What can a Higher Education Institution Do to Increase Retention Rates of First-Generation, Low Income Students?

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**Introduction to Our Study**

In order to find a topic that we were all passionate about we decided to reflect on how our undergraduate college experience was and find a factor that connected and described all of our experiences. Two out of the three of us are first generation, low-income [FGLI] college students yet all of us are passionate about working, helping, and making a difference in low-income and first generation college students. **Moreover, due to wanting to work with this type of population once we finish graduate school, we decided to focus on the services provided to support low-income first generation students at a large university in the greater New York City area**. Once we determined our topic, we researched, interviewed, and collected information to help us with our research topic.

**Literature Review**

**Definitions of Terms**

In our research, we found that first generation, low-income college students [FGLI] are defined similarly by practitioner. Zhang and Rentz (2011), define first generation college students as, children of parents who immigrated into the United States and/or children of parents who never received a higher institution education. On the other hand, a professor at Georgia named Robert Toutkoushian stated how “no one has defined what they mean by ‘first generation’” (Smith, 2015). Due to this, the researchers from Georgia decided to perform a study in order to have a better definition of what it means to be a first-generation college student. Thus, the researchers believe the definition of first generation depends on whether neither parent and/or only one parent has some to no postsecondary education (Smith, 2015).

According to First-generation college and low-income student center (n.d.), first generation college students [FGCS] are those whose parents never attended a postsecondary institution. On the other hand, they want students to think broadly. As a result, Brown University allows students to self-identify as a first-generation college student due to having little to no exposure to the process of applying to a higher education institution and/or how to navigate college, regardless of whether parents attended college or not. News for Brown (2017) provided the definition of what a low income student is: students are considered low-income based off on their financial aid application. In the application, students are able to select whether they received free lunch in high school, their and/or parents’ income, and if they were part of any programs for low-income college students when in high school. Thus, Schademan and Thompson (2016) believe there is a gap between first generation low-income college students and traditional students (those whose parents attended college and/or have a higher earning income).

**First Generation, Low-income Students Demographics**

Schademan and Thompson (2016) state, “first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students currently make up 24% of the total undergraduate population attending college in the United States” (p. 194). They believe that since the economic gap between the percentage of poor and rich individuals are increasing, more first generation and low income college students are starting to apply and attend four-year institutions (p.194-195). In a study by Schademan and Thompson (2016) called “*Are College Faculty and First-Generation, Low-income Students Ready for Each Other?*” they discovered that faculty have different beliefs about whether a student is ready or not to attend an institution (p.194). Further they explore the impact of the degree in which the students are helped, faculty who are open and willing to facilitate the transition to the campus community of first generation low income students can allow the students to become more academically ready, and first generation and low income students who attend a four year institution can have a range of different social and academic needs/difficulties (p.194).

In a Minorities in Higher Education report revised by Zhang and Rentz (2011) done by Ryu (2008), it illustrates how there has been a growth in the number of marginalized students enrolling and attending higher education institutions (p.248). Moreover, according to Smith (2015),"The fastest growing demographic is Hispanics and Latinos and they tend to have lower educational levels than non-Hispanics and non-Latinos” (p.1). As a result, there will be an increase of first generation, low income Latinx and Hispanic students wanting to attend and obtain a degree from a four-year institution, which mean universities/colleges will have to start providing the necessary resources to faculty and staff to learn and understand how to work with this type of population.

**Positive Impacts of Strong Supports for FGLI**

Working to alleviate the stressors and challenges that FGLI students face is a major goal of our assessment of these issues. According to the College Board “one out of every three five to seventeen year olds is a FGLI in the United States” (Collias, 2014, para.1). Being first generation and low income puts pressure on students because they need to find and ask for extra support in order to meet their unique needs. The good news to this information is that higher education as a field recognizes the issues that FGLI students face and have been working towards improving the supports that are put in place for these students. For example, offices of Equity and Diversity, Educational Opportunity Fund offices and programs, Satisfactory Academic Performance [SAP] student programs, and even extracurricular offices that support involvement of FGLI students to increase satisfaction and student success. Additionally non-profit organizations exist to improve and better the lives of FGLI students both financially and with additional knowledge of their options. Some examples include Knowledge Without Borders, First Gen Fellows, I’m First, and the First Generation Foundation. The main reason why the creation of these organizations and offices are important is that these FGLI students will soon become “the majority of U.S. College Student” (Collias, 2014, para.1). A major problem that Gail Mellow (2017) highlights in her article “The Biggest Misconception about Today’s College Students” is that both this country and the education system as a whole have a grave misunderstanding of what a typical college student ‘looks like.’ This misunderstanding has to do with a failure to make effective and wholehearted changes to accommodate the growing diverse student population; FGLI students included in this. The facts are that only “62 percent can go to college full time” and “over half of all undergraduates live at home to make their degrees more affordable” (Mellow, 2017, para.3). These facts vary from the stereotypical ‘college students’ portrayed to us in television, movies, and in literature. The upside though is that uncovering the truth behind the stereotype allows for educational institutions and organizations to break down these misconceptions in order to enact change. The more conversation and accurate portrayal that is out there, the more that actual college students can be helped and supported.

