, and Resiliency Theory. As aforementioned in Chapter 1, the research questions that guide this project are: 1. How do cultural diverse first-generation college students overcome barriers in doctoral programs? 2. What are the barriers that culturally diverse FGCS face in higher education? As you move through this paper, I implore all who read it to consider their roles in shifting, where necessary, with more urgency towards more equitable and inclusive student-centered dialogues practices in your area of expertise (Lindsey et al, 2018; Welborn, 2022). Each university and doctoral program will face their own unique barriers, and it is recommended that personalized data be gathered as well (Cross, 1989; Soles et al., 2024). As an example below, I will review the research design used to gather data; the setting chosen to conduct this study; participants who decided to enroll, and the data collection process and analysis.

Research Design

A lack of research on FGCS in doctoral programs motivated this study to explore the lived experiences of six doctoral students at one university located in Southern California. A qualitative and narrative inquiry approach was used to highlight the multi-layered experiences of

culturally diverse FGCS in doctoral programs (Shank, 2002; Creswell, 2009). Qualitative

Research as defined by Shank (2002), a method in which researchers aim to understand the

world experiences of certain individuals and investigate how they make meaning of those

experiences. Some added benefits of pursuing Qualitative Research includes: 1. Helping to

provide a more detailed account of a person's experience, 2. Allowing for the research to evolve

and adapt, 3. Creating an opportunity to study the meaning behind said answers, and 3. Develop

new ideas and theories (Shank, 2002). Narrative Inquiry, furthermore centers the voice of the

participants, gives power to the interviewee, and allows them to share their unique perspectives

and lived experiences (Creswell, 2009).

An understanding of the factors contributing to the success of FGCS in doctoral programs

from culturally diverse backgrounds will assist educators in meeting student needs at the

undergraduate levels in more specific ways, invite cultural proficient dialogues in academic

settings, and bolster storytelling to succeed, preparing students for graduation and post-

graduation opportunities. Findings may also support future research and implementing asset-

based approaches at higher education institutions to better support FGCS from culturally diverse

backgrounds at all levels of their academic careers.

Setting

The site for this study is a public university situated in a predominantly White and

affluent neighborhood in Southern California called: Mar University (MU), consisting of 36

doctoral degree programs. In 2022-23, 594 doctorates were awarded following an enrollment of

3,787 doctoral students the same year. More than 40% of doctoral students complete in 6 years.

In a 2021-22 report, MU ranked among the top 21 among *America's Best Graduate Schools.* MU

also ranked first for highest population of low-income students for peer institutions in a New

York Times 2017 report (New York Times, 2017). As well as Washington Monthly (2021), ranked among 6th place for best public university for upward mobility.

Setting aside national rankings, the MU Graduate Climate survey paints a different picture. In 2016-17, the Graduate Education Office (GEO) at MU administered a graduate student climate survey to 1,515 participating students out of a pool of 6,236 eligible graduate students. Of this main sample, 16.4% identified themselves as an underrepresented minority student (URM). Of the URM group, 63% of doctoral students rated the quality of their experience at MU lower (4.1) than non-URM (4.34 on a scale of 5). Quality of inclusion also rated low amongst URM (3.06) compared to (3.35) of non-URM. When asked if students had considered quitting school, 40% of URM students answered yes compared to non-URM at 30%. 47% considered quitting and commented regularly feeling: excluded, ignored, intimidated, bullied or harassed while attending MU as graduate students (Espaldón, 2017). No information could be found online about FGCS in doctoral programs at Mar University.

For reference, I will note that in 2023, MU reported that 37% of the incoming class identified as FGCS, a 1% decrease from a 38% (10,675 students) reported data set presented on their website in 2016. Among the FGCS freshman and transfer students: first year retention rate was 89-93%, graduation rate was 62-66% and the six-year graduation rate was over 80%. MU, on their website, prides itself in having higher than average national retention and graduation rates among undergraduate FGCS. No mention of graduate or doctoral student FCGS on their website even though they have a taskforce dedicated to the FGCS Experience.

Participants

To most accurately capture the intricate stories of those involved in the focus group, qualitative research recommends a sample size of six to nine participants (Malterud, 2016). Therefore invitations were sent to nine participants and this study yielded a total of six. This

study also applied a phenomenological approach calling on participants to speak from their own experiences (Mertler, 2021). Often, students from culturally diverse backgrounds are expected to perform at the same level as their White peers, but with fewer resources (Welborn et al. 2022). This study aimed to learn more about the unique barriers and successes of culturally diverse FGCS doctoral students face at one university, MU, a four-year public institution within a predominantly White student population. Students were selected for this study through purposeful and snowball sampling. These sampling methods allowed the researcher to gain insight into the experiences of this specific student demographic. Purposeful sampling refers to inviting participants who fit specific criteria and hold certain expertise about a phenomenon. Snowball sampling, also applied, relies on networks including: friends or colleagues, who may also fit the criteria and share among their respective networks (Creswell, 2015). In 2023, 3,648 doctoral students self-identified as FGCS and from culturally diverse backgrounds at MU.

Though the literature often uses the term: Students of Color, and MU uses URM (under-represented student minority), this study will employ the term culturally diverse instead using an asset-based mindset as recommended by Resilience Lens, Critical Race Theory and Cultural Proficiency Framework (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Masten, 2011, Welborn et al., 2022). Moreover, the term 'Color' has a racist origin connected to segregation and the oppression of culturally diverse groups in the United States (Kalunta-Crumptin, 2020). URM implies a deficit perspective with relations to ethnic groups in university settings and is dehumanizing to the communities referenced (Bensimon, 2016). Culturally diverse will allow for students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds to identify themselves as they wish, since some may not identify as being 'of color'. In order to participate in this study, students must have self-identified as culturally diverse, for example belonging to any of these groups: Black/African

American, Indigenous/Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x, mixed, bi-racial, or multi-racial or other (identity chosen by student). Participants were also asked if they identified as FGCS, meaning they are the first in their family to go to college, or lacked the parental support to pursue and navigate a college education. Third, students should have been enrolled in a doctoral program at MU at the time of the focus group. Fourth, participants from all genders were welcomed to participate (i.e. Non-Binary, Male, Female). However, for participants to have been selected they must have completed one full academic year of their doctoral program. This means students would have been at the end of their first year, currently in their second year, third year, or fourth year and beyond to participate (Appendix B).

Data Collection

Data collection is a lengthy process in which a researcher receives a large amount of information through observations, interviews, and a review of records (Mertler, 2021). For this study there was one focus group allowing students to tell their stories by answering guided prompts and sharing out loud if they felt called to. Data was collected solely through the focus group interactions and the writings. Questionnaires were given to help students prepare to answer the prompts during the focus group (FG). Questionnaires were also used to identify and select participants who met the proper criteria. Students received an email (Appendix A) through a listserv and were asked to fill out a questionnaire to determine their eligibility.

The FG interactions and the prompts were the primary data-collection method to help expose the researcher to the participants' lived experiences, barriers and successes (Creswell, 2015). Data collected was anonymous and stored in a secure, password protected google folder. Hand coding was used to analyze the findings. The participants' data was only accessible to the researcher to create themes, understand the framework and theories applied, answer the research,

questions asked, identify commonalities, differences, and highlight solutions for moving forward with the purpose of increasing the support of culturally diverse FGCS in doctoral programs.

Focus Group Protocol

Focus Groups study the interactions of multiple participants, much like an interview, but more in depth (Morgan, 1988). In this study, there was one Focus Group (FG) with six participants lasting 90 minutes. The focus grourp research method allowed for culturally diverse FGCS to be observed in a moderated setting. This study was conducted in a semi-private setting giving the participants an opportunity to share and find common themes within their experiences in real time. It also gave participants the opportunity to explore their thoughts, values and experiences without feeling isolated in their account. Participants also engaged in creating their own questions and framework along the focus group process and exchanged ideas with one another in real time (Morgan, 1988). As a result, it presented a perfect opportunity to apply Socialization Theory as a way to analyze how participants influenced each other's answers and experiences throughout the session (Weidman et al., 2001).

Emails, Selection Process and Questionnaires

Email responses and questionnaires were the first interaction between the researchers. An email was sent out scheduling the first FG within 3 days of the participants' response to the questionnaire. As a researcher, I relied on my networks within my job context to reach out to doctoral students. To ensure a diverse pool for this study, an email (Appendix A) was sent out through a graduate doctoral listserv that was accessed through my department and in collaboration with the community centers on campus: The Raza Centro, The Black Resource Center, The Inter-Cultural Center, Native Networks Indigenous Center, and the Pride Office serving students who identify as: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and beyond. Follow up emails were sent to my network with reminders. The emails included a link to fill out initial

information that would help identify them for the study. Nine doctoral students were then chosen and contacted for further questions. Afterwards, a consent form (Appendix B) was sent out to selected students. The consent form explained further details of the study and next steps. The recruitment email stressed that participation was completely voluntary, and if they felt called to, they could also share the opportunity with other potential participants (Mertler, 2021).

Students participating in this research study received two sets of questionnaires: 1. To determine their eligibility for the study (Profile Questionnaire in the body of the email, Appendix A), 2. To prepare for the focus group, once they had been admitted as a participant (Pre-FG Questionnaire, Appendix C). Storytelling can be a lengthy process, and students were encouraged to fill out a Pre-FG Questionnaire to help them think about their experiences as FGCS culturally diverse doctoral students and any intersecting identities. These questionnaires were not used as data, but instead as artifacts. Students also had the opportunity to share out loud during the FG if they felt inclined to. This enabled students to continue to think critically and share anything they missed during their first writing account (Potts, 2004). The table below for the pre-focus group questionnaire connected each of the lenses to the questions being asked. Students were then tasked to use their questionnaire (Appendix C) to answer the poetry prompts (Appendix D).

Below is a table detailing how each of the theories guides the questionnaire prompts to help students prepare for the focus group. This questionnaire was used as an artifact and data was not collected.

Table 1. Theories Applied to Generate Questionnaire, Pre-Meeting Writing Prompts

Questionnaire	Critical Race Theory & Counter Narrative	Resilience Theory	Socialization Theory
Please describe your experience as a First-Generation College Student from a culturally diverse background in a doctoral program.	X		
As a culturally diverse (CD), First-Generation College Student in a doctoral program, how do you define success?	X	X	X
What barriers have you encountered in your higher education journey as a CD FGCS doctoral student?	X	X	X
What factors on or off campus have contributed to your success as a CD FGCS in a doctoral program?	X	X	X
Can you recall any instances when your identities either as a CD FGCS were magnified (called attention to) in a good or bad way in your doctoral program?	X	X	
If you could give a piece of advice to future FGCS seeking entry into a doctoral program, what would it say?	X	X	X

Writing Exercises: Poetry Prompts

Oral and written narratives have long been a proven way of communicating for people over the ages. Historically, storytelling is an important part of the data collection process because it allows the participants to interpret their own experiences and continue evolving in their thought process by reflecting and making meaning in real time. Stories in this case are the most appropriate way of gathering data for they allow a more in-depth and detailed account to be told by the participants. Students were given 20-30 minutes within a 90 minute time frame to share

out-loud any of the poems they wrote (Appendix D). This space allowed students to reflect orally in real time on their lived experiences, find commonalities with each other, and challenge stereotypes they may have faced. This process documented the counter-narratives created through the assigned poetry prompts. We, thus now can learn to understand not only the experience, but the impact of what they have endured. We can also deduce how they may have arrived at their decision-making process, explore the comparison between experiences and the relationship between people (Potts, 2004). The table below summarizes who I collected and analyzed data, the conceptual framework guiding this study and the lenses that informed my research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds overcome barriers in doctoral programs?

2. How have counter-narratives impacted their success?

The table below summarizes the data collection method and analysis procedures along with the conceptual framework used to guide the research and lenses applied to understand the experiences of participants.

Table 2. Research Overview

Data Collection Method & Analysis Procedures	Focus Group	1. Narrative Analysis 2. Poetic Transcription Analysis
Conceptual Framework	Cultural Proficiency	
Lenses that informed study	1. Critical Race Theory 2. Resilience Theory 3. Socialization Theory	

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a procedure in which a researcher attempts to derive an understanding of the data collected. The researcher then assigns meaning to the results by coding and analysis. In this process themes can be pulled from the data and future research can be built. In order for researchers to remain objective, literature suggests analyzing data multiple times to try and prevent any bias to present solely a record of facts and not interpretation from the data (Creswell, 2008). For this study two types of analysis were adopted: 1. Narrative Analysis (NA) and 2. Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA). NA is a familiar research method, while PTA is relatively new in use and allows for art to meet research in a creative and unique way to understand the data collected. Further details on the types of processes are below.

Narrative Analysis

A Narrative Analysis (NA) allows for the researcher to gather key themes and elements to understand how to sum up the story of the participants (Creswell, 2008). The main analysis I conducted through writing prompts. Codes were not pre-conceived, but instead allowed to flow out of the raw data. Hand coding was used to analyze the focus group and categorize the data according to the research questions asked (Saldaña, 2009).

Poetic Transcription Analysis

Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA) is known as experimental analysis and was first coined by researcher Corrine Glesne (1997) as a way of formulating a type of poem from the testimonies of interviewees. Poetry can offer a new lens into which data can be analyzed. This mixture of art and research challenges the norm of how data should be analyzed. PTA disrupts tradition just as we ask students to challenge the main story with counter-narratives. I also seek to highlight a fun and creative way to present, understand and interpret data. PTA, for this reason, was applied to focus group writing prompts (Glesne, 1997). After reviewing the data

several times and coding themes, 15-20 lines were identified to form a story that can sum up the overarching themes of participants. The poem was edited in order to find a rhythm and remove any identifiable data.

Positionality & Reflexivity: Ethical Issues and Role of Researcher

To offer context on my background, bias and positionality, I will share about myself in relation to this project and steps taken to minimize bias throughout. Similar to participants in this study, I consider myself FGCS and am a current Latina doctoral student of MU. There is a chance that I may have shared some of the same barriers and supports they mention. However, I am also an advisor and have worked with some of the participants for three to five years. For this reason, it is important for me to highlight both my influence and awareness as I present the findings of this study. Positionality can be described as the idea that one's perception of the world is influenced by a number of factors including: location, worldview and belief system (Holmes, 2020).

I was excited to connect with other FGCS, like myself, to listen and learn from their experiences and to help inform best practices for future research. My research goal was to invite FGCS to share their own examples of persistence, resiliency and rebellion to be documented within my research, and create counter-narratives that challenge stereotypes in academia (Zamudio et al., 2010). Throughout this process, I assert that I maintained reflexibility, meaning I stayed aware to the best of my influence as a researcher and considered the impact of my relationship to the research process and subject being investigated (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). According to researchers Merriam & Tisdell (2015) positionality is influenced by reflexibility, and taking precautions to continuously challenge one's own assumptions in the process. I want to encourage more educators to do the same and look at how their position and reflexibility is impacting the content that they teach and the environments they create for students.

I acknowledge that I have also faced many of the challenges described in the literature for FGCS and focus on an asset-based framework to try and improve other's outlook to be positive of culturally diverse scholars who are FGCS in doctoral programs. Through this paper, I want to help create nurturing environments where all students can embrace their identities, feel celebrated and empowered to pursue their passions and tell their stories. I am personally and professionally invested in my topic and including others with similar drives to be a part of the systemic change needed to support FGCS in doctoral programs. This is where you the reader come in at whatever level of participation you'd like to be in, push for inclusive and diverse curriculum, policies and recommend best practices to dismantle oppressive university structures in place. It is my sincere hope that by the end of this academic paper we will all grasp a better understanding of the complexity and richness of culturally diverse FGCS in MU doctoral programs and highlight the importance of FGCS narratives through poetry and what role you can take in carrying the torch for future FGCS (Jehangir, 2010 & Baxter Magdola, 2008).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This project aimed to understand the barriers that First-Generation College Students (FGCS) from culturally diverse backgrounds experience in doctoral programs and how they've overcome them. Data from this project was collected through one focus group and six culturally diverse FGCS participants currently enrolled in a doctoral program. The lenses of Critical Race Theory, Resiliency, and Socialization were used to understand the written accounts of student participants. Moreover, Cultural Proficiency was applied as a guide to offer recommendations for future practices involving FGCS in doctoral programs.

A lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) offered background context to comprehend the diverse experiences of FGCS doctoral students highlighting the relationship between power and race and how participants created counter-narratives on college campuses (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). A Resiliency lens provided an asset-based model to understand how FGCS engaged in and processed the world around them (Masten, 2011). Additionally, a Socialization lens was applied to the findings in hopes of understanding what skills students adopted to help them navigate their doctoral programs (Boden et al., 2011). Finally, Cultural Proficiency (CP) was utilized as a framework to provide future recommendations (Welborn et al, 2022). In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of the conceptual framework driving this study, data collection and analysis, background on the university including student profiles, and a review of themes, research questions and lenses.

Brief Review of Conceptual Framework

A Cultural Proficiency Framework (CP) is used in this study as an asset-based approach guiding focus group's interactions, for interpreting the data, and as a solution for educators to adopt in creating an equity-minded practice and policies to understand the needs of its diverse

student community. CP is defined by Welborn et al. (2002) as an inclusive method in educational settings to bring people of all levels together in all stages of the decision-making process. This framework values diversity, shares power and authority with its participants. And creates an opportunity to work together towards the success of its students (See appendix). For this study, six students gathered voluntarily to share their unique stories through their own words in an attempt to help share their diverse perspectives as First-Generation College Students, the barriers they face and how they've overcome them as doctoral students.

CP emphasizes the importance of practicing inclusivity within student communities (Webourne, 2022). For this reason, a narrative inquiry approach was used to analyze the written and oral accounts of six FGCS who have overcome and continue to persist in their doctoral journeys. All students in this study currently attend the same university, holding different class levels and representing STEM and Social Science disciples. Data for this project was collected at an one in-person focus group from a series of individual writing exercises over a 90-minute session. A total of three questions were posed as prompts to students to reflect on their FGCS journeys as doctoral students. Then writings were analyzed through *Narrative Analysis (NA)* and *Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA)*. Narrative analysis yielded quotes and themes that will be discussed in the next section. PTA resulted in one poem highlighting 20 lines from participant's writings to provide a different form of analysis into their experiences.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Analysis took place in two ways using a *Narrative Analysis* (NA) approach and through *Poetic Transcription Analysis* (PTA). NA recommends notes from the interview or focus group be reviewed along with the writing exercises to organize key findings and interpret the data (Creswell, 2008). Additionally, Saldaña's (2009) *structural coding* and hand coding were used to categorize the texts according to the research questions asked and devise themes. In 1997,

66

Corrine Glesne's PTA was adopted as an experimental analysis to formulate one poem from the words and phrases derived from data. This approach pushes the boundaries of traditional research analysis to find creative and innovative ways of conducting future research and data analysis. Poetry in this case, offers a lens to interpret data from mixing art and research. After reviewing the data several times and coding themes, the researcher can identify 15-20 lines that can sum up the main overarching themes. The poem will be edited in order to find a rhythm and remove any identifiable data (Glesne, 1997).

Following the focus group and a reading of each poem, I highlighted themes and subthemes. Next categorized them to help answer the research questions. Seven rounds of coding took place: First, a general reading of each participants poems; Second, themes drawn out from each poem; Third, common themes among participants were identified; Four, barriers identified among each participant; Five, common barriers among participants identified; Six, field notes and observations reviewed; Seven, final reading of writings to create one poem using PTA. I transferred each poem to an excel document which I used as my codebook to maintain overarching themes from each poem. Each person submitted three poems, varying in length, for a total of 18 poems total to be reviewed. In order to provide further insight into the experiences of FGCS who participated in this study, I will review the university profile next to provide context.

University Profile

In 2021-22, Mar University (MU) graduated 516 PhD students in a pool of 3,648 doctoral students. This same year, a report was released by *America's Best Graduate Schools where* they ranked among a list of 21 in the nation. MU also ranked top for highest population of low-income students among peer institutions in a *New York Times* 2017 report (New York Times, 2017). Additionally, *Washington Monthly* (2021), ranked it within the top 6 best public

universities for upward mobility. Setting aside national rankings, the MU Graduate Climate survey paints a different picture for doctoral students. In 2017, the Graduate Education Office (GEO) at MU administered a graduate student climate survey to 1,515 students out of a pool of 6,236 eligible graduate students. Of this main sample, 16.4% identified themselves as an underrepresented minority student (URM).

Of the URM group, 63% of doctoral students rated their quality of experience lower than non-URMs (4.1 URM compared to non-URM at 4.34 on a scale of 5). Quality of inclusion also rated low amongst URM again, 3.06 compared to 3.35 of non-URM. When asked if students had considered quitting school, 40% of URM students answered yes compared to 30% of non-URM. 47% of URM also reported wanting to quit noting feelings of being: excluded, ignored, intimidated, bullied or harassed while attending MU as a graduate student (Espaldón, 2017). No information could be found online specifically about FGCS in graduate or doctoral programs at Mar University. Below, you will find a brief synopsis of the student participants, their biographies and experiences highlighting their FGCS identity.

Participant Profile

Participants from this study were recruited from Mar University student listservs. Though observations were recorded through field notes, the bulk of data collection came via the in person writing exercises. Each participant identified as FGCS, from a culturally diverse background and currently enrolled as a doctoral student. Eight students were selected, but six was the final number of participants in this study. Participants were selected 1. to ensure as diverse a pool of participants as possible and 2. If they met the requirements of the study. The profile of these students is important to acknowledge as they represent diverse identities and experiences of groups that have historically been underrepresented in higher education.

CP Framework suggests that in order for students from diverse backgrounds to thrive in academia, their voices must be incorporated into classroom settings (Welborn et al., 2022). CRT and Resiliency theory both found that if students are able to see themselves in academic spaces with an asset-based mindset, then it helps challenge the negative stereotypes and experiences underrepresented students face (Delgado & Stefano, 2001; Masten, 2011).

This study highlights cultural differences and not underrepresented student identities. With the guidance of CP, this study aims to celebrate the experiences of participants helping to create positive stories of diverse student voices and the skills that made them successful in academic settings (Boden et al., 2011). Through this study, FGCS at Mar University were invited to reflect on their academic journeys and culturally diverse identities through a set of three poetic prompts.

A total of 6 doctoral students from MU participated in a 90-minute focus group. I connected with on campus resource centers, academic departments and students I worked with to invite students to be a part of this research project. I received 22 interested participants who filled out an interest form. I selected eight who matched my criteria and six showed up in person. Student demographic was self-reported for this study. There was an even split between genders in terms of male (3) and female (3). There was also good balance among student levels representing first, second, third and fifth year doctoral students. However, there was a heavier representation of science among students including: education, psychology, chemistry, engineering and physics. Two doctoral students noted participating in Joint Doctoral Programs (JDP) at the time of this study.

Interestingly enough, this project yielded a heavy Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x interest with 16 out of 22 applicants identifying as such. I'm not sure if it was my birth name that made them

more interested in participating in the study or who was recommending them, but five out of six participants who ended up following through with this project were Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x. Five out of the six students were also the first in their families to pursue a college education and a doctoral degree. One out of the six had parents who had some college education, but no degree. To protect the identities of these students and their stories, each participant chose their own pseudonym. Table 3 below contains additional information on the students selected, including their: pseudonym, program, year, FGCS status, cultural identity and gender. Following the table are the short biographies of each student participant.

Bubba

Bubba is a first year in the JDP, Psychology doctoral degree program at Mar University. She identified herself as Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x and neither of her parents hold a 4-year college degree from America or another country. Bubba grew up with Mexican immigrant parents, who had her very young. As teenagers, her parents had to work very hard and had limited resources available to them. Bubba grew up in a low-income neighborhood and as the oldest child, she was tasked with setting a good example and caring for her younger siblings. Though she played many roles in her family, she always felt loved by them even when they didn't always understand what she was doing in school. In her poetry, Bubba writes about a big challenge she overcame in her doctoral program. She had to navigate how to transition from industry to a doctoral program. Bubba also pays homage to her parents, family, and romantic partner, noting them as cheerleaders who have helped her get through some of the toughest challenges she faced.

Table 3. Student Participation Overview

Name	Program	Year	First-Generation College Student	Cultural Identity	Gender
Bubba	Psychology, JDP	1st year	Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country	Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x	Female
Ernesto	Biochemistry & Chemistry	5th year	My parents have college experience but did not graduate from a U.S. college or any other college outside the U.S.	Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x	Male
Kofi	Biomedical Informatics, Engineering	1st year	Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country	Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x	Male
Gabriel	Physics	2nd year	Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country	Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x	Male
Maya	Biochemistry & Chemistry	2nd year	Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country	Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x	Female
Nicole	Education, JDP	3rd year	Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country	African American/Black	Female

Ernesto

Ernesto is a fifth year student at Mar University in the Biochemistry and Chemistry program. Neither of his parents hold college degrees from America or other countries, but did take some coursework. He identifies as Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x and the child of deaf parents. American Sign Language was his first official language. He grew up in a very quiet home and was expected to be independent early on. Due to the lack of translators, his parents were not very involved in his schooling as a child. In his junior year, he decided he wanted to go to college, but

71

it would be something he would have to undergo on his own. Due to affordability and accessibility, he decided to attend a community college. In his poetry, Ernesto pays homage to his mentors, but also speaks of loss and burden when one of his closest mentors passed away. As a result, he found himself with the responsibility of managing an athletic program he was involved in as a teenager. Ernesto also mentions in his writings struggling with self-doubt and social anxiety, but the driving force behind his doctoral pursuit is his passion for chemistry and wanting to make a difference.

Kofi

Kofi, is a first year student enrolled at Mar University. He is currently in a doctoral program in the Biomedical, Informatics Engineering program. Neither of his parents hold a college degree from America or other countries and he identifies as Hispanic/Latinx/e/o/a. Kofi is in a unique situation because although he is an American, he grew up in Puerto Rico, an island far removed from what most would consider typical. He speaks most comfortably in Spanish and in his poetry describes his home with great care and love. He also chose to write in Spanish for the entirety of the focus group as he felt he could process his experiences better in his native language.

Kofi is proud of his roots, where he went to college even though at times it was tough. He specifically has to learn to navigate higher education without much family guidance having grown up in a single-parent household. In his writing, he credits his family for who he is now and how far he's come. He holds great admiration for each single family member in his life- his mother, grandmother, and his uncles all played special roles in his growth. As such, he described struggling with being far from home, experiencing feelings of isolation and culture shock while in his doctoral program. This is the first time he's been so removed from his family and culture. His future, however, motivates him and propels him forward even in challenging times.

Gabriel

Gabriel, is a second year Physics student at Mar University. Neither of his parents hold a college degree from American or foreign universities. He identifies as Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x. He and his hard-working parents come from Lima, Peru. Due to their income status, they weren't able to afford going to college themselves. Gabriel wrote in Spanglish, a combination of English and Spanish, making his poetry fun and authentic in the process. His parents were very supportive of him going to college, but he did encounter one disagreement while he was in college that took a toll on him. Early on in his academic career he found to be more passionate about physics than engineering, his original major. He then decided to change majors from engineering to physics and this did not sit well with his parents because they didn't think it could offer a stable career path.

However, Gabriel did always feel encouraged to pursue higher education because his parents saw it as a socio-economic upward mobility in it. His parents eventually came around to support his major change. One family member, who he's always had a special connection with, through it all, was his grandmother. She always motivated him to keep pushing forward in his college education and in life. One of the hardest struggles for him was when she passed away. In his writings, Gabriel acknowledges that many sacrifices were needed in order to achieve academic and professional success. He also acknowledges that meaning and purpose will be found outside of the realm of academics through relationships and community.

Maya

Maya, is a second year at Mar University enrolled in the Biochemistry and Chemistry degree program. Neither of her parents have degrees from American or foreign universities. She identifies as Hispanic/Latine/a/o/x. Maya grew up along a small desert region of the U.S./ Mexico Border crossing regularly from Mexico to America to go to school. She lived in a single-

parent household, the daughter of a hard-working father and grandparents whom she would stay with often. Her whole family worked as farmworkers and she quickly realized some of the barriers that they encountered as a result. Her family struggles to find quality health services which led her on the path to pursue a doctoral degree in hopes of supporting underserved communities.

In her poetry, she pays homage to her husband, another First-Generation College Student. They both met in high school and relied on each-other through their doctoral journeys. One challenge that came up from Maya was in her first year, because she felt that she couldn't show up as her full authentic self. She often felt no one understood the culture she came from. In her poetry, Maya calls attention to the intersectionality that comes with being a graduate student, from an immigrant family background, First-Generation College Student, and trying to figure out work-life-balance. She does also speak of learning to be an advocate for her needs and grounding herself in her identities and the people that surround her.

Nicole

Nicole, is a third year doctoral student in a JDP School of Education at Mar University. Neither of her parents hold a college degree from an American or a foreign university and she identifies as African American/Black. Her faith in God is what actively motivates her to keep pushing through. She finds reassurance in herself knowing that she got through a master's degree program before and that she will get through her doctoral program too. Her family's involvement inspires her to give back to her community, family and in her professional role. A challenge that she faced was often shrinking herself to make others feel comfortable, especially going to a university where there were few Black students.

Nicole is now empowered to be a visible representation of a confident Black Christian woman and a versatile leader who is able to adapt to any adversity. Nicole speaks at length about

74

her faith, relationships with family, friends and colleagues as constant pillars that have contributed to her success thus far. Though some challenges that crossed her path were disagreements with her family about pursuing a college degree and feelings of isolation, being one of very few Black students in her college. Below you will find Table 4 with specific themes that emerged from each participant's work from the prompts asked.