Fortunately, many institutions, even those in our own state of New Jersey, focus their mission statements as a campus-wide community on the betterment of their approach to diversity and inclusion. Our own institution, a university in the greater New York City area, actually states that learning will take place in “a climate characterized by tolerance and openness in the exploration of ideas” (Mission statement, n.d.). Their mission towards promoting diversity and inclusion allows for a more successful academic environment for FGLI students to learn and to take these transferable skills into their careers beyond college. This university also aims to recognize that the entire world is only successful if there is more understanding and respect for “increasing connectedness” (Mission statement, n.d.). The more higher education institutions work towards enacting changes for FGLI students, the more this will positively impact society as a whole.

The work at both a small level, in higher education institutions, and on a larger level, in national non-profit organizations, is definitely bringing about effective change but the bigger question lies in the gap between the supports and efforts made for positive change and where so many of these institutions are falling short. Although positive efforts are continuing to occur, it seems that all of the changes go back to the effectiveness of government both locally and nationally. As was previously mentioned, changing society’s idea of what a ‘traditional college student is, is a major step in the right direction. As Mellow (2017) describes from her perspective, “correcting society’s perception of who attends college in the United States is the first step towards helping these hard-working and ambitious students.” This is the central piece behind these continuous efforts enacting lost lasting change.

**Negative Impacts of Minimal Supports for FGLI Students**

Understanding the negative impacts that affect the population of FGLI students is a major integration of our assessment. When reflecting upon FGLI students and the lack of knowledge that revolves around their challenges, Benjamin Franklin states in a quote “The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.” College education for FGLI students, is oftentimes seen as a break in the family system as opposed to a continuum of their education.  Expectations that are passed down from generation to generation, of their assigned family roles leave these students in an integrating continuum. Thus, this shift causes the student to experience a loss of identity and sense in which they self-identify with two identities that are driven away from their purpose of self; their home and college identity. These FGLI students enroll in college to break away stigmas that revolve around their families and as such they prefer to break away from family ties that align them with poverty. FGLI students do not want to be categorized as first generation, low income yet wherever they go (work, school, home), they feel as if they do not belong. Although, all first-generation college students are not the same they do share various similarities that make their experience difficult in any higher education setting. These difficulties occur primarily on areas such as financial, academic, professional, and psychological. In higher education, it is important to recognize that a lot of FGLI students, enroll in school with few resources and academic needs.

Many first-generation students come from low socio-economic background as such their knowledge of the resources offered by institutions can be very limited. Thus, not having the right department to guide them along the process can be very daunting. Daunting, in the aspect that many are questioning how they will pursue to pay their college expenses. A lot of these students are “. . . competing priorities of work and family responsibilities that interfere with devoting the time or effort required to return to college” (Berz & Schuetz, 2014). FGLI students are juggling multiple responsibilities that limit their abilities to obtain a degree and combat poverty. According to Dennis Pierce (2016) FGLI students’ obstacles go far beyond the financial gap that exist. “We know most student who drop out do so because of financial reasons. We can reform orientation, and we can reform career counseling-but if we don’t address the financial challenges facing low-income students, we won’t see the jump in persistence and completion that we all have as goal” (Linerman, 2016). It is important to understand how the struggles of FGLI students limits their retention rates in universities/colleges as their expected four-year graduation date is usually not achieved until after five to six years being in school.  Many FGLI students are taking longer than the four-years to graduate, and the question is what can colleges do to accommodate their needs.

As a FGLI student it is difficult to assimilate to the college atmosphere. They may struggle with understanding their cultural background, college readiness and place on the SES poverty scale. Those factors contribute to the lack of interests, experiences, and resources that might not be understood by professionals and peers. According to Huerta, Watt, and Reyes (2013) “. . . these students have difficulty succeeding once enrolled in college because they often live off campus, work full- or part-time jobs, are less likely to develop relationships with their professors or other students, and tend to perceive their professors as uncaring about their academic success.” (p.89). FGLI students have built walls that do not allow them to express their confidence in what they are able to accomplish and lack to be academically competitive because of doubt and fear and this is mostly because they are the first in “. . . in their families to attain a college education, typically do not complete college at the same rate as students with college- educated parents.” (Huerta, Watt & Reyes, 2013, p. 89). Due to this factor students are resorting to lower levels of academics and low self-esteem issues.