Table 4. Students, Poem Prompts, and Themes

Student Name	Themes emerged from: "Where I'm From" Poem	Themes emerged from: "An Ode to" poem	Themes emerged from: "Dear Younger Self" poem
Bubba	resiliency, persistence, migration, dreaming, sacrifices, family, responsibility, language barrier, growing up too fast, agency, resourcefulness, fear, doubt, love, cultural & familial identity	relationships, love, affirmations, support, "imposter syndrome", motivation, mental health, food, self care, transition, strength, cheerleader	affirmations, warning, excitement, preparing, newness, community, relationships, goals, belief in oneself-confidence
Kofi	ethnic pride, resourcefulness, gratefulness, lost, FGCS identity & being first, resiliency, persistence, representation (role model)	relationships, mom, gratefulness, family, adversity, under-resourced, love, strength, persistence, food, single mom,	believe in yourself/confidence, talented, goal oriented, don't stop being who you are-identity, being true to yourself, community, reassurance, affirmations
Ernesto	independence, FGCS, resourceful, silence, voice, food, self motivated, goal setter	relationships, mentorship, role model, loss, responsibility	doubt, anxiety, good student, confident, and doubtful, hopelessness, affirmations, longing for relationships
Gabriel	Spanglish, family, relationships, support, major change, FGCS, accomplishments, fear, confidence, celebrations, ethnic identity, socio economic class	gratitude, relationships, loss, proud, morning, responsibilities	relationships, sacrifices, unsure, expectations, doubt
Maya	transnational, goal setter, community, family, relationships, sacrifices, purpose, give back	FGCS, relationship, immigrant, admiration, proud, allyship, identity	health, responsibility, sacrifices, family, guilt, self care, advocate for self, challenges, finding voice, community, background/roots, purpose, identities, community
Nicole	religion, faith, resilience, grassroots, city, service, support, family, relationships, goal-setter	affirmations, support, community, relationships, support, role-models	ask for help, plan, be open, connection, support, resources, believe in yourself

The prompt: *Where I'm From,* encouraged students to think about their personal journeys and how they ended up where they are now. This poem captured the rich diversity that each student brings with them to the university. *An Ode To* poem invited participants to think about a person, place or thing that helped them get through difficult situations in their life as a student. The last prompt was a letter to themselves called: *Dear Younger Self,* in which some students wrote out things they wished they would have known prior to starting their doctoral programs. Some gave advice to their child-self, others to their teen-self, and some just a few years shy of their age now. There were many similarities shared between participants. Relationships were a recurring theme in each poem. Students referred to people as their motivation and support, and named it a crucial component of their success as doctoral students. As such, I will review below how the theme of Relationships was brought up by participants, a common barrier they faced, and how their responses were seen through each of the lenses to answer the research questions asked.

Overview of Themes: Research Questions and Lenses

The purpose of this study is to amplify student voices and serve as a guide for all stakeholders invested in the success of culturally diverse FGCS's futures. It adopted the lenses of Resiliency, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Socialization to 1. Invite culturally diverse FGCS to reflect on their academic experiences; 2. Provide narrative accounts through poetry to celebrate and acknowledge their unique journeys, and 3. Analyze themes that can identify resiliency factors. Moreover, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do culturally diverse FGCS overcome barriers in doctoral programs?

2. What are those barriers?

Through a series of guided writing exercises, students were invited to reflect on their individual journeys and create counter-narratives to challenge stereotypes and highlight their strengths as FGCS. Various forms of Resiliency, Socialization and CRT became evident throughout the coding process. In reviewing participant's lived experiences, the theme of *Relationships* was also at the core of their stories. Research indicates, FGCS students depend on relationships to gain the knowledge necessary to navigate college. Participants recognized early on the importance of skills learned by their loved ones. For them, mentors came in the form of family, friends and teachers. Mentors helped shape their habits, values, and resiliency throughout their university experiences (Johnson, 2016).

All participants shared how they had learned resilience type behaviors from their families, and relied on their intimate social circle to adapt to new situations within higher education. Their race and ethnicity was a crucial component in how they perceived themselves and navigated their experiences. Also, their ties to family or loved ones ultimately served as the necessary intrinsic motivation needed to persist. This study highlights how students adopted skills learned from their families and applied it to college settings to succeed. For example, Kofi, indicated early on that he learned how to be resourceful, hard-working and persistent from growing up in a single-parent multi-generational household. He was exposed to a number of good family mentors that motivated him to take responsibility over his own learning, tackle unforeseen obstacles and seek out new opportunities (Jones & Abbes, 2017; Sanford, 1962).

Under the main theme of Relationships, sixteen sub-themes emerged. Under the lens of Resiliency top sub-themes consisted of providing: affirmation, food, connection, and community, to motivate students to overcoming barriers in academia. Next, under the lens of Socializions, learned skills/behaviors included: resourcefulness, preparing/planning, agency, goal-oriented,

belief in oneself, mentorship, self-care, and persistence. Through the lens of CRT, cultural and familial capital consistently connected with the overarching theme of *Relationship*s and was identified as a driving force behind overcoming barriers to student's success.

One shared barrier that all students acknowledged in their writings was a *Lack of Support.* This theme explored the ways in which all of the students felt abandoned in their academic careers in some way, shape or form. Another barrier that came up for some was language. At an early age, some of the participants translated for their parents in school settings. This skill taught them later on how to code switch between school and home. Students also spoke at length about their FGCS status, repeatedly noting they were left to navigate higher education on their own. Each student faced very unique challenges due to their identities and personal experiences.

Upwards of twenty-five sub-themes came about to describe the barriers students uniquely faced in their doctoral pursuit. Barriers included: fear of failure, negative self talk, caring for siblings, social anxiety, self-doubt, feelings of isolation, feeling defeated, experiencing loss, heartbreak, unexpected responsibilities, lack of role models, lack of resources, living in a single-parent household, expectations to be independent as a child, internal conflicts, feeling down, making sacrifices and feelings of guilt for time spent at school vs with family, lack of access to health services, feeling misunderstood by family/school program, being underrepresented in their discipline/school, location from family, overwhelming expectations from self, burn out, lack of balance of responsibilities, hard to ask for help (pride/fear), isolation, being singled out in academic settings, experiencing public shame/embarrassment by authority figure, feelings of betrayal and being unsafe, and lack of guidance/support. For the purpose of this data analysis the overarching themes of Relationships and Lack of Support will be explored further in the

upcoming section. However, in practice for educators and leadership, FGCS should focus on student voices to learn how to best support each student, the challenges they face and what needs could be met by the organization. In this next section, I provide quotes from participants and how the theme of *Relationships* came up for them in their academic journeys.

Research Question 1: Relationships

How do culturally diverse First-Generation College Students (FGCS) overcome barriers in doctoral programs? The theme of *Relationships* explores how six FGCS doctoral students leveraged their networks to help navigate higher education. Students learned to overcome obstacles on their path to higher education having seen their own parents overcome many personal challenges of their own due to income, cultural background, and other identities (Resiliency Lens). If FGCS can form connections between their past experiences, and their academic work, then they are more likely to feel motivated and confident to participate in the classroom (Miley, 2009). Students learned these skills through socialization from mentors, family and loved ones the skills that would help them be successful in academic settings (Socialization Lens).

When students participate in groups, they learn to adopt the necessary skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to succeed in the given environment or organization (Jehangir, 2010; Roksa et al., 2018).In this study, participants worked hard to craft their own narratives with an asset-based mindset, a luxury they had not been afforded before in academic spaces (CRT/Counter-Narratives). A *Resiliency Lens* was applied to this study and can help educators adopt an asset-based approach with FGCS experiences. It is important to consider ways to bridge the world of academia to that of First-Generation College Student's experiences and tap into the capital they enter college with.

Schools and teachers hold an enormous amount of power to impact a student's life for the better. According to resiliency educator and researcher Bernard (2017), teachers building caring relationships with students is instrumental in creating resilient students. When students are asked who is a positive role model in their lives most likely than not they choose a parent, second to them is a teacher (Bernard, 2017). In this study, we see FGCS, leveraging their relationship with their families and skills learned to do well in college. For example, for Bubba, she relied on the cultural connection she had with her family and loved ones to stay motivated in higher education. In the first poem, *Where I come from…*, Bubba writes:

> I come from: the love my parents have given me unconditionally
> I come from the hugs, kisses and support I receive from my family when I most
> need them
> I come from a family that don't understand what I am professionally doing but are
> very proud of me
> I come from a family that I admire tremendously
> I come from a background that always makes me proud and motivates me to keep
> going when I want to quit

Meeting this basic survival need, of love and trust among FGCS is a holistic acknowledgement of their person, that they are not just showing up to class to be taught or fixed, but that they are going to be cared for as a whole (Bernard, 2017). Similarly, Ernesto, another student, writes in *An Ode To* mentorship about an impactful relationship in his formative years with a teacher who left a profound effect on his life. Faculty are considered key in the development and success of doctoral students (Lee, 2012). This mentorship experience taught Ernesto to be valued and acknowledged in a classroom setting as a high school student. This is what he looked for in college, but did not receive it. In his poetry, he does not write about other mentors, but instead of how he has to rely on himself to keep moving forward.

Below is a description of how Ernesto felt about his mentor and an experience where he was surprised to receive an award from him. He was baffled to have someone take the time to

80

invest in him because his parents had expected him to be independent from an early age. Below

is a sample of his poem and the excitement and confidence he feels when an authority figure

invests in him.

> An Ode to Mentorship: I have been significantly impacted by mentorship
> throughout my life. Entering high school, I had no idea what to expect, nor where
> I was heading. The first mentor I can identify was Chad Peterson, the athletic
> trainer during my Freshman and sophomore years of high school. During
> Freshman year, I took his athletic training course, learning basic anatomy and
> injuries related to sports medicine. Academics always came easy to me, because I
> have a photographic memory, so I found I had an aptitude for anything academic
> that I set my mind to. I interviewed to intern under him for the following year, and
> he even admitted to me afterwards that he gave me the hardest exam of the group
> in order to truly determine if I was worth the spot, and I passed with flying colors.
> Through the summer up to sophomore year and into the year, I quickly grew into
> one of his three senior interns, by the end of the year he gave me a personalized
> award that he normally only gives to his graduating seniors.

For people who have overcome many obstacles, it is a result of skills and networks that

were developed along the way. These people are more open to asking for and receiving help.

Allowing students to reflect on their experiences allows them to build community, confidence

and resilience in academic settings. As they search for resources and develop a sense of agency

in the process, students will keep persisting until their goals are met (Nguyen et al., 2016).

Gabriel, another participant, used the skills he learned with his family, specifically to create new

friendships in college, he tells himself in a letter to his younger self:

> Dear Gabriel,
> La física no lo es todo. El trabajo no lo es todo. Los amigos y relaciones son
> donde más significado encontrarás.

In another poem, Gabriel described in great detail in both English and Spanish, his

relationship with his grandmother. He writes about the support she offered him from afar through

his phone calls making his childhood memorable. She was his motivation during his college

years and she was behind his pursuit of his dream career. Gabriel's grandmother was his biggest

cheerleader. But there's a sad tone that follows towards the end of his poem due to the loss of his grandmother. He vows though, to continue sharing his accomplishments, new friendships made, and to keep learning from her bravery and her strength from raising ten children. Gabriel ends the poem with a sweet note, telling his grandmother he is proud of her. A portion of his poem is below for reference, for the full poem, see Appendix H:

An ode to my abuelita,
Ever since I was kid, you supported me.
Hiciste mi infancia inolvidable.
Motivaste durante el colegio.
Encouraged me to pursue my dream career.
Celebraste mis logros.
Me acompanaste when I was down,
con tus llamadas desde Lima.
Fuiste parte íntegra de mi vida.

Research states that Hispanic students and their families often battle negative stereotypes including being labeled lazy, for lack of engagement in school settings (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). Storytelling in higher education allows for those who come from marginalized communities to be able to confront and challenge racial and cultural stereotypes like the one listed in the latter (Hall 2006). Power is given to the storyteller by allowing them to choose their own language and give them the space to connect with others on similar experiences (Tyson, 2016).

Kofi, another doctoral student, wrote all three of his poems in Spanish highlighting his family and what he's learned from them. In one poem he writes "Le doy gracias a mi familia bella. Que siempre han estado ahí para mí. Que ante la adversidad de crecer con pocos recursos. Nunca me faltó el amor y cariño de ellos a mí." Kofi's family taught him how to overcome adversity with limited resources. They taught him about showing up and having support. He mentions that his mother, as a single parent, modeled strength and hardwork. His grandmother

was caring and loving, always asking if he had eaten or not so she could give him an "arrocito con habichuela". Kofi goes on to thank his uncles who stepped in as paternal role models when he grew up without a father; and overall his entire family for giving him the tools to keep growing.

> Eres un chico joven, talentoso, y deseoso de seguir aprendiendo. Vas a salir de tu Isla, de tu comunidad, de la gente que lleva años conociendo quién eres Pero eso no está mal, ellos están ahí para ti. Siempre seguirán siendo tu familia. Puerto Rico siempre estará ahí para ti, para recibirte con un gran abrazo, como solo PR los sabe dar. No dudes en ti, apuesta en ti, y verás todo lo que lograrás por quien quieres ser.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) brings race to the forefront so that it may be critically analyzed in relation to the power dynamics that exist within our society (Delfano & Stefancic, 2001). According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001) CRT is defined as a movement by and of scholars and activists who are actively seeking out connections between race, racism and power. They use CRT to interrogate how White supremacy moves legally through different aspects of our community including: politically and culturally. Storytelling in Hispanic communities plays an important characteristic in persisting. In Critical Race Theory (CRT Lens), five tenets are highlighted: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). For this study, a CRT lens will be applied with a focus on counter storytelling and its impact on their success. When we consider how race impacts our education system then we will understand how to provide additional support for marginalized racial groups. Groups can share their truths as a form of resistance challenging stereotypes and oppressive stories that have upheld white supremacist ideals and values (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Counter stories amplify a person's voice challenging inequality and discrimination (Zamudio, 2010).

We see an example of how a student observed injustice and how it motivated her to seek a career in health sciences giving her the purpose to persist. Maya, a Chemistry & Biochemistry doctoral student, recounts her upbringing in her first poem, *Where I come from*.

> On the Mexico side, I lived with a single father of two and an older sister. On the U.S. side, I stayed with my grandparents who lived in a small rural community that has a lot of agriculture. They were farm workers their entire lives. My father and uncles grew up as farmworkers. This community faces a lot of barriers in access to quality health services. My background has driven me to seek a doctoral degree to address these barriers in underserved communities.

Another student Nicole, a doctoral student with the JDP School of Education at Mar University recounts how her identities as a Black Christin Woman and the relationships she has with her family helped shape who she is today, motivating her to keep pushing through the barriers she and her family faced. Nicole states in *Dear Younger Self* poem:

> I am going to be an audacious Black woman that does not have to shrink herself for the comfort of others, come from a line of strong-willed, confident, authentically Black women on my mother's side. My mother and grandmother are servers to their families, communities and in their professional roles. They seek to help, guide and support all that come into their lives… determined to give students and future leaders hope and support that was missing on our academic and personal growth journey's.

Mentoring relationships can strongly impact FGCS by helping them navigate on campus and off campus life (Socialization Lens). Mentorship is defined as an exchange of advice and support that encourages growth, socialization, leadership, and career development (Johnson, 2016). Since FGCS don't have immediate family members to help them with specific college tasks, mentors can help guide them in academic settings. A good mentor provides a balanced amount of challenge and support (Sanford, 1962), so that students feel empowered to embrace their own learning, tackle unforeseen obstacles and seek out new opportunities (Jones & Abbes, 2017). For Nicole below, her network started with one of her mentors. Cultural Proficiency states that for a community to work well together they need: mutual respect, personal regard,

acknowledgement of core responsibilities and abilities, personal integrity and trust (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003).

Nicole on mentorship:

> I know when I chat with her I am going to be able to share my insecurities with
> my research and carve out a plan to move my research forward. She has allowed
> me to join her research presentations encouraged me to present and take on
> facilitator opportunities. She is a real champion of me being a subject matter
> expert and not becoming complacent in my degree. She has her own mentor-
> mentee checklist that she had me complete when we first started meeting. I
> appreciate her intentionality to check-in with me, remind me of my
> accomplishments and encourage me to have balance in all that I do. She also
> reminds me to not overcommit, but to do well in what is on my plate thus far.

Learning to create a strong network of people to provide support and guidance helps

students build resilience to thrive in college settings and prepare them for life after higher

education (Dalton & Crosby, 2016). Maya, speaks of the importance of having someone who

understands all her identities and challenges in order to build her resiliency. The reason she is

able to overcome obstacles is due to her husband. Below is a sample from *An Ode to*:

> I am a first-generation college student and the first to go to college in my family.
> Although this means that I had to overcome many barriers, I never felt truly alone
> because I've had my husband since day one my husband is able to understand all
> parts of my identity… He understands the demand and expectations of a doctoral
> student and fully supports me. He also understands that I have cultural values
> outside of academia. I think most importantly, he understands the struggles of
> being a first-gen and underrepresented student in a doctoral program.

Another student, Bubba, writes about learning resiliency from her immigrant parents

(Resiliency Lens). She speaks about the intricate identities and responsibilities she held as a

daughter and sister seeking a better future for themselves. She saw her parents struggle and had

to be the caretaker for her sibling. Having had this experience taught her how to navigate higher

education. A sample of her poetry answer to *Where I Come From* is below:

> I come from el rancho I come from immigrant parents
> I come from low class

I come from the dream of seeking a better future in America
I come from teenage parents struggling to raise a child when they were children
      themselves
I come from the struggle of being the oldest child and always being looked as a
      role model
I come from being my parents' personal translator since I learned English
I come from learning to take care of my younger siblings at a very young age due
      to necessity
I come from learning how to navigate my way towards college

Kofi, in his poem *Where I Come From*, speaks of moving forward without much guidance and engineering his own path. He also describes how there were a lot of rocks along his path, but also boasts with a tone of satisfaction that his hard work got him into Mar University.

Yo solo sabía lo que tenía que hacer Diseñe mi rumbo, construí la Carretera
caminé en ella como mejor lo pude hacer No sabía bien cómo construir el rumbo,
pues dejé muchos hoyos y parchos por recorrer Pero sé que no lo hice mal, pues
llegué aquí

In this next section, I will highlight the participants' ability to overcome obstacles through Resiliency theory.

Resiliency Lens

Resiliency theory showcases the strengths students enter college with and provides us with a framework to understand how students engage and process certain experiences around them (Masten, 2011). Through psychology, resilience in children and families has been studied at great lengths, but resiliency in schools has only been studied recently. When students are asked who is a positive role model in their lives most likely than not they choose a parent, second to them is a teacher (Bernard, 2017). For people who come from marginalized groups and do well against other obstacles, it is a result of other skills and networks that have developed along the way. They are more open to asking for and receiving help. These students will keep persisting until their goals are met (Masten et al. 1990).

In one poem, Gabriel described in great detail his relationship with his grandmother. He writes about the support she offered him from afar through their phone calls and making his childhood memorable. Hearing stories from his grandmother taught him to overcome challenges in his personal and academic life. Similarly other students highlighted the skills and values they adopted as a result of relationships in their lives in order to become resilient. Gabriel in a second poem, used the skills he learned with his family, to create new friendships in college, he writes in a letter to a younger version of himself saying: "Los amigos y relaciones son donde más significado encontrarás (Friends and relationships is where your will find more meaning)."

Kofi, also highlighted his family throughout his poems and what he'd learned from them. In *An Ode to* poem, he writes being thankful for his family because he always felt loved and cared for even while growing up with few resources and amongst adversity. Kofi's family taught him how to overcome adversity with limited resources. They taught him about showing up and having support. He mentions that his mother, as a single-parent, modeled strength and a hard work ethic. These are skills he channeled as he coped leaving his home to pursue a graduate education far from his home. For both Gabriel and Kofi, their grandmothers had great influence on their lives affecting how they handled situations as a FGCS. Kofi mentions how his grandmother always showed she cared through food and check ins. She would regularly ask if he had eaten so she could then feed him. Kofi goes on to thank his uncles in his poems, who stepped in as paternal role models when he grew up without a father. Overall his entire family gave him the tools necessary to keep growing and trying new things.

At times, however, peers, educators and parents can negatively affect the resiliency of students. These groups have the ability to harm or empower them by passing on learned behaviors through social and emotional experiences. Experiences that can be harmful are when

students are shamed for not doing well in school, or guilted for taking too much time on an academic responsibility (Yosso, 2005). In one poem, Gabriel described the friction between his family and his decision to change majors from Chemistry to Physics. He wanted to pursue a degree in Physics, but his family didn't see worth in that degree, they feared he would have a hard time finding a job after college. Gabriel stood his ground, but it was hard to challenge his family members who he had so much love and respect for. Eventually his family came to terms and supported him, but in the beginning it was difficult to push back and advocate for his needs and wants.

Representation is also instrumental in the resiliency of students, peers and educators who understand the unique experiences of culturally diverse FGCS in academic settings. For Maya, a Latina doctoral student in Chemistry, she found it an isolating experience to come to Mar University having been brought up in a humble immigrant background where her family struggled for basic health care, she writes: "It was difficult because I feel like I can't be my full self within my program and I am also not very understood in my family." Similarly, Nicole, an Education Leadership doctoral student, described a disconnect with her family and community at school. She highlights an undergraduate experience where she notes being one of very few Black students on her college campus led to a *Lack of Support*, stating "there were few Black students that looked like me in most of my English major courses. Most Black students were athletes." Because of this, she also experienced microaggressions and she writes about an instance where a faculty member publicly singled her out and told her she was not good enough. She carried with her the doubts from her family because they didn't think she should be pursuing higher education. Nonetheless, Nicole persevered and is on track to graduate from her doctoral program in Education at Mar University in just a few months. There's an added layer, when students

88

come with culturally diverse backgrounds and additional barriers they encounter, as well as skills and strengths they bring to college to overcome adversity. In this next section, I will discuss using Critical Race Theory and creating counter-stories as an effective way to empower students and challenge stereotypes about their perceived abilities.

Critical Race Theory & Counter-storytelling

According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001) CRT is defined as a movement by and for scholars and activists who are actively seeking out connections between race, racism and power. CRT interrogates how White supremacy moves legally through different aspects of communities including: politically and culturally. CRT consists of five tenets: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). This is an important lens to consider because it helps to highlight barriers that exist for students from racially underrepresented backgrounds in education. CRT can be used in higher education to explore the relationship between privilege and oppression in the school system. This can include a look at: the campus climate, financial support, access to well-being resources and the diversity of their peers, the staff, faculty, and administration (Hiraldo, 2010). Counter-storytelling validates racial groups' experiences in education and provides a tool to tell their story and combat racism in schools.

When Nicole encountered microaggressions in college because of her skin, she was surprised and didn't know how to react to a person in authority belittling her. But now, years after with a doctoral degree almost in hand, she writes in a letter to her younger self:

> I am going to be an audacious Black woman that does not have to shrink herself for the comfort of others, able to command any and every room I enter, and opportunities will seek me out for my input.

Counter narratives provide an opportunity for marginalized groups to offer their perspective and challenge the dominant story. Nicole did just this by pursuing a doctorate degree and proving to herself those around her that she was more than capable of doing so even after a trusted authority figure, like her college professor, told her she wasn't a good English writer. Counter-stories amplify a person's voice, where they can share their truths as a form of resistance, helping to debunk stereotypes and oppressive stories that have upheld White supremacist ideals and values (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Given the institutionalized racism that has existed and continues to permeate education, culturally diverse FGCS have lived their entire lifetimes challenging stereotypes in academia meant to keep them out (Bonilla-Sylva & Peoples, 2022). Critical Race scholars have long worked to topple the dominant narrative (Yosso, 2005) and we can do this now through student voice. Storytelling places importance in a student's story, others can offer empathy, connection, and awareness, helping to improve academic performance and engagement. Students in turn, feel validated and an integral part of the community on their college campus (Jehangir, 2009). Stories help normalize the experiences and obstacles FGCS face.

Regardless of background, "storytelling validates students' experiences" (as cited in Nguyen et al., 2016, p. 76). Allowing students to reflect on their experiences keeps them engaged in the classroom and allows them to build community, confidence and resilience as they search for resources and develop a sense of agency in the process (Nguyen et al., 2016). Storytelling in Hispanic communities plays an important characteristic in persisting. For example, Maya describes her upbringing growing up in a small desert region along the U.S./Mexico border with her father in Mexico and her grandparents in the U.S. side with most of her family as farm workers motivated her to pursue a doctoral degree in a health field. She personally witnessed the

disparities that exist for immigrant communities working in agriculture and it has fueled her passion for Chemistry. During the focus group, Maya was quick to share her thoughts out loud, including stating that she had really enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on her academic journey because no one before had really asked her about it, especially at a university level.

It is important to consider ways to bridge the world of academia to the cultural capital that First-Generation College Students carry with them. This way students have the opportunity to link their lived experiences with the curriculum and gain a greater meaning-making contributing to their success in the classroom (Jehangir, 2010). Representation matters, lived experiences matter, culture matters. Cultural Proficiency centers diverse students' stories, and highlights their experiences to shift the culture of the school (Lindsey et al., 2018). In the next sections, I will discuss how some students learn to successfully operate between home and campus from their peers, through the lens of *Socialization*.

Socialization

Socialization is defined by researchers Boden et al. (2011) as the ability to adopt the skills necessary to adapt and become efficient contributors of society. Socialization theory explains that graduate students can only become competent after they interact regularly within academic and professional networks including their peers, faculty, and other professionals. When students participate in groups, they learn to adopt the skills, values, and knowledge necessary to succeed in any given environment (Roksa et al., 2018). If FGCS can form connections early on from their past experiences and what they learned in the classroom, then they are more likely to stay engaged, learn, and succeed (Miley, 2009). Doctoral students in this study reported that the relationships they made through socialization earlier in their academic careers highly impacted their choice to remain in their programs.

For Nicole, she described in her *Ode To* poem coming from a close sisterhood of Black friends who are resilient and persistent role models. Additionally she writes how her colleagues in education saw potential in her when she did not. She didn't see herself as an upfront leader, but her network invited her to think differently of herself and see worth in her personal narrative. Nicole invested in relationships with her peers and in return she received the same care and support from them. In her second poem, Nicole states how three colleagues supported her specifically on her doctoral journey by cheering her on in the midst of dissertation setbacks, validated her feelings throughout family disagreements, and encouraged her to find time to rest. In many ways their relationships modeled for her what resilience and persistence looked like and she followed in a similar path.

Nicole has done an incredible job at recruiting people to be a part of her network. This has kept her motivated and taught her to be open to new opportunities throughout her life. She describes how one mentor, Dr. Mary Oling Sisay, was a great example of a well-educated Black woman leading an institution. Because of these relationships, she learned to advocate for herself more and to set work-life balance. Nicole also mentions that what was helpful when they met, was when Dr. Mary Oling Sisay had her own mentor-mentee checklist at each meeting. This showed her mentor was prepared, intentional and cared about her future.

Researchers have found that students that were integrated into their department early on did better than those who did not attend opportunities to network and build community with the department (Lovitts, 2001). However, according to some researchers, opportunities to participate have been inequitable for marginalized students. For example, in comparison to male White students, women and underrepresented racial ethnic groups said socialization experiences had been more negative with lots of inequities overall in their doctoral program, like participating in

professional development opportunities, publishing or presenting at a conference were there were not an equal distribution of genders and ethnic groups (Millet & Nettles, 2006). For Bubba, her transition from industry into graduate school was only made possible with the support of her partner. He played an important role in her pursuit of a graduate education and continuous doubts that she struggled with. She described him as a rock in her life, someone who held her steady as she overcame many obstacles on her path to academia. In this next section, research question two will cover the theme of barriers as they relate to students in this study and their identity of being FGCS.

Research Question 2: Barriers to Success, Lack of Support

What are the barriers culturally diverse FGCS doctoral students face? Each participant had specific barriers that were personal to their journey. However, they all unanimously stated experiencing *Lack of Support* at many points in their academic careers. The school system, much like our country, can be hierarchical in structure, slow to change and creates barriers for students in academic settings (Roegman et al., 2021). Other challenges FGCS share are feelings of isolation, lower engagement in student life and don't often have enough time to focus on academic duties due to: coursework, long work weeks and other responsibilities due to: family, culture, and community (Benson & Lee, 2020; Lindsay, 2018).

Beginning in her young years, Bubba had to step up as caretaker for her siblings. *Lack of Support* in her household forced her to become a third parent. In one of her poems, she states: " I come from parents struggling to raise a child when they were children themselves." Other barriers Bubba named were fear of failure stating: "I come from being scared of failing and not taking advantage of every opportunity I encounter". In this instance we can see that Bubba's fears are her own negative self-talk that comes from not having someone to support and mentor her in her college years. She also mentions lacking safety. In *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, it

93

states that psychological needs like relationships, must be met before she can reach success (Maslow & Lewis, 1987).

For Ernesto, he describes growing up with a lack of guidance, being the first in his daily life to pursue a college degree and being born with Deaf parents. Ernesto said there was a lack of translators in his school leading his parents to be absent from his schooling. Whenever possible, he served as translator. This prepared him for what came later into his high school years when it came down to going to college. Ernesto was expected to fend for himself as a child. He was extremely independent and so it came at no surprise to him when he learned about college from his friends that he would have to prepare for this new chapter on his own. Similarly for Maya she described *Lack of Support* from her family or in her doctoral program.

Nonetheless, FGCS are an asset in education not only for their diverse perspectives, but because they help generate cultural and financial wealth in many under-resourced neighborhoods (McCoy, 2014). In 2010, the government acknowledged a direct correlation between poverty and lack of higher education; as a result, The U.S. of Education collaborated on a plan with twelve organizations, called *The Completion Agenda*, to raise graduation rates and ensure that by 2025 all 25-34 years olds in the United States would have completed an associate degree or higher (Howard, 2010). Closing the equity gap on higher education meant encouraging and creating space for groups from culturally diverse backgrounds to be able to pursue higher education. Cultural Proficiency has the power to build trust, resiliency and help FGCS to pursue post-undergraduate opportunities (Perna, 2015).

Kofi also talks about his FGCS status and not having direct support from his family to figure out how to navigate the specifics of pursuing a higher education, like learning good study habits. In his poem, Kofi writes: "Aunque debo de admitir que no tuve mucha guía de cómo

estudiar. Pues no había en mi núcleo familiar, primos o amigos cercanos con educación con la cual tuviera una buena referencia para seguir." Despite this, he is pursuing a doctoral degree in Biomedical Engineering at Mar University on his way to completing his full second year. Other barriers are notes in the Appendix F .