**Gaps in the Literature**

        After reviewing our research findings, we were able to determine that there are a few gaps. Most of the articles we analyzed determined that most FGLI students have other responsibilities while attending a university and struggle financially and academically. On the other hand, we were not able to find information that emphasizes what Higher Education institutions are doing to help FGLI students. There seems to be an assumption that FGLI students are not taking advantage of the resources offered by the institutions. No evidence was found that could determine what Higher Education institutions are doing to help retain their FGLI students. Another gap we found is negative in regards to resources available for these students. For example, what can be done to link FGLI students from an earlier age (High School even?) to the appropriate and beneficial resources that do exist? How can students easily access those services? As we continue to develop our research, we will take into consideration these findings.

**Conclusion**

As many Higher Education institutions become more diverse and inclusive, it is important to give the necessary tools staff, faculty, and other professionals need to assist first generation, low income students. FGLI students who attend a four-year institution are in search of a better future for themselves and their family. Assessing the needs and providing the tools necessary to FGLI students, can limit the dropout rates and increase the success of these students. As a result of our literature review we concluded to look more into: What can a Higher Education Institution do to increase retention rates of first generation, low income students?

**Importance of this Study Within Literature**

This specific study is crucial due to the rapidly changing United States population and the growing FGLI college student population. There has become a pressing need for FGLI students’ unique needs to be met in order to eliminate continuous dropout rates. This retention issue goes back to the issue at hand, a lack of data and information on student support and how these supports will benefit FGLI students. Additionally, the supports that are in place are not being discussed in the literature on this topic. This missing data leaves room for speculation and a lack of reference for other struggling institutions looking to provide support for their own FGLI populations. As Jean discusses in her dissertation on FGLI college transitions, this experience is more complex than many institutions are planning and providing for. The various challenges FGLI students face include a lack of motivation which affects GPA, a lack of student engagement, and a minimal connection between a FGLI student and their college campus. These issues point back to what an institution is missing. Jean’s dissertation looks to find out why more data is not being collected to resolve these gaps in support. Jean believes that more research on this topic can lead to increased knowledge of FGLI student success. We also found research from another author, Jenkins (2013) whose work focuses on the major differences between traditional college students and FGLI students. The article focuses on stressing the importance of the difficulty FGLI students’ face when entering college due to environmental stressors, less perceived support, both financial and academic (2013, p.129). This obvious difference leaves room for further research to take place and this is our main focus. The lack of literature on what can be done to assist these FGLI students leads to more error in supporting them. We also feel the lack of literature on successful FGLI retention is another major lapse. Our research question aims to fill in these gaps. We aim to find firsthand experience that will find answers to these questions.

**Research Question**

Our research question focuses on how the creation of supports will lead to increased retention rates of FGLI students in a higher education environment. This information was obtained by looking at research that focuses on numerous elements of the FGLI experience including literature on FGLI students, cultural norms and assumptions at institutions, extracurricular involvement, student engagement, expectations for FGLIs, unique FGLI challenges, organizations that work to improve their experience, and the impact of low economic status on student success. This research is incredibly important since the more students are enrolling in college, the more diverse populations higher education needs to accommodate and support.

**Our Data Collection**

**Description of Researchers**

This action research project involves three Educational Leadership in Higher Education graduate students from a large university in the greater New York City area. One student is currently an Academic Coach at the Disability Resource Center, another is a Graduate Assistant for the ADP Center for Learning Technologies, and the other is a Graduate Assistant for the Facilities Logistics and Support Services Department. The three researchers work and attend school at the same institution.

These researchers come from a diverse group of backgrounds including Dominican, Puerto Rican, and white. Some researcher bias does exist on this topic since one of the students works with FGLI students in a professional role and feels personally connected to their success. It can be difficult to separate the data collection from wanting to impact these students’ lives. This researcher also has strong opinions on the supports that must be in place for these FGLI students to succeed. Another researcher is a FGLI student and feels a personal connection to the informant’s experiences. The third researcher, also is an FGLI student, and feels emotionally and personally invested in this topic. All three researchers have biases when it comes to the data collection but will work to separate out their personal feelings on the topic to obtain effective, valid data. Since the biases have been identified and addressed, they can be put aside for the purpose of this research.

**Description of Informants**

Participant 1 is a 20-year-old African American female currently attending a large university in the New York City area. Originally from New Jersey, where she attended public school and grew up in the foster care system. She currently has two part-time jobs (McDonalds and work study) in order to pay for her expenses. Her goal is to become a Social Worker in order to help students who are going through a difficult time in life. Although financial aid offers her support, she still needs to take out loans in order to attend and graduate from the four-year institution. She is currently majoring in Family and Child Studies with a minor in Child Advocacy. She hopes to apply to Rutgers University to obtain her Masters in Social Work. However, she is afraid as she does not know if she will be able to afford school as she wants to start her Masters as soon as she finishes her undergraduate studies.

Participant 2is a 20-year-old Dominican female currently attending a large university in the New York City area. Originally from New Jersey, where she attended Passaic public school. Majoring in Family and Child Studies Concentration School Settings P-3. She currently has one part-time job as an Office Assistant to help cover partial of her expenses. Her goals are to become P-3 Elementary School teacher and starting an Adolescent's Girl group. Both parents went to post-secondary school but dropped out. Her way of paying for college has been through financial aid and loans.

Participant 3is a 30-year-old white adult learner, who began her undergraduate career at a small college in the greater New York City area and took a break from her undergraduate degree. She went on to return to school to finish her undergraduate degree and her goal is to continue into a graduate program in education. She works full time in addition to going to school part time, since she has a young child.

**Purpose/Context**

The purpose of our interviews is to gain firsthand insight into the daily lives of current first-generation, low-income college students. We are interviewing students from an institution located in the greater New York City area. This project will focus on the characteristics and strategies that are most common amongst FGLI students to foster their college success. We will describe and measure the effectiveness of programs, policies, and interventions through literature to measure student retention and ways to prevent attrition. The study will be done through qualitative research. This project will focus on issues regarding academic, personal, financial, social, and cultural challenges that FGLI students face. Our research has prepared us with the knowledge of the various difficulties these FGLI students face and we plan to discuss their feelings on the supports that are in/are not in place to assist them in their college experience.

**Triangulation, Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness**

In order to have an ethical and just project, this research was performed with three essential research elements in mind: validity, credibility, and trustworthiness. In order to obtain effective, honest, and current data the researchers in this project chose to use methodological triangulation in order to gain insight on the problem of retention rates for FGLI students at an institution in the greater New York City area.  The researchers will use multiple approaches in their data collection process including interviews, observations, and collection of artifacts. The artifacts will be transcriptions of the interviews and surveys on the topic of FGLI supports at the institution. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), “The notion of triangulation or the inclusion of multiple perspectives guards against viewing events in a simplistic or self-serving way. Triangulation can also refer to using multiple methods, for example, observing journaling and interviews, so that one is not limited to one data source” (p.41). Thus, it was important to the research to triangulate their data by pulling from multiple methods due to wanting the data to be credible and trustworthy. The researchers met in-person every Saturday at 1:00pm and online most Tuesdays at 5:30pm to discuss and evaluate the work being performed. Anderson et al. (2007) stated that credibility, “...ring[s] true to those who provide the data and that multiple data sources have been compared” (p. 41). As a result, researches’ meetings would discuss the relevance, importance, and results of the action research project.

In order to ensure credibility, the researchers collection plan was to interview, observe, and collect artifacts. Interviews allowed the researchers to gain insight of the resources, struggles, and experiences of first-generation, low income students by looking at the research question. They were also aware of their own biases and opinions of and how this might have an impact on the research. Finally, the researchers observed the trustworthiness of the research being done. Anderson et al. (2007) describes trustworthiness to be an “... extent which research was done with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation” (p.41). The researchers made sure to obtain diverse participants and reach out to different professionals within the institution to be able to get different perspectives and opinions.

**Data Collection Plan**

We plan to conduct interviews to obtain data from three different FGLI college students and compare and contrast our findings to see how much of their experiences are shared. We will then compare this data with the supports in place at the institution. We primarily looked at for our research, a large university in the greater New York City area. First we will interview, followed by the collecting of artifacts, (qualitative information through interviews and a survey) and lastly we will observe an office that works with FGLI college students, which will lead us to a conclusion on the perceived supports in place at the institution we are looking at. We chose to order the process this way, since our research relies heavily on qualitative data and experience, which will impact our action plan. We will focus our data collection on interviews and literature on the topic of FGLI supports. We will conduct observations of the Educational Opportunity Fund [EOF], Center for Advising and Student Transition [CAST], and Academic Support office on the university campus, to assess the day-to-day processes in an academic support office, mainly working with FGLI college students and a SAP (Satisfactory Academic Performance) staff member, who works with FGLI college students. These observations will allow us to gain insight from a staff perspective.

**Our Data Analysis**

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

As researchers that are all a part of the same graduate program and work in the field of higher education, we consistently made sure to reflect and remember our biases in regards to supporting FGLI students. Two of the researchers personally connect to the topic of being FGLI students and the third researcher is professionally invested in the issues surrounding FGLI student supports. With these connections to the topic in mind, the researchers made sure to back the entire data collection process and the analyzing of this data with literature on the topic. Constantly bringing in academic literature to support any themes or surprises from the data allowed for the researchers to remain without bias throughout the process. We also worked to ensure that the interviews came from various individuals who shared both similar and differing perspectives. While the interviewers’ experiences were connected by being FGLI students, their personal stories were different which brought in varying perspectives of FGLI students’ lives.

The observations that were conducted took place in three differing offices that all support FGLI students, including an EOF (Equal Opportunity Fund) office, an advising office, and an academic support center. The observations brought in data from three very different departments that all serve FGLI students in different capacities. Interviewing FGLI students of different ages, backgrounds, and personal experiences helped to see where connections did and did not exist. The observations took place at the same institution but the staff was of different expertise and varying direct involvement with FGLI students. Both data collection processes allowed the researchers to remain honest, consistent, and to obtain valid data that could be trusted. The interviewing of these students and the observations allowed the researchers to see emergent themes but also kept them honest in their findings, regardless of what their opinions were of these students and offices were prior to the data collection.