Finding representation on campus for racially minoritized students is crucial to the success of FGCS (Soria, 2015). Nicole states how being one of very few Black students on her college campus led to a lack of support: "there were few Black students that looked like me in most of my English major courses. Most Black students were athletes." Because of this, she also experienced micro-aggressions and *Lack of Support in school*. "A micro-aggression is subtle statement and behavior that unconsciously communicates denigrating messages to people of color" (Nadal, 2011, p. 470). Research suggests that microaggressions are linked to low self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014). Nicole wrote about an instance where a faculty member publicly singled her out and said she was not good enough. She also experienced *Lack of Support* at home from her family when she was pursuing graduate school. They didn't understand why she was doing it and were very vocal against it. There are notes of isolation, in being misunderstood and confusion in her writings at not knowing what to expect and who to trust when authority doesn't support you. Nicole states:

> Is resilience to overcome a faculty member stating in front of a class in my spring
> semester of senior year that I was not a great English major. I come from the
> hustle of NYC streets to pursue a master's degree when no one in my family
> thought I should.

Nonetheless, Nicole persevered and has graduated from her doctoral program in Education from Mar University. Like Nicole, Ernesto grew up with his fair share of *Lack of Support*. In a poem he described growing up with a lack of guidance too from his family. It also included growing up with Deaf parents and serving as translator at an early age. This did,

however, prepare him for what came later into his teenage years and it came down to going to college. When Ernesto was a small child, he was expected to fend for himself and so it came at no surprise when he learned about college and knowing that this was one more thing that he had to do by himself. Below is his story from the poem *Where I Come From*:

> I come from a silent house, growing up as a child of Deaf parents, the most often comment I got whenever someone came over was always how quiet the house was. As such, I became quite accustomed to being in silence, even now. I come from a home where I was expected to be independent as a child. My parents have minimal formal education, so it was never possible for me to ask them for help on anything academic. Further, American sign language interpreters were very hard to come by, so my parents had almost zero involvement with the administrative side of my K-12 education as well. During my junior year of high school, as people started talking about college, I realized that it was another thing that I would have to do alone; figure out the applications, pay for the applications, learn about financial aid and what it would mean to attend college. The lack of involvement meant that I was entirely reliant upon myself to motivate myself, and I saw this too late and had made non-ideal choices in what courses I took in high school, and put in too little effort. Fortunately, community college presented itself as a nearly free way to reinvent myself and start my academics over.

Maya, a Chemistry doctoral student, like others before her, described similar feelings to participants of not receiving support from her family or in her doctoral program. In her poem, she writes: "It was difficult because I feel like I can't be my full-self within my program and I am also not very understood in my family." Maya did, however, have the support of her husband, also a FGCS, who helped guide her through several academic hurdles. Maya possessed a great level of self-awareness inwardly in her writing and outwardly vocally. When asked what she would tell her younger self, it showed that she had given it much thought as she had much to share. Although she experienced feeling lonely at times, she reminds herself that there are other people out there she can be in community with that will support her in different aspects of her life. She also describes finding confidence in her roots, her family and culture, and a sense of purpose. For Maya, entering the health field so she can provide better services for low-income

96

groups is her primary motivation. She grew up seeing her family struggle to receive adequate care, and now she understands first-hand why those disparities exist, as she herself is not receiving the support she needs from the university as a doctoral student. Maya details below, in her poem: *Dear younger self*, what she wished she would have known before starting her doctoral journey.

> As a first-generation college student, you will face a lot of challenges. A valuable skill that I wish I would have learned earlier is to advocate for myself. Ask help whenever you need it! I realized in graduate school that I would be struggling in silence while others were asking for help or opportunities. Those people were able to get the resources they needed. As first-generation, it is sometimes difficult to ask for help or ask for opportunities. Don't put yourself at a disadvantage by not asking for help while others are doing it. Being a "hard worker" doesn't mean that you have to struggle alone. It might feel lonely at times. Remember to always find your community. This can be people who support you in your career and educational journey. … It will be a long journey ahead. You will be in spaces with people that don't share the same identities as you. However, always remember where you came from. Remember the reasons why you wanted to come to college and study in the first place. Continue to advocate and work towards that goal. Remember the great contribution that you make to your team and community by being in the spaces that you are. Remember how you will use your background and education to address a lack in the field and in health services.

First-Generation College Students with culturally diverse identities, who come from marginalized groups often carry with them trauma that are both seen inside and outside classroom settings (i.e. school shootings, racial discrimination, and abuse or neglect) (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020). Participants voiced feeling alone in the process of navigating college without much family or institutional support. They also spoke about their family challenges and how they had to learn to embrace adulthood as children. This taught them to problem-solve and be resourceful at an early age. Helping students process their personal experiences is where the learning occurs (Carpenter and Pease, 2013). Literature suggests that learners who engage in effective cooperative activities with their peers can benefit from better academic performance, stronger relationships and greater individual psychological well-being (Carpenter and Pease,

2013). It is when students can share their experiences, find meaning and develop trust with each other, that they can truly blossom. In this next section, I offer a creative form of data analysis embracing diversity and cultural knowledge from students in this study through *Poetic Transcription Analysis* to disrupt traditional methods of analysis like CP encourages us to do as educators.

Poetic Transcription Analysis

Poetic inquiry has been growing steadily over the years and has become popular in qualitative research specifically among fields that include the study of: psychology, sociology, anthropology, nursing, social work, geography, women's/feminist studies, and education (Prendergast, 2009). Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA) began in 1997, when researcher Corrine Glesne decided to create poems out of the testimonies of her interviewees. After reviewing and coding the data multiple times, 15-20 lines were identified to form a story summing up the overarching themes of participants. Identifiable data was removed and a rhythm established to help the poem flow better. This process was branded: Poetic Transcription Analysis and offers poetry as a creative lens into analyzing data (Glesne, 1997). PTA is used in this study for three reasons: 1. It challenges the traditional way of analyzing data in research, which isn't often welcoming of labeling creative methods as strong academic or research practices; 2. It produces a new way to interpret and present data and 3. It makes research fun. Below is the poem created out of the testimonies of six culturally diverse first-generation doctoral students from Mar University and is titled: *All of Us*.

The Poem: All of Us

> I am…
> a first-generation college student.
> from teenage parents struggling to raise a child when they were children
> themselves.

from a family that doesn't understand what I am professionally doing but are very
    proud of me.

I come from a line of strong-willed, confident, authentically Black women.
from a silent house, growing up as a child of Deaf parents.
from a home where I was expected to be independent as a child.
from a house where my earliest and happiest memories come from climbing up a
    stool to help my grandmother make flour tortillas.

Es un montón de sacrificios que tendrías que hacer.
Brace yourself. For failures. For new exciting experiences.
Ask help whenever you need it!
Remember to take care of yourself! You are not just a student. Take care of other
    parts of you.

Being a "hard worker" doesn't mean that you have to struggle alone.
You are not alone on this journey
Los amigos y relaciones son donde más significado encontrarás.

Gracias a toda mi familia. Me dieron las herramientas para seguir creciendo.
Y espero que, aunque no entiendan lo que estoy haciendo.
 Lo hago por ustedes.

Through this poem, themes of relationships and resiliency are still evident along with

some challenges. Students highlight the skills they learned from loved ones in their trusted

network and walk with courage into challenging environments with the cultural knowledge of

their families. These experiences are a sum of the skills students enter college with. It is a

beautiful and impactful thought that tortillas and the memory of making tortillas can serve as fuel

for someone who is first in their family to get a doctoral degree. The power of these words and

their experiences are reflected in short verses, but are the reminder of power, strength and

persistence. This poem is a call to never give up and never endure on your own. It is also a

reminder to readers that each student faces individual barriers. As such, educators should take a

hard look at how their institutions include student voice into the decision-making process for the

success of FGCS.

Conclusion

This chapter shared the findings from data analyzed through one semi-structured focus group highlighting the culturally diverse testimonies of six FGCS in doctoral programs at a Southern California university. The participants' written accounts were reviewed to gain a better understanding of the challenges and successes each student encountered. The themes identified throughout the analysis reflected on the barriers they encountered in all stages of their academic career and factors that led them to succeed. Though they all uniquely faced challenges specific to their identities and experiences, they unanimously cited *Lack of Support* as a common struggle in higher education. When students were asked what helped them overcome barriers, they also agreed upon one resource as undoubtedly the most important in their success, *Relationships*.

For example, Maya listed a lack of representation in her program which led to lack of support. However, her husband was a strong support system for her since they both came from similar cultural experiences including being First-Generation College Students. For Kofi, it was hard to be far from home. He had learned many good behaviors at a young age from growing up in a single-parent multi-generation home. Skills like making the most out of limited resources, remaining positive in the wake of adversity and creating a strong work ethic, which later proved useful as he pursued a doctoral degree.

Student participants interviewed overall demonstrated an immense amount of passion in seeking a doctoral degree even among the many obstacles they faced. Relying on their familial and cultural capital allowed them to gain the support necessary to persist enabling access to information, knowledge, and resources (Bourdieu, 1972; Yosso, 2005). Additionally the skills they learned from their networks beyond their family gave them the ability to adapt to higher education. As a result, we can conclude that FGCS lead complex, multi-layered lives that require personalized attention to best serve them. For this reason, implementing an asset-based approach

like Cultural Proficiency (CP) in the classroom where it includes multiple stakeholders in the conversation and centers diverse student stories is recommended as a best practice for supporting student success. CP Framework gives students the opportunity to reflect on, find meaning and value in their experiences while in the classroom. It also invites educators to do the self-work necessary to create a more equitable learning environment for culturally diverse students to thrive in (Carpenter & Pease, 2013; Cross 1989; Lindsey, 2018). Chapter five presents a discussion of research findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This dissertation explored the ways in which First-Generation College Students from culturally diverse backgrounds succeed in doctoral programs at one Southern California site, Mar University. In an attempt to center student voices and provide more research around culturally diverse FGCS doctoral students, six students were interviewed. Students reflected on their academic journeys through a series of writing exercises, creating counter-narratives of resilience and persistence through poetry. They highlighted the positive factors and barriers they encountered along their college journey. Though, literature on the FGCS suggests that students often lack guidance and support in college having not had parents who went to college, students in the study attributed learned skills and behaviors from families and loved ones that helped them overcome barriers to success. In this next section, I will provide an opportunity for discussion, an overview of the study, followed by a summary of the findings, implications for social justice and leadership practices, and recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Through a qualitative phenomenological approach this study sought to give voice to a culturally vibrant and often under-served population within higher education, FGCS in doctoral programs. This study was guided through a Cultural Proficiency (CP) framework adopting the lenses of: Resiliency, Socialization and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore the ways in which First-Generation College Students from culturally diverse backgrounds succeed in doctoral programs. CP was used as a strengths-based structure to understand how FGCS successfully navigated doctoral programs. CRT provided historical context to understand experiences of FGCS specifically to their race and ethnicity with special attention to how they formed counter-narratives in higher education. Socialization highlighted what behaviors students learned from

their networks and how it helped them in their respective programs. Finally a lens of Resiliency was adopted to learn how participants recovered from and overcame obstacles. For this project student success was defined by each of the students. For some students this meant giving back to their home communities, graduating with doctoral degrees, or building a strong network beyond academics. The guiding research questions for this study were: How do FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds overcome barriers in doctoral programs? And what are those barriers?

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research and a *Narrative Inquiry Approach* in order to showcase the multi-layered experiences of culturally diverse FGCS in doctoral programs from Mar University (pseudonym) (Shank, 2002 & Creswell, 2009). Prospective students were sought out through general email, graduate listserv and personal connections. I recruited 6 graduate student participants who met specific criteria: (1) Enrolled as doctoral students at Mar University, (2) Identified as First-Generation College Students, and (3) Culturally diverse (self-selected belonging to one or more ethnic groups). When recruiting participants, I prioritized having a balanced representation of academic levels, diversity in majors, genders, and finally ethnic backgrounds. Four out of six participants were STEM focused. 3 male and 3 female students participated with a heavy Latinx/e/a/o presence with 5 out 6 identifying as the latter.

After completing the selection process, eight students were chosen for one focus group and 6 showed up to participate. Before the focus group, students answered pre-focus group questions, this was not used as data, but meant as a tool to help them reflect before coming in person. During the focus group, they had the chance to create 3 poems to describe their experiences. Content was interpreted through a strength-based approach with three lenses: guiding the results (Resiliency, Socialization and Critical Race Theory) and Cultural Proficiency used to provide further understanding of student experiences and next steps. A dual analysis was

conducted for accuracy and creativity using *Narrative and Poetic Transcription Analysis*.

Narrative Analysis (NA), recommends notes from the interview or focus group be reviewed along with the writing exercises to organize key findings and interpret the data (Creswell, 2008). Additionally, Saldaña's (2009) *structural coding* and hand coding were used to categorize the texts according to the research questions asked. *Poetic Transcription Analysis (PTA)*, an experimental analysis used to formulate a poem from data, was also implemented. PTA pushes the boundaries of traditional research analysis to find creative and innovative ways of conducting future research and data review. Poetry in this case, offers a lens to interpret results by mixing art and research.

Limitations

The goal of this study was to focus deeply on the stories of six FGCS in doctoral programs at Mar university through poetic accounts of their experiences. A limitation of this study was that research was conducted at only one site. As a result, the testimonies of the FGCS in this dissertation do not reflect the entirety of the population of FGCS in American doctoral programs. Another limitation is that students were only asked to answer three questions, so there is information that could be missing from their experiences. Although some similarities can be found between participants, findings should not be generalized for all FGCS. Supporting FGCS is not a one size fits all model. Each student encountered unique barriers and specific ways to overcome them according to their personal skill set. Additionally, *Narrative Inquiry* and *Poetic Transcription Analysis* help bring out the student's lived experience through storytelling, but depends in part on what the researcher deems important enough to highlight. The researcher is in complete control of editing and bias may come through. Moreover, the researchers' own lived experiences as a current doctoral student of color who is also FGCS and current employee of Mar University, which may impact the tone in which questions are asked or data analyzed.

Lastly, another potential limitation to the study was the participant sampling. I was successful in recruiting enough students for a focus group and diversity in academic standing, but not in ethnic and gender identities. 5 out of 6 Latina/o/e/x students participated in this focus, and only 1 student who identified as Black/African American. 3 students identified as male and 3 students identified as female. There was also a heavy science background and fields represented included: education, psychology, chemistry, engineering and physics. In the following section I will review a summary of the findings and research questions.

Summary of Findings: Themes and Research Questions

The findings of this study generated two themes: 1. *Relationships* and 2. *Lack of Support*. Theme one, *Relationships* highlighted the importance of a network among FGCS in doctoral programs (Boden et al., 2011). Students were able to persist and overcome several barriers as a result of the people in their lives. Participants relied on their familial and cultural capital to learn how to form new connections in graduate school, adapt to different settings, and succeed in their academic careers (Jehangir, 2010). Theme two, *Lack of Support,* also consistently showed up for students throughout their educational journeys including in their doctoral pursuit. As FGCS, they cited experiencing a lack of guidance in both their personal and academic lives (Benson & Lee, 2020; Lindsay, 2018). Many participants faced very specific challenges due to their family structure, cultural values, and other identities. Additionally, the school system, much like our country, can be hierarchical in structure, slow to change and create additional barriers for students in academic settings (Roegman, Kolman, Goodwin & Soles, 2021).

The following section connects themes to the research questions.