**Credibility**

In order to keep our research creditable, the researchers performed the interviews and observations in separate departments of the university, utilizing the triangulation method of credibility. This allowed for a diverse range of responses, experiences, and viewpoints and allowed the researchers to use multiple and different sources, methods, and perspectives (Stringer & Dwyer, 2005, p.49). This allowed for the responses to “corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research problem and its outcomes” (Stringer & Dwyer, 2005, p. 49).  For the interview process, we used a semi-formal interview structure. Due to wanting the informants to feel as comfortable as possible, there was a free flowing conversation amongst the researchers and the informant(s). Throughout this entire process the researchers would reflect and ask themselves, “is this study plausible, and does it have integrity?” (Stringer & Dwyer, 2005, p. 48). This process of consistent self-reflection ensured the researchers kept the process accurate and valid. Additionally, to ensure credibility, we performed the observations in three different offices that work closely with FGLI students. We focused on the services provided, the relationship between the advisor or office with the students, and awareness of the different resources. By having a conversation with the directors from the different departments, we were able to schedule an informal visit to shadow an employee of the department. However, the three different advisors did not know the scope of our research, therefore we do not feel as the information obtained was ‘purposely’ tailored to the observations. The three artifacts obtained were collected when meeting with the advisors after the observations.

During the observation process, it was difficult not to be biased. Two of the researchers are FGLI students while the other works closely with this type of population. As a result, we have our idea of what meeting students should look and be like. Nonetheless, we focused on our goal and the interactions between the student and advisor. This helped to keep the bias out of the observation. Lastly, the researchers performed member checks weekly, to ensure the data was being discussed as it was being collected. This method of credibility allowed for all the researchers to “be given frequent opportunity to review the raw data, the analyzed data, and reports” (Stringer and Dwyer, 2005, p. 50). Member checks were necessary on this topic of FGLI students since the researchers bias could have impacted the data’s credibility.

**Transferability**

According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), “There are many ways to approach the question of how results of action research are “generalized” or transferred to other settings…” As a result, ”external validity deals with how generalizable the findings of a research are to other contexts (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). As researches, we believe our research is generalizable due to the anecdotes and stories shared of a diverse range of students. If applied to any higher education institution in the United States we believe that the results would be the same. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), “Practitioners tend to find traditional research … less useful, than narrative accounts from schools and classrooms that provide them with vicarious experience.” Therefore, using the anecdotes that the informants shared during their interviews and taking into consideration the different observations, make this research relatable to other FGLI students across the country. While in a meeting we discussed how the experiences of the informants had a lot of similarities.

Our project focuses on a more naturalistic research, which according to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007),  “this type of research fits well with current practitioner culture…” Understanding and sharing their experiences can have an influence on the success of other students and an effect on the actions that postsecondary institutions take. However, one uncertainty of the transferability of the study is trying to examine what other higher education institutions are doing to increase retention rates and the success of FGLI students. In this limited study, we found that students have to navigate the university setting without having little to no guidance and/or knowledge of the different resources offered and available to them, but it is not proven if this is true across the country. We believe this research would be transferable to higher education institutions that have a high population of FGLI students who need the guidance and resources to succeed.

**Insider Status**

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) state that as researchers we should “constantly analyze our own feelings and subjective reactions to this role.” Therefore, due to wanting to eliminate biases we viewed ourselves as strangers to the study. It was vital to understand the importance of being an insider and outsider to the process, as we did not want to affect its validity. However, the hardest challenge for being an insider in the process was detaching ourselves mentally and emotionally. As practitioners, we are passionate about what we do and are trying to accomplish. As a result, throughout this research we tried to as neutral as possible.

**Plan**

We determined a plan for our data analysis of the three interviews, observations, and artifacts. As we developed our plan, we tried to be mindful of our own biases and awareness of transferability. We made sure to check in with one another and ask questions while in the process of reviewing the data. First, we analyzed the data collected multiple times, in order to understand and not miss any important details. Together, we first examined the interviews, then the observations, and finally the three artifacts provided by the different departments that work closely with FGLI students. During the data collection phase, we were mindful to use the triangulation method.  As we reviewed our data, we came upon common topics and different perspectives. The color-coding aspects included topics of perspectives held by the participants, process, events, relationship, structures and methods; in which we found that a lot of the topics had common themes that overlapped. As a result, we decided to color code the sections based on the differences and similarities of the nine sources acquired.

**Results**

        The goal of this study was to determine how the creation of supports will lead to increased retention rates of first generation, low income students in a higher education environment. We decided to focus on the resources for FGLI students and departments that work closely with them. We believe that there is a lack of knowledge and support between the students and the different departments. Therefore, the researchers interviewed three current undergraduate students at a large university in the New York City area with various levels of needs, responsibilities, and knowledge of the resources provided and available. The following are emergent themes found within the research. First, parents do not understand the sacrifices and the struggle of their children when they enroll in a postsecondary institution. Secondly, all the students have had negative experiences and interactions when meeting and dealing with advisors and financial aid offices. Third, students must have a part-time and/or full-time job in order to be able to afford their outside and inside expenses - but still is not enough. Lastly, designating a section within the institution’s website solely for low income, first generation students.

        With these four emergent themes in mind, we feel that the main focus should be on offices and departments that work with students regarding financial aid and financing for college, freshman experience, center for student involvement, advisement, and the moderators of the institution’s website. Communication between these offices and departments must be significantly improved through workshops, college meetings, and daily exchange. Additionally, these results also speak to the way the institution is connecting with its outside of campus stakeholders, the FGLI students’ parents. The results speak to a larger issue, parental involvement and communication. This could include parents attending freshman experience activities, the setup of a specific FGLI parent meet and greet, and a more accessible outward facing institution website for parents and the FGLI students to more easily navigate.

        Part of our results process will include sharing the progress our findings with the interviewers and obtaining their feedback on the emergent themes. (Stringer and Dwyer, 2005, p. 117). In the constraints of time placed on this data collection process, we will be unable to conduct further interviews post initial data collection and analyzing, but sharing the outcomes with all of the stakeholders is a relevant piece of this process.

**Findings and Recommendations**

**Lack of Understanding from Parental Figures**

The first emergent theme from the findings included a lack of understanding of higher education from parental figures of FGLI students. As we took a look at the findings, we found all three of the participants voiced concerns about those around them lacking an understanding of their education. In one instance the student expressed they “did not have help navigating school [their] first year” **(Informant 1, Interview 1)**. This speaks to a lack of effort from the institution to support FGLI students as well as a lack of support from the student’s parents, family, or friends. The student also added they “did not know where to go, where things were, or who to talk to” **(Informant 1, Interview 1)**. This also demonstrates that the student felt disconnected from the campus as well as from their family. More specifically, many students consult their parents for information or support when it comes to needing help finding specific offices or forms to fill out etc. This student did not have this opportunity so both their institution and their family offered no additional help in their transition to college process. Another issue these students faced is their parents/families misunderstanding or motivation for the purpose of higher education. One student noted their parents “told [them] entering college is [the] only way out of poverty” **(Informant 2, Interview 2).** The parents’ perceptions of what college meant to the student did not necessarily align with the student’s own personal career goals and realistic expectations for this student, causing a rift between their perceptions of obtaining a degree. This student also explained that never having “anyone to guide [them] or tell [them] this is how you do this and that” **(Informant 2, Interview 2)** allowed for the student to build independence but constantly feel that the college process was a struggle. This student’s parents also struggled to assist the student financially and were unable to “afford to pay for [their] SAT courses” (**Informant 2, Interview 2)**. The student persisted though, even though their parents’ finances and understanding were not aligned with the student’s needs to succeed at college. Lastly, the third participant felt her mom’s attitude towards education was that she had no choice and should never complain, which is placing an unrealistic expectation on the student. Part of the lack of understanding from parents also manifested in parents’ level of support, understanding, and compassion for the student’s challenges being FGLI students. Participant three mentioned her mom’s emphatic opinion on staying in school but then a cold attitude towards actually supporting any difficulties that the student faced while in school. This parent’s disconnect also applies to the theme of a lack of support. The student reflected on an instance where she “[told] her mom it was so hard” (**Informant 3, Interview 3)** and her mom’s reaction was to laugh and say she was “lucky to be the first in the family to go to school and live there” (Informant 3, Participant 3). This student also expressed the pressure from her own family saying her “whole family resented [her] and expected so much from [her]” **(Informant 3, Interview 3).** This lack of healthy communication and support between the student and her family showed a clear lack of understanding of the college process for the student. Overall, all three students experience multiple instances where there was a clear lack of support, understanding, and even acknowledgement of the unique challenges they face as FGLI students in their college experiences.

One solution though that could be utilized to address these issues with parents and the students is a “designated web-page that shares the resources needed for first-generation college students” **(Informant 2, Interview 2)**. Increased electronic information making resources more readily available and approachable could close this gap between students and their parents. Other efforts such as events involving parents, inviting them to orientation activities, or even creating an FGLI organization could all bridge the gap between students college experience and their parents’ involvement and support. **Another bright side to the lack of support from parents are the specific offices, departments, faculty and staff that make positive differences in students’ lives like sharing information with them. In our third observation in an academic support office, the academic coach intentionally made sure to follow up their discussion with a student by emailing “them some information on tutoring and the writing center regarding the conversation they had” (Observation 3, Appendix G). Additionally, the academic coach goes to a class to speak about the academic support center when the opportunity is available (Observation 3, Appendix G).  Daily efforts such as these can increase the amount of support FGLI students feel they have on their own campus leading to a stronger connection to their institution.**