Research Question 1

Cultural Diverse FGCS in doctoral programs overcome barriers to success through the *Relationships* they've built. If FGCS can form connections between their past experiences, and

their academic work, then they are more likely to feel motivated and confident to participate in the classroom (Miley, 2009). When students participate in groups, they learn to adopt the necessary skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to succeed in the given environment or organization (Jehangir, 2010; Roksa et al., 2018). Although most research on FGCS study states that students don't receive a lot of guidance from parents since they've never gone to college themselves, in this study six participants acknowledged the skills they learned from family and loved ones that helped them in their doctoral programs (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006).

Learning to create a strong network of people to provide support and guidance helps students build resilience to thrive in college settings and prepare them for life after higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2016). In one of her poems, Bubba, a Psychology doctoral student, shares that although her family doesn't understand what she is professionally doing, they are proud of her. She goes on to discuss the deep bond and admiration she holds for them. This relationship serves as motivation for when she feels like quitting. For another student, Gabriel, a doctoral student in Physics, talks about his connection to his grandmother in his poetry and how that helped value relationships in college and seek them out more. For Maya, a doctoral student in Chemistry. She relied on her husband who was also FGCS and a current doctoral student. She talks about how important it was to have someone be able to understand where she comes from, the unforeseen challenges ahead, and the courage to pursue new opportunities (Jones & Abbes, 2017). Nicole, a doctoral student in the School of Education, was fortunate to build a strong network of Black women leaders she could rely on for those specific challenges that came her way. She named one mentor who had a checklist with her each time they meant, personalizing the experience with her. This relationship was successful because it consisted of trust, respect

and an acknowledgement of responsibilities and abilities (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Next I'll discuss the challenges participants wrote about in their poems.

Research Question 2

Barriers for culturally diverse FGCS in doctoral programs show up in various forms and can often be specific to their circumstances. However for participants of this study, one common challenge they faced was a *Lack of Support* in their families or in academic settings. Ernesto, a Chemistry doctoral student in his sixth year, describes growing up a hearing Latino with deaf parents. From a very young age, he learned to be independent, because it was expected of him. His parents were not involved in his schooling since interpreters were not always readily available. As a result, he did not have familial support in his doctoral program. Kofi, a doctoral student in Biomedical Engineering, also talks about his FGCS status and not having direct support from his family to figure out how to navigate the specifics of pursuing a higher education, like learning good study habits. In his poem, Kofi writes: "Aunque debo de admitir que no tuve mucha guía de cómo estudiar. Pues no había en mi núcleo familiar, primos o amigos cercanos con educación con la cual tuviera una buena referencia para seguir."

For another student, Maya, she voices barriers of *Lack of Support* as a result of lack of representation in her doctoral program. In her poem, she writes: "It was difficult because I feel like I can't be my full-self within my program and I am also not very understood in my family." Maya did, however, have the support of her husband, also a FGCS, who helped guide her through several academic hurdles. For Nicole, she also experienced *Lack of Support* in both school and at home. Her family was resistant to her going back to school and pursuing graduate school. They didn't understand why she was doing it and were very vocal against it. There are also sub themes of isolation in her experience, in being misunderstood when the people you love and trust, don't support you fully.

Using the lenses of *Resiliency, Critical Race Theory, and Socialization* helps us understand how students persisted in their journeys. *Resiliency* theory showcases the strengths students enter college with and provides us with a framework to understand how students engage and process certain experiences around them (Masten, 2011). *Socialization* is defined by researchers Boden et al. (2011) as the ability to adopt the skills necessary to adapt and become efficient contributors of society. *Socialization* theory explains that graduate students can only become competent after they interact regularly within academic and professional networks including their peers, faculty, and other professionals. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001) *Critical Race Theory* is defined as a movement by and for scholars and activists who are actively seeking out connections between race, racism and power. This is an important lens to consider because it helps to highlight barriers that exist for students from racially underrepresented backgrounds in education.

Resiliency Lens

For people who come from marginalized groups and do well against other obstacles, it is a result of other skills and networks that have developed along the way. They are more open to asking for and receiving help. These students will keep persisting until their goals are met (Masten et al. 1990). For one student, Kofi, his family taught him how to overcome adversity with limited resources. They taught him about showing up to persist and looking for support. He mentions that his mother, as a single-parent, modeled strength and a hard work ethic. These are skills he channeled as he coped leaving his home to pursue a graduate education far from his home.

Critical Race Theory Lens

CRT can be used in higher education to explore the relationship between privilege and oppression in the school system (Bonilla-Sylva & Peoples, 2022). This can include a look at: the

campus climate, financial support, access to well-being resources and the diversity of their peers, the staff, faculty, and administration (Hiraldo, 2010). Counter-storytelling validates racial groups' experiences in education and provides a tool to tell their story and combat racism in schools. For one student, Nicole, she describes an instance of lack of representation in her program. She recalls how being one of very few Black students on her college campus led to a lack of support: "there were few Black students that looked like me in most of my English major courses. Most Black students were athletes." Because of this, she also experienced micro-aggressions and *Lack of Support in school*. She wrote about an instance where a faculty member publicly singled her out and said she was not good enough.

Socialization Lens

When students participate in groups, they learn to adopt the skills, values, and knowledge necessary to succeed in any given environment (Roksa et al., 2018). If FGCS can form connections early on from their past experiences and what they learned in the classroom, then they are more likely to stay engaged, learn, and succeed (Miley, 2009). For Bubba, her transition from industry into graduate school was only made possible with the support of her partner. He played an important role in her pursuit of a graduate education and continuous doubts that she struggled with. She described him as a rock in her life, someone who held her steady as she overcame many obstacles on her path to academia.

Cultural Proficiency Lens

Under the guidance of Cultural Proficiency as a framework, this study aimed to understand the experiences of FGCS in doctoral programs and recommend future steps for leadership. Cultural Proficiency (CP) as defined by Welborn et al. (2022) is described as valuing and including the diverse perspectives of the students, community and school officials, as a part of the decision-making process in an educational setting (Phillips, & Horowitz, 2017; Nuri-

109

Robins et al., 2011). In a higher education setting, a CP approach means taking a critical look at the attitudes and practices of individuals and the whole organization (Sobel & Taylor, 2011; Welborn et al., 2022). Students' cultural capital must be considered and their voice incorporated into the decision-making process. For Nicole, she unfortunately experienced a Lack of Support from faculty because they belittled her in front of a classroom. This should not be the case for any student, especially when they come with a wealth of skills and knowledge to succeed. CP acknowledges the differences of all its participant members and sees them as an asset. As educators, it is important to acknowledge, center and celebrate these diverse perspectives (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016) to help students feel engaged and valued in higher education. In this next section, I will provide implications for social justice, educational leaders and recommendations for future research.

Implications for Social Justice

First-Generation College Students in doctoral programs are a widely underserved and underrepresented population across American universities. Knowledge of the experiences of FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds in graduate programs would give educators a better understanding for offering support to these students. hooks (1994), a Black feminist scholar, writes about *engaged pedagogy* in her literature as a way to explain a need for both student and teacher to take up equal responsibility in learning. It is a relationship that relies on trust to foster a safe environment to dialogue and question. Campus administrators play a large role in making processes inclusive and equity minded when it comes to the futures of FGCS. Classifying educators as experts in academia is how we all consciously and unconsciously contribute to the achievement gap. Feminist scholarship states that in order for education to help us gain freedom, old systems should be challenged (hooks, 1994). Cultural Proficiency (CP) offers a framework that does just that. It allows for a shared responsibility of the decision-making process in school

settings challenging hierarchy leadership styles. Using CP and CRT to include the voices of FGCS who are enrolled in doctoral programs and have graduated from universities, would help create much needed counter-narratives in higher education settings to acknowledge, affirm and support their identities and stories (Yosso, 2006).

Using asset-minded approaches to work with FGCS is imperative especially in graduate education and STEM fields, where we may see less of them. One such approach is *Growth Mindset* (GM). *GM* is defined by researchers Yeager & Deck (2012) as the ability to learn intelligence under the right guidance and support. In contrast, a 'fixed mindset' is the belief that intelligence is an inherited trait and cannot be learned. Faculty can sometimes uphold this thinking, and thus challenge their bias through a framework like *Cultural Proficiency* to challenge negative stereotypes about intelligence in classroom settings. FGCS, in this way, can learn to see their minds as something that can strengthen and grow just like muscles overtime, making higher education and learning more unattainable.

Additionally, relationships between older, more established FGCS can prove to be a great asset for new and incoming FGCS. Students who identify within marginalized groups (Women, Black or Latino, etc.) often face more stress and insecurities because they struggle to connect with their White peers while also battling their own stereotypes (Aguilar et al., 2014). FGCS can then learn from each other and overcome barriers like the *Hidden Curriculum (HC)* to understand the silent and invisible set of rules in school settings impacting a student's academic and long-term success (Gair & Mullins, 2001; Kentli, 2009). Next, I will cover implications for leaders to consider.

Implications for Leaders

First-Generation College Students come with a wide array of perspectives and values that are impacted by their identities and upbringing that impact their learning, their dreams, goals and

111

school behavior. Producing a diverse and inclusive curriculum that reflects students' culture and lived experiences will help validate students, help them stay engaged and persist. Being *Culturally Proficient* is an investment that will create aforementioned opportunities for various groups on college campuses (Welborn et al., 2022). Because each student encounters specific challenges in academia as a result of their unique identities, CP helps guide leaders in education to create more equitable practices, collaborations, diverse instruction and curriculum. In order for CP to be successful, researcher Lindsey (2019) states these five core elements should be adopted: (1) Assessing cultural knowledge, (2) valuing diversity, (3) Manage differences, (4) Adopting diversity, and (5) Institutionalizing cultural knowledge. All these tenants can be achieved through storytelling.

To this effect, educational leaders are urged to start by creating inclusive classrooms and incorporating FGCS experiences into the curriculum, allowing them to reflect on their stories, and utilizing their cultural capital inside the classroom (Welborn et al., 2022). Second, leaders must acknowledge they are not the sole knowledge holders in the classroom and prioritize the growth of students by sharing the stage with them to learn together. If educators are unable to look past their bias, comfort and traditions, then it may create problems in making change and progress difficult to achieve. Third, leaders must also be open to a CP framework in which they welcome collaborations with all parties impacted by school decisions, include students in the process, and guide other leaders along the way. But at the core, educational leaders must create strong relationships and lead by example (Lindsey, 2018). In this next section,

Future Research

Education leadership plays a powerful role in the success of students. There is room to study resiliency further in schools. According to resiliency educator and researcher Bernard

112

(2017), teachers who build caring relationships with students are instrumental in creating resilient students. Researchers also note that building resilience can look a little different from student to student and institution to institution depending on the opportunities they have available. Resilience at some universities, for example, can look like seeking student programming for mindfulness, empathy and compassion (Brown, 2014; Arizona State University, 2020). Or it can look like creating programs and events that foster meaning-making, self-reflection, goal-setting and relationships (Walten & Cohen, 2011). Students are shown to work harder when they love and trust a teacher (Bernard, 2017). Meeting this basic survival need among FGCS is a holistic acknowledgement of their person, that they are not just showing up to class to be taught or fixed, but that they are going to be cared for as a whole.

FGCS in doctoral programs are still underserved and under-researched. The majority of resources, services, studies and surveys are conducted on the undergraduate population. Many institutions, similar to Mar university, do not think to track the first-generation status of graduate students and are unaware of their unique educational experiences and challenges. Thus, further investigation into how specific departments create space for resiliency, socialization, and counter-narratives would be beneficial to FGCS in doctoral and graduate programs. This can come in the form of workshops for students and a FGCS training for faculty and staff. An important part of building community and sense of belonging are programming resources, which are usually slim to none for graduate students compared to their undergraduate peers. More support in this area would benefit FGCS. Finally, another point of interest to consider tracking is how the status of being a FGCS doctoral graduate impacts students' job search, if at all. When FGCS are less able to engage on campus due to cultural and familial responsibilities, when are they taught how to job search? Who is helping them in this next chapter?

Conclusion

This study was twofold: one, to offer scholarly context and two, offer a social justice perspective informing educators and other stake key holders of the barriers that culturally diverse First-Generation College Students (FGCS) face as doctoral students at one Southern California University. For participants of this study, *Relationships* helped them overcome obstacles on their academic journeys. Challenges also showed up in the form of *Lack of Support*, representation, and fewer resources. Despite these challenges, FGCS in this study were able to overcome their challenges to pursue doctoral degrees. As we move forward, it is important to consider asset-based frameworks like *Cultural Proficiency, Resiliency Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Growth Mindset* to provide culturally proficient academic, retention and graduation efforts for FGCS. Supporting FGCS is not a one size fits all model. It is critical to acknowledge that each student comes with their own unique set of experiences, identities, and challenges. Promoting student voices by including them in curriculum and the decision-making process of institutions will promote a shared responsibility of their success.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO STUDENTS

My name is Sinai Cota, and I'm currently enrolled at UCSD/CSUSM Educational Leadership Program. The goal of this email is to recruit participants for my qualitative research dissertation. My research explores experiences of First-Generation College Students currently enrolled as doctoral students and who identify as coming from a culturally diverse background (Black/African-American, Latino/a/e/x/Hispanic/Chicana/o/e/x, Asian/ Pacific Islander, Indigenous, Bi-Racial, Multi-Racial or other). Although UC San Diego has ranked high among upward mobility for under-resourced student groups, current research says underrepresented students who are doctoral students often feel alienated because of their identities and have up to 40% think about quitting their program.

Goal: To gain a deeper understanding of your overall journey through a series of writing exercises.

- I plan on conducting <u>one focus group with 6-9</u> participants lasting <u>60-90 minutes</u>.

- Prior to meeting I will ask you to <u>complete a questionnaire</u> to help you prepare for your writing exercises. The prompts will help you reflect on your experience, including barriers encountered and your definition of success, as a First-Generation College Student.

- When findings are presented, we will *use alternate names* (you can choose yours) to protect your identity and *remain anonymous*.

- During the meeting, participants will meet each other and engage in a reflection of the questionnaire while also writing throughout a 60-90 minute session.

- Participating students will be asked not to disclose any personal information from other peers in the group nor share any topics discussed at the time of the focus group.

115

- Participants will be asked if they would like to participate via zoom or in person for the focus group, and decide as a group if we will do it in person, online or blended.

- The findings will provide an in-depth understanding of the educational journey of First-Generation College Students from culturally diverse backgrounds in doctoral programs.

- Each participant will receive a $50 gift card as a thank you.

This study is seeking participants who identify as First-Generation College Students in a doctoral program from culturally diverse backgrounds including anyone who is: African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/a/e/x/ Hispanic/ Chicana/o/e/x, Indigenous, Bi or Multi-racial. If none of these labels apply to you, but you would like to participate, please reply back to the researchers, Sinai Cota for more information. In this study, First-Generation College Students can be defined as first in your immediate family to attain a college degree–that is, your parents don't hold a college degree nor do they have any college experience **OR** you navigated college on your own despite having parents who went to college (maybe internationally or may have been absent from your life).

If this sounds like you, please answer the questions below. Once reviewed, if you meet the criteria for participant, I will contact you to set up the first interview, email you the consent form, including more information about the study. Please feel free to contact me directly at sicota@eng.ucsd.edu with any questions you may have.

Profile questions:

1. I am first-generation:
   a. Neither of my parents hold a 4-year college degree from the U.S. or from any other country; or

b. My parents have college experience but did not graduate from a U.S. college or any other college outside the U.S.

c. My parents have a college degree, but were not present or engaged in my college education

2. I identify as: African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/e/x/Chicana/o/e/x, Indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, Other (Please Specify)

3. I identify as: Male, Female or Non Binary, Other (Please Specify)

4. I am currently in a doctoral program at:

   a. Name of institution and program:_____

   b. Year in program:_____

5. If you are currently in the first-year of the program, how many quarters have you completed?

6. If you are at the dissertation level of the program, how far along are you in the process?

   a. Working on my proposal;

   b. Submitted my proposal;

   c. Conducting research and collecting data;

   d. Writing final chapters; or

   e. Will or have defended my dissertation (date of defense): _____

Thank you for your time.

Sinai Cota
619-***-***
s@ucsd.edu

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Greetings!

My name is Sinai Cota, and I'm completing the final year in the Educational Leadership Program at Mar University. I'm currently conducting a study on the experiences of First-Generation College Students presently enrolled in doctoral programs and who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. This topic aims to capture information about the overall experience of participants pursuing a doctoral degree. This is important because too often the statuses of First-Generation and culturally diverse students are described as the unlikely student to pursue and persist in a doctoral program. You are invited to participate in this study because you identify as *first-generation* defined as neither of your parents holding a four-year college degree (or did not have parents engage or support you in your educational pursuits) and you also identify as culturally diverse.

In preparation for the study, each participant should be aware of the procedure they will follow:
- Once the recruitment email is returned, the participant receives the informed consent to read and sign, and schedules their availability for focus group meeting within five days of the receipt of the consent.
- The *first* step entails a questionnaire to help you reflect on your experience as a First-Generation College Student in a doctoral program from a culturally diverse background
- The primary investigator, Sinai Cota, reviews the signed consent form at the time of the focus group and allows for open reflection on the questionnaire during the meeting.
- Students can choose to show up virtually or in person, and answer prompts individually. Afterwards, if desired, students will be allowed to share out loud.

In any research there may be potential physical or emotional risk and breach of confidentiality. In this study, the participant:
Risks
1. May recall uncomfortable, sad memories or current struggles that are deemed difficult to articulate or share.
2. May experience deeply rooted unexpected and unresolved feelings.
3. Personal information may be subject to being breached.

Safe guards
1. May ask the primary investigator to step away at any time and take a moment to recuperate.
2. Will be directed to talk with people they trust (i.e., family, friend, and mentor), make an appointment with a counselor, or if necessary, request to stop or withdraw from the study.
3. A list of referrals to local health clinics will be offered if a strong emotional reaction is evoked during the interview and journal writing processes.
4. Documents will be kept in a private google drive folder with the primary investigator only having access to the documents. The primary investigator is working alone, thus limiting others to have access to data. Pseudonyms will be used.

Your participation in the study will add an in-depth understanding of your unique experience. Your story will bring insight into the attributes that have encouraged and enabled you to pursue a doctoral.

Selected participants will receive a $50 gift card. Participation in this study is voluntary and withdrawal from it is understandable. If withdrawal from the study occurs, receipt of the incentive will not be jeopardized, thus the participant should not be concerned with any consequences.

This study has been approved by the California State University San Marcos Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about the study, you may direct them to the primary investigator, Sinai Cota, s@ucsd.edu or (619) ***-***9, or the primary investigators Chair, Dr. Brooke Soles at b@csusm.edu . Questions about your rights as a participant should be directed to the IRB at (760) ***-***9. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

- o   I agree to participate in the study.
- o   I agree to be audio taped.
- o   I decline participation from the study.

Participant name: _____

Participant signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: PRE-FOCUS QUESTIONAIRE

Students will be asked to journal the following before the focus group:

- Please describe your experience as a First-Generation College in a doctoral program from a culturally diverse background.

- Thinking about your identities, as a First-Generation College Student in a doctoral program, how do you define success?

- What barriers have you encountered in your higher education journey as a doctoral student?

- What factors on or off campus have contributed to your success as a culturally diverse FGCS in a doctoral program?

- Can you recall any instances when your identities either as a culturally diverse FGCS were magnified (called attention to) in a good or bad way in your doctoral program?

- If you could give a piece of advice to future FGCS seeking entry into a doctoral program, what would it say?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP, WRITING EXERCISES

During the first meeting, a Focus Group (FG) will take place in a semi-private environment with only the researcher and participants present occurring within 3-4 weeks of the questionnaire. Focus Groups (FG) are a way of studying the interactions of multiple participants, much like an interview, but more in depth (Morgan, 1988). The researcher has the flexibility to reword questions, ask clarifying questions, and generate data from the group interaction in addition to the questions being asked by the researcher (Morgan, 1988). The FG research method allows for non-FGCS to be observed in a controlled setting. It also gives participants the opportunity to explore their thoughts, values and experiences without feeling isolated in their account. Participants can also engage in creating their own questions and framework along the FG process and exchange ideas with one another (Morgan, 1988).

Students will receive a series of 2-3 writing prompts to reflect on their experiences throughout the FG. Students will use google documents to share the progress with the researcher. The researcher will create a private google document with each of the participants and a folder with the name of the study that can only be accessed by them individually. The researcher will have the ability to remain fluid in offering feedback to students as needed and can comment on the shared documents. Socialization Theory will be used to understand and analyze how participants influence each other's answers and experiences throughout the session (Weidman et al., 2001).

The writing prompts will include the following questions:

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral

students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)

- An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt)

APPENDIX E: OVERARCHING THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Research Question	Poetry Prompts	Main Themes identified by theoretical framework	Subthemes
Q. 1 How do FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds overcome barriers in doctoral programs?	*Where do I come from?* (Students asked to reflect on their higher education journey) *An Ode to…* (Students tasked with writing an ode to something that got them through challenges encountered while a student at MU) *Dear Younger Self…* Students asked to write a letter to their younger self leaving words of wisdom.	Relationships	Resourcefulness/Prep aring, Agency, cultural capital, familial capital, affirmations, food, goal-oriented, belief in oneself, mentorship, self care, connection, community, purpose, Persistence, Resiliency
Q2. What are the barriers?	*An Ode to…* (Students tasked with writing an ode to something that got them through challenges encountered while a student at MU) *Dear Younger Self…* Students asked to write a letter to their younger self leaving words of wisdom.	Lack of Support	First-Generation Immigrant (FGCS) "Parents struggling to raise a child when they were children themselves", Additional responsibilities in home with siblings and self; Non-english speaking home; and needing to translate for parents, fear of failure, negative self talk, social anxiety, self-doubt, feelings of isolation Feeling defeated,

Research Question	Poetry Prompts	Main Themes identified by theoretical framework	Subthemes
			Loss Unexpected responsibilities Lack of role models Lack of resources Single parent household Expected to be independent as a child Loss Fear Social Anxiety Internal conflict Feeling down Sacrifices (time spent at school vs family) Lack of access to health services Misunderstood by family/program Being underrepresented in their field/school Physically far from family Overwhelming expectations from self Burn out Lack of balance of responsibilities Hard to ask for help (Pride/Fear) Isolation Being singled out (in school by authority figure/teacher) Experiencing public shame/embarrassment by authority figure Betrayal, Lack of guidance; feelings of

Research Question	Poetry Prompts	Main Themes identified by theoretical framework	Subthemes
			being unsafe

APPENDIX F: BARRIERS

Student Name	Barriers named in poems by each participant
Bubba	- First-Generation Immigrant (FGCS) "Parents struggling to raise a child when they were children themselves"(having to navigate on their own) - Additional responsibilities in home with siblings and self - Non-english speaking home and needing to translate for parents, - Fear of failure - Negative self talk - Social anxiety - Self-doubt - Feelings of isolation - Feeling defeated - Loss - Unexpected responsibilities - Lack of safety
Kofi	(FGCS) Lack of guidance (having to navigate on their own) - Lack of role models - Lack of resources - Single parent household - Lack of safety
Ernesto	- Expected to be independent as a child - Lack of safety - Lack of guidance in school/edu (having to navigate on their own) (FGCS) Lack of knowledge about college, - Loss - Unexpected responsibilities - Fear - Negative self-talk - Social Anxiety - Self -doubt - Feelings of isolation, - Feelings of being defeated
Gabriel	(FGCS) Lack of guidance for school, having to navigate on their own - Internal conflict - Lack of family support - Lack of safety - Loss - Feeling down - Sacrifices (time spent at school vs family)

Student Name	Barriers named in poems by each participant
	● Doubt
Maya	● Lack of access to health services ● Immigrant family background, ● (FGCS) having to navigate on their own, ● Lack of Safety ● Misunderstood by family/program ● Lack of sense of belonging and community ● Being underrepresented in their field ● Physically far from family ● Overwhelming expectations from self ● Burn out ● Lack of balance of responsibilities ● Hard to ask for help (Pride/Fear?) ● Isolation
Nicole	● Being singled out (in school by authority figure/teacher) ● Experiencing public shame/embarrassment by authority figure ● Lack of safety ● Betrayal ● Lack of family support ● FGCS (Navigating and motivating on own) ● Lack of representation in school ● Lack of sense of belonging ● Self-doubt

The Barriers:
Caveats that assist in overcoming resistance to change

The Guiding Principles:
Underlying values of the approach

The Continuum:
Language for describing both healthy and nonproductive policies, practices, and individual values and behaviors

The Essential Elements:
Behavioral standards for measuring and planning for growth toward cultural proficiency

APPENDIX H: FULL LENGTH POEMS OF PARTICIPANTS

Bubba's Poems

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)

I come from el rancho

I come from immigrant parents

I come from a low class

I come from the dream of seeking a better future in America

I come from teenage parents struggling to raise a child when they were children themselves

I come from the struggle of being the oldest child and always being looked as a role model

I come from being my parents' personal translator since I learned English

I come from learning to take care of my younger siblings at a very young age due to necessity

I come from learning how to navigate my way towards college

I come from being scared of failing and not taking advantage of every opportunity I encounter

I come from the love my parents have given me unconditionally

I come from the hugs, kisses and support I receive from my family when I most need them

I come from a family that don't understand what I am professionally doing but are very proud of me

I come from a family that I admire tremendously

I come from a background that always makes me proud and motivates me to keep going when I want to quit

129

- An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

An Ode to my soulmate

To the person that picks me up when I feel defeated

To the person that makes me laugh after an exhausting day

To the person that holds me close so I could feel protected when I am having an anxiety attack

To the person that pushes me to become the best version of myself both physically and mentally

To the person that tells me I am beautiful when I need to hear it the most

To the person that eats cookies and ice cream with me when I need to decompress

To the person that jumps into spontaneous adventures with me when I need a break

To the person that helped me transition from industry to graduate school

To the person that always reminds me of my strengths and the reason why UCSD chose me

To my rock, my cheerleader and soulmate

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt)

Dear Younger Self,

Brace yourself for an emotional rollercoaster

For failures

For a lot of life changes

For overwhelming emotions

For family troubles

BUT also

For new exciting experiences

For a new city

For a new school

For new friends

For new communities

For new support groups

For new physical goals

For new sports

For new adventures

For a new daily routine

For a new lifestyle

BUT remember you are ready for all of this

You are meant for this journey

Ernesto's Poems

> I come from a silent house, growing up as a child of Deaf parents, the most often
> comment I got whenever someone came over was always how quiet the house
> was. As such, I became quite accustomed to being in silence, even now.

I come from a home where I was expected to be independent as a child. My parents have minimal formal education, so it was never possible for me to ask them for help on anything academic. Further, American sign language interpreters were very hard to come by, so my parents had almost zero involvement with the administrative side of my K-12 education as well. During my junior year of high school, as people started talking about college, I realized that it was another thing that I would have to do alone; figure out the applications, pay for the applications, learn about financial aid and what it would mean to attend college. The lack of involvement meant that I was entirely reliant upon myself to motivate myself, and I saw this too late and had made non-ideal choices in what courses I took in highschool, and put in too little effort. Fortunately, community college presented itself as a nearly free way to reinvent myself and start my academics over.

I come from a house where my earliest and happiest memories come from climbing up a stool to help my grandmother make flour tortillas. Food became a hugely impactful part of my life, knowing the

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)

An ode to mentorship. I have been significantly impacted by mentorship throughout my life. Entering high school, I had no idea what to expect, nor where

132

I was heading. The first mentor I can identify was Chad Peterson, the athletic trainer during my Freshman and sophomore years of high school. During Freshman year, I took his athletic training course, learning basic anatomy and injuries related to sports medicine. Academics always came easy to me, because I have a photographic memory, so I found I had an aptitude for anything academic that I set my mind to. I interviewed to intern under him for the following year, and he even admitted to me afterwards that he gave me the hardest exam of the group in order to truly determine if I was worth the spot, and I passed with flying colors. Through the summer up to sophomore year and into the year, I quickly grew into one of his three senior interns, by the end of the year he gave me a personalized award that he normally only gives to his graduating seniors. About a month after giving it to me, and the literal day before the start of my junior year he died of a sudden heart attack from an underlying genetic abnormality. As quickly as I had found the first positive male role model and mentor of my life I lost it. The other two senior students had graduated, while other students had joined the program with me, I was the only one who had the time invested to keep it running, so the athletic training program was dumped on my shoulders.

● An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

Dear Ernesto.

You're fresh into high school: you're scared, convinced you can't take advanced placement classes because you're not good enough, so engulfed in self doubt and social anxiety that it's overwhelming. But why? Academics have never been a problem, or even particularly challenging to this point. Each step and each new challenge built up and made to look like an insurmountable peak in reality are nothing more than a light breeze through the park. Every class you take you sit at the top with minimal effort. Anything you set your mind to will see you at the top. I write to you from the end of a PhD in chemistry, a field that inspires terror in most, you are the 1% of the 1%. But I can't help you socially. I've given up there. You've always felt alone, and that won't change.

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt)

Gabriel's Poems

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)

I come from Lima, Peru, from a familia de clase media. My mother and father were really poor when they were little and they never had the chance to go to college. They both needed to support their family economically and so they started working when they finished school. I, on the other hand, had the financial

support from my parents to pursue a higher education. Though sometimes money was an issue, it never was that we didn't have enough to eat. Tuve educacion primaria, secundaria y universidad. Y mis padres la mayoria de veces me apoyaron. El unico evento where they didn't support me was when I changed majors from engineering to physics. Ellos creain que physics no era una buena carrera economicamente porque iba a terminar siendo profesor de escuela. Supongo que ahi tuve un primer conflicto interno porque tenia que elegir entre algo que me gustaba (fisica) y algo que me daba un futuro mas estable (ingenieria). Recuerdo que cambiarme fue una decision dificil porque mi familia me dijo que no me iba a apoyar mas economicamente si elegia fisica. Pero a pesar de todo sentia que era lo que queria, lo que me apasionaba y no me arrepiento. Otra cosa related I guess its que me inculcaron desde kid that I needed to continue my education as much as I can since my parents believe that only education can move you from social/economic status. Supongo que esta mentalidad la sentia mas por parte de la familia de mi mama. Mi abuelita siempre me impulsaba a seguir estudiando. Era gracioso que desde pequeno, como me iba bien en el colegio, mi abuelita me decia: "mi cerebrito". Y cada vez que tenia algun success academic siempre era celebrado.

- An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

An ode to my abuelita,

135

Ever since I was kid, you supported me.