**Negative Interactions Between Students and Employees**

Next, we found that most of the participants mentioned at least one instance where they were looking for support and did not find professional staff or faculty that was eager to help them. This negative experience also adds to the lack of support FGLI students experience leading them to feel like dropping out. Specifically, Participant two mentioned that they almost dropped out and was “almost held back from [their] first semester because [they] didn’t have all [their paperwork completed” (**Informant 2, Interview 2)**. The lack of knowledge the student had on their required paperwork also came back to the office that they needed assistance from. A disconnect we feel exists is the responsibility the student believes they have for their own college experience vs. what the professionals in various campus offices feel their responsibilities towards helping students entail. This could be bridged by creating mentorships, where supportive roles are more clearly defined or a FGLI organization that can provide students with the resources and tools so they can act as their own self champion without feeling lost. Until these improved relationships between campus offices and students exist, students may feel that the offices they visit are not on their side or have an attitude with them when the student asks for help. Participant 2 also described trying to “access the office” and “the lines were so long and it felt like the financial aid advisors had little patience which made everything so triggering” **(Informant 2, Interview 2)** and this caused them to “feel hopeless” **(Informant 2, Interview 2).** Two of the participants voiced the same assumptions about asking for help. Participant 2 mentioned that “as a student, [they] were often scared to ask for help, because [they] didn’t want to be let down or looked down on” **(Informant 2, Interview 2)**. This isn’t necessarily a reaction to an encounter with a campus office but rather the assumption of how a campus office might treat the student, which is also a problem. Participant three, a returning student finishing their degree as an adult learner felt that after they had a baby and took a break from college “they were an adult and did not need anyone’s help” **(Informant 3, Interview 3**). The fact that multiple students feel this way about seeking out support speaks to the reputation these offices have. Additionally, this student had a negative experience with their advisor, who “never made it an interest to learn about [them] or better yet [question] how to help [their] college experience” **(Informant 2, Interview 2**). This experience only deterred the student further from attempting to access resources. Student three mentioned the incredible support from peers and student leaders at the institution, rather than the offices she had to deal with. This also could point to a solution involving better communication between student leaders, offices, and students. Some solutions could include having student liaisons between offices like financial aid or advising and the students. Additionally, FGLI students need supports for their unique needs but Participant three even suggested having an office or advisor to assist with FGLI, adult learners. This student feels there are many students that fall into those two identities and still should not be forgotten. These initiatives could go a long way since the information can be provided in an effective and more approachable manner, leading to FGLI students feeling more supported and connected.

**Higher Education Institutions’ Affordability**

After analyzing the results, one of the conclusions we made is that the affordability of a postsecondary education is not possible without loans, having one or more jobs, and decreasing monthly expenses. **The collected artifact 1, highlights the monetary requirements for FGLI students to be accepted into the institution and receive an extra help with expenses and resources. In order to be considered low income, students’ household size income must show a need and monetary constraints. As a result, a household size of three should make no more than $40,840, whereas a household size of four should be no more than $49,200 (Artifact 1, Appendix H). If students are not** able to afford education**,** it is highly unlikely students will be successful. While investigating this, we looked at the collected interviews to come to this conclusion. During an interview with informant 1 she stated, “With the jobs I have I need to buy food pay for transportation, and school supplies like pens and all of that but books are too expensive” **(Informant 3, Interview 3).** This made us realize that the students are not in full control of their success while attending an institution. Therefore, for FGLI students being an EOF student can provide an extra monetary income for each semester. However, the EOF department only admits between 120 to 150 students for the fall semester and if the student does not get accepted through this department they do not receive the extra funding.

According to informant 3, “I also wish I had more help and support from my mom but unfortunately, I don’t. She can’t afford to help me” **(Informant 3, Interview 3).** Throughout this research we found that FGLI students come from a background of poverty and as such, they do not have the monetary support from parents or caregivers. While interviewing informant 3 she also discussed how, “finding money to get books and stuff. I remember I had a class where I asked a girl that sat next to me if I could pay her to photocopy the pages for me” **(Informant 3, Interview 3)**. Being the first to attend a postsecondary education, there was a ‘trend’ on having little to no help from parents.

Our recommendation for alleviating this issue is for the different departments that serve and work with FGLI students to create a semesterly book scholarship. **Although the EOF program offers annual grants to ‘their’ FGLI students, others (not associated with EOF) from this targeted population are not able to receive the needed help ((Artifact 1, Appendix H). Therefore, providing a scholarship to these students can have a** large and positive impact on the students’ ability to concentrate on their studies and have a less monetary constraint. With having a scholarship that offers students the ability to not have to stress about one of their expenses can make a difference between the retention and graduation rates of students.