Hiciste mi infancia inolvidable.

Motivaste durante el colegio.

Encouraged me to pursue my dream career.

Celebraste mis logros.

Me acompanaste when I was down,

con tus llamadas desde Lima.

Fuiste parte íntegra de mi vida.

Pero ahora ya no estás.

Se siente raro no poder llamarte.

Y contarte como me esta yendo.

Los amigos que he hecho,

Los logros que he obtenido,

Y el lugar donde estoy

Que nunca imagine estar.

Quiero escuchar tus historias.

Lo valiente que fuiste

To raise a mis diez tios y tias

Cuando tu esposo fallecio tragicamente.

Las fuerzas que tuviste que sacar

To mourn the death of my abuelo

And at the same time mantenerlos a todos.

Siempre me dijiste que estabas orgulloso de mi

De todo lo que habia conseguido

Y todo lo que iba a conseguir

Pero nunca te dije

Lo orgulloso que estaba

De que tu fueses mi abuelita

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt)

Dear Gabriel,

La fisica no lo es todo. El trabajo no lo es todo. Los amigos y relaciones son donde mas significado encontraras. Es cierto que has tenido que sacrificar tanto para llegar donde estaras (si decides seguirlo). Y es cierto que lo valdría. Academicamente es el lugar perfecto, amistades haras y te sentiras comodo aca. Pero me encuentro en esta dicotomia entre todo lo que he sacrificado por llegar a este lugar. En verdad lo vale? Supongo que no tengo alguna cosa en especifico que decirte. Solo compartir como me siento y pienso ahora. Y tu decidiras si este es un camino que quieras seguir. Porque es verdad que tendrás que pasarte las noches en la biblioteca y no cenar con tu familia. Es verdad que tendras que faltar a reuniones sociales y familiares para cubrir los gaps de knowledge. Es verdad que tendras que ir a otro pais para hacer una maestria y trabajar con dos profesores en dos universidades diferentes para siquiera ser considerado como candidato en universidades estadounidenses. Es verdad que tendras que estudiar

137

hasta feriados malogrando relaciones de pareja. So no se. Es un monton de

sacrificios que tendrías que hacer.

Kofi's Poems

Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as

FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students.

Vengo de la Isla del encanto, Puerto Rico.

Isla que me vio nacer, que me vio crecer, que me vio vivir.

Estudié en ella, en la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Mayagüez.

Muy buena Universidad fue, no me arrepiento de lo que aprendí en él.

Aunque debo de admitir

Qué no tuve mucha guía de cómo estudiar

Pues no había en mi núcleo familia, primos o amigos cercanos con educación

Con la cual tuviera una buena referencia para seguir.

Yo solo sabía lo que tenía que hacer

Diseñé mi rumbo, construí la carretera y caminé en ella como mejor lo pude hacer

No sabía bien cómo construir el rumbo, pues dejé muchos hoyos y parchos por recorrer

Pero sé que no lo hice mal, pues llegué aquí.

Ni los huracanes, los Terremotos, múltiples Huelgas, un Gobierno Corrupto, pandemia o la

pobreza

Me pararon para alcanzar mis metas.

Yo estoy en mi peak

Y estoy orgulloso de mi y de representar mi Isla aquí. Wepa!

An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources.

Le doy gracias a mi familia bella
Que siempre han estado ahí para mí.
Que ante la adversidad de crecer con pocos recursos,
Nunca me faltó el amor y cariño de ellos a mí.

Le doy gracias a mi mamá
Porque es una mujer fuerte y trabajadora
Que aunque fue dejada sola con 2 hijos
Nunca se rindió de darnos todo lo mejor para crecer y vivir.

Le doy gracias a mi abuelita
Por ser una mujer tierna y cariñosa
Siempre preocupada por si ya comí
O sino arrocito con habichuela para mí.

Le doy gracias a mis tíos
Por sustituir la figura Paterna en mi vida
Que aunque fueran tíos abuelos y no tenían que acoger el rol
Lo hicieron con mucha responsabilidad y honor.

Gracias a toda mi familia
Y espero que, aunque no entiendan lo que estoy haciendo
 Lo hago porque ustedes me dieron las herramientas para seguir creciendo
Los amo y los adoro, gracias por ser mi familia.

Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey?)

Que es la que hay Kofi,

¿Te acuerdas de mí? Soy tu futuro yo hablándote y vengo a acordarte de unas cosas.

Recuerda bien cómo estabas cuando empezastes a trabajar

No te sentías bien en ella, deseabas progresar y echar pa lante en otro camino.

La gente te lo decía desde que empezastes a trabajar,

"Eres un chico joven, talentoso, y deseoso de seguir aprendiendo"

"No te acuestes en querer crecer en una compañía donde solo te ven como un recurso y no dejan ser quien deseas ser."

Todavía te queda mucho por aprender, crecer y conocer.

La vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te trae la vida.

Este cambio que vas a experimentar, es uno completamente diferente

Vas a salir de tu Isla, de tu comunidad, de la gente que lleva años conociendo quién eres

Pero eso no está mal, ellos están ahí para ti. Siempre seguirán siendo tu familia.

Puerto Rico siempre estará ahí para ti, para recibirte con un gran abrazo, como solo PR lo sabe dar.

Vas aprender, a crecer, a trabajar como un profesional.

Buscarás nuevas oportunidades, la gente lo verá y lo valorará.

Eres grande, mira para donde vas.

No dudes en ti, apuesta en ti, y verás todo lo que lograrás por quien quieres ser.

Maya's Poems

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)
  - Where I come from (think where you come from and where you are now)
  - I came from
    - I come from a small desert region along the U.S./Mexico border.
    - I was a transborder student (I lived in Mexico and crossed to the U.S. every day to go to school).
    - On the Mexico side, I lived with a single father of two and an older sister.
    - On the U.S. side, I stayed with my grandparents who lived in a small rural community that has a lot of agriculture. They were farm workers their entire lives. My father and uncles grew up as farmworkers. This community faces a lot of barriers in access to quality health services.
    - My background has driven me to seek a doctoral degree to address these barriers in underserved communities.

- An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

141

- ○ Title: An ode to my husband.
    - ■ I am a first-generation college student and the first to go to college in my family. Although this means that I had to overcome many barriers, I never felt truly alone because I've had my husband since day one. We are both first-generation students. We started dating when we were in high school at the time when we were applying for college. Throughout undergrad, we were both in universities that were across the country from each other. It was our first time being away from home but he always encouraged and supported me. He was always someone who I could call when things got rough. He is a first-generation college student, son of immigrants. He grew up in the same town that I did. He is someone that is so incredibly intelligent and eager to help others in his field. Right after graduating from high school, he received a full ride scholarship up to his PhD. He went to an ivy league school which is almost unheard of where I am from. He had to face a lot of barriers and challenges being in such a prestigious school so far away from home and I very much admire him for that. However, he is still very humble about his accomplishments. Right now, he is also a doctoral student in a STEM field. I feel like his field is known for being one that provides a lot of financial security and allows people to make a lot of money. However, his current research focuses on making his field more accessible to

142

underrepresented students. He recognizes that this field is sort of pushing away students from underrepresented backgrounds and, as a result, are not getting the financial benefits of the field. I had a really rough first year in my doctoral program. It was difficult because I feel like I can't be my full self within my program and I am also not very understood in my family. However, my husband is able to understand all parts of my identity. He understands the demand and expectations of a doctoral student and fully supports me. He also understands that I have cultural values outside of academia. I think most importantly, he understands the struggles of being a first-gen and underrepresented student in a doctoral program.

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt)

Dear Maya (in undergrad),

  - (1) Prioritize your health

    - I know that you put a lot of pressure on yourself. I understand that you have a lot to work for. You are a first-gen college student and also the very first to move so far away from your family. You want to make your family's sacrifices worth it. You might also feel guilty and maybe selfish for being away from family to pursue

your education. However, remember that you are making them so very proud. Remember that this is why they worked so hard. Remember to take care of yourself! You are not just a student. Take care of other parts of you. This part of life is only temporary and you should enjoy where you are right now. Although it feels like the struggles will be over once you graduate, you will face additional challenges and you have a lot of ways to go. Don't burn yourself out. Find hobbies and make time for yourself.

- (2) Advocate for yourself
  - As a first-generation college student, you will face a lot of challenges. A valuable skill that I wish I would have learned earlier is to advocate for myself. Ask help whenever you need it! I realized in graduate school that I would be struggling in silence while others were asking for help or opportunities. Those people were able to get the resources they needed. As first-generation, it is sometimes difficult to ask for help or ask for opportunities. Don't put yourself at a disadvantage by not asking for help while others are doing it. Being a "hard worker" doesn't mean that you have to struggle alone.
- (3) Remember where you come from
  - It will be a long journey ahead. You will be in spaces with people that don't share the same identities as you. However, always remember where you came from. Remember the reasons why you

wanted to come to college and study in the first place. Continue to advocate and work towards that goal. Remember the great contribution that you make to your team and community by being in the spaces that you are. Remember how you will use your background and education to address a lack in the field and in health services.

- ○ (4) Find you community
  - ■ It might feel lonely at times. Remember to always find your community. This can be people who support you in your career and educational journey.

Nicole's Poems

- Where I come from poem (Students will be asked to reflect on their higher education journey as FGCS from culturally diverse backgrounds enrolled as current doctoral students. They will be asked to fill in the blank and write as much as they can in 15-20 minutes)
- Where I come from…
  - ○ Is the body of Christ, I am a living embodiment of His divine will, grace, and favor actively working in my life.
  - ○ Is resilience to overcome a faculty member stating in front of a class in my spring semester of senior year that "I was not a great English major."
  - ○ I come from grassroots organizing in Salinas, Fresno, Philly, Chicago and working alongside blue collar workers advocating for worker's rights to make a decent living.

- ○ I come from the hustle of NYC streets to pursue a master's degree when no one in my family thought I should. Is from a family that serves the Lord, serves our community, and one another in a authentic, genuine and present ways.

- ○ Is from a community of practitioners determined to give students and future leaders hope and support that was missing on our academic and personal growth journey's.

- ○ I come from a line of strong-willed, confident, authentically Black women on my mother's side. My mother and grandmother are servers to their families, communities and in their professional roles. They seek to help, guide and support all that come into their lives.

- ○ I come from a state school that touted it's label of being the most diverse public school in the early 2000's, yet there were few Black students that looked like me in most of my English major courses. Most Black student were athletes.

- ○ I come from a sisterhood of close friends, chosen family and prayer warriors that are eager to connect, reflect, laugh and thrive in their own lives. They are resilient, persistent, and present in many ways for themselves and challenge more Black women to do the same.

- ○ I am going to be an entrepreneur, self-made woman with multiple streams of income.

- ○ I am going to be a sought after Ed.D and community engagement consultant, keynote speaker, and scholar.

146

- I am going to be a confident woman, that is not a single subject matter expert, but a versatile leader able to adapt to any adversity.

- **I am going to be an audacious Black woman that does not have to shrink herself for the comfort of others**, able to command any and every room I enter, and opportunities will seek me out for my input.

- An Ode to poem (Students will be asked to reflect on something or someone who helped them along the way to their doctoral degree and this can range from a program to a relationship, to inanimate objects or other useful resources. They will be given 15-20 minutes)

- <u>I come from colleagues</u> that became friends who saw beyond my potential but to who I was: a leader. They quickly pushed away my doubt that I was not a leader and simply wanted to be in the background. Instead they encouraged me to transform my personal narrative to be a leader, to be someone that contributes to conversations and intellect that is valuable.

- Faith is someone who begrudgingly accepted my offers of friendship at a time of work disappointment. I encouraged her to get out of her rut of being passed over for a promotion and instead seek out new opportunities beyond the university. She did! She became an adjunct professor, expanded her ministry business into an annual conference and started a new career outside of higher education. Over time she poured back into me by praying for me, reading over my materials and advocating for me when my name was mentioned in rooms I was not in. She pushes me by calling me Dr. Nicole whenever we talk.

- I immediately think of three colleagues that became friends that have helped me tremendously on my doctoral journey: Faith from my time at UPenn. She begrudgingly accepted my offers of friendship as a new staff in an office that passed her over for a promotion. Over time, we connected over our Faith, close family ties, travel, and being lifelong learners. I left UPenn three years ago this May and she and I continue to talk weekly on Thursdays. She has cheered me on through dissertation set backs, given me the okay to feel my emotions with family disagreements, encouraged me to rest when the words were not coming, and took time to visit me when I was in DC for two days. She has shown me care of a parent, friend, confidant and missionary in many ways through our friendship. Her resilience to persist beyond many hurdles in her life, have encouraged me to continue advancing through my degree. She often calls me Dr. Nicole when we chat. She is one of my biggest supporters. I can not wait to see her again for graduation.

- Vivian has been an unlikely colleague, turned mentor, turned friend. Her no nonsense, straight no chaser attitude can be off putting. Truthfully as I started this program she bruised my feelings at one point. Yet, I knew it was not coming from a place of malice or ill-intent. I reflected on how to not take it all personally and have bounced back to return to collaborate with her. I appreciate her guidance because it is practical and reliable. I know when I chat with her I am going to be able to share my insecurities with my research and carve out a plan to move my research forward. She has allowed me to join her research presentations, encouraged me to present and take on facilitator opportunities. She is a real

148

champion of me being a subject matter expert and not becoming complacent in my degree.

- Dr. Mary Oling Sisay is simply a phenomenal example of a well-educated Black woman leading from the top of an institution. She is cool, calm, and intentional with everything she does. She has been a welcomed mentor that encouraged me to look for new roles, advocate for opportunities for myself and remind me to not become engulfed in work. She has her own mentor-mentee checklist that she had me complete when we first started meeting. I appreciate her intentionality to check-in with me, remind me of my accomplishments and encourage me to have balance in all that I do. She also reminds me to not overcommitt, but to do well in what is on my plate thus far. Plus, Dr. Mary has blazed a trail for Ed.D/s like myself to be in senior leadership positions in the academy when often we are told we can not. She is also a champion of me becoming a faculty member to be an even more seasoned service-learning expert where I can say I have been both an administrator and faculty member in service-learning.

- Dear younger self poem (Students will be asked to write a letter to their younger selves, what they wished they would have known before embarking on their road to higher education and the doctoral journey? 15-20 minutes will be allotted for this prompt).

- Dear Boo Boo,
  - You are not alone on this journey. Reach out to Dr. Lester, Eld. Norman, cousins, teachers, etc. Ask people all the random questions you have. No, the first year was not hard, but it would have been better if you asked folks

what to expect, who to connect with, what resources to utilize and how to share the experience with family and friends.

○ While in high school take the time to visit schools on the weekend and during the week. Connect with students returning home for breaks, along with recent college graduates.

○ Be open to trying new experiences, going beyond what your advisor is sharing with you and what you learn from your peers. Don't let the magnitude of the university overwhelm you, explore the different spaces. Connect with staff at the institution, not just the faculty. Staff have quite the social capital and are more plugged into resources than you can imagine.

○ Go on the alternative spring break trips, take out the loans for study abroad, and take two internships, rather than one.

○ Find a community outside of campus through the church. Connect with like minded folks early and often, they may have career or internship opportunities for you to explore.

○ You can do all things. Believe in yourself, this educational journey is much more beyond the bachelor's. You just wait!

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