**Surprises & Expectations**

Before the start of this project, we had our own biases, beliefs, and expectations. However, this was expected as the three of us had experiences working and assisting FGLI students. As reflective individuals, we were always thinking about how to make things better, our purpose, and the overall satisfaction of the progress of our research. The three of us were unsatisfied and rather disappointed with the numbers of FGLI students enrolled in the institution, the awareness and lack of resources for this population as well as the relationship amongst staff, faculty, and students.

When we began this research, we were aware of some of the resources provided, the different departments that target this population, and the gap that exist due to our own experiences. We had an understanding of what being a FGLI student entails and some of the struggles they experience. Therefore, from experience we know there is a lack of advertisements, support groups, and resources that aim to help this population of students. However, some of the findings that surprised us are:

1. The negative relationship between students and office staff.
2. The feelings of isolation that FGLI students feel due to not feeling supported by the campus community.
3. The lack of understanding from parents. They value work more than seeing their children obtain an education.

**Influence on Other Practitioners in the Higher Education Setting**

We all had a somewhat limited understanding of supports for FGLI in higher education. Our personal experiences and as well as professional involvements had allowed us to look into this topic for the purpose of uncovering the gaps between FGLI students and their success in higher education. There was a limited amount of literature on both the topic of supporting FGLI students, especially considering today’s political climate as well as the lack of information on other institution’s programming and supports that are in place. It would be a great improvement to see more institutions with successful FGLI initiatives publishing information on how these initiatives work and how to ensure continued support and success for FGLI students, which leads to increased institutional retention. We intend for this research to be furthered into future studies and initiatives. For at least one of us in this process, further research will be conducted to expand upon the knowledge obtained from first hand interviews and observations. This research could only serve to benefit FGLI students as the population of college students in this country continuously become more diverse.

The needs of these unique populations must be addressed and supported in order for higher education to truly continue working to serve all of the students intending to obtain a degree and an education. Some information we found along the way includes increasing the involvement parents have to ensure understanding and stronger ties to the student’s campus community and increasing supports that are in place such as adding information to institution’s websites for FGI students and their parents to more easily navigate as well as creating more content and resources that are easily accessible for these students and their families. Lastly, it has become increasingly important that different organizations or programs be created to ensure FGLI success such as a new orientation for FGLI parents and the students, a possible mentorship program for FGLI, student liaisons for FGLI student to engage with offices on campus in a more efficient manner, and even an organization or club for FGLI students. This club could include academic, professional, and personal elements that would be able to let FGLI students feel more connected to their campus and community. One thing we did not expect was for institutions that had successful initiatives or programs in place for FGLI to have so little published information for the public. We imagined that any institution able to support these students would be more vocal about their planning and efforts, so we would hope more institutions share this information going forward so that improvements can be made on other campuses. **As a result, we recommend for practitioners to:**

1. **Foster positive relationships with FGLI students. The student population is rapidly changing and more FGLI students are enrolling in postsecondary institutions and these students need the extra support.**
2. **Publish information around the campus community about their offices, initiatives, and programs that target FLGI students. This will help attract students find the resources they might need as well as establish relationships with different departments.**
3. **Continue to get educated on this topic. This will allow practitioners to have a better understanding of FGLI students’ experiences, needs, and stories.**

**Recommendations for Novice Practitioners**

The three of us were novice action researches when we first started this study. At the beginning of this process we were insecure and unsure of our abilities as practitioners. However, once we determined our topic, chose our research question, and learned to work together as a team we started to see the study slowly progressing. Due to being passionate about FGLI students we are content with the results of our research. However, we understand that there is still a lot more that needs to be done and researched especially since FGLI students are attending universities now more than ever. Researching allowed us the opportunity to learn how to effectively gather data, interview informants, and analyze data by looking at an issue that we felt needed attention. Therefore, we encourage practitioners who are passionate about an issue to practice action research. In order for a novice researcher to have a successful research, there are a few ‘tips’ to keep in mind:

First, we encourage the novice researchers to be aware of their biases and expectations. The data collected should be trustworthy and credible and as result, the researcher should be able to be professional, open-minded, and look within.

Second, we encourage the researchers to interview diverse students, as it will allow for different perspectives and viewpoints. We also encourage observing different departments that target their specific population to get an understanding of the interaction amongst the students and employees and what and how is the office environment.

Third, creating six to nine questions to guide the interview. Seidman (2006) highlights, “The truly effective question flows from an interviewer’s concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward…” Therefore, having a set of questions can help the conversation but the researchers should be able to ask follow-up questions to make the conversation flow and continue. It is important that the researchers are engaging with the participants during the interview process, as it is semi-structured. Creating that trust between the informant and researcher can be beneficial to the research project. The more the researcher is engaging, the more information the informant will share. At the end of the day, a good researcher will actively listen to others’ stories.

        Finally, do not analyze the data during the interview process. Pay close attention to each informant. Researchers should try their best to leave their biases ‘outside of the door’. Take time to analyze the data collected after the interview. It is vital to be reflective but everything should be done at its appropriate time.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester? (Past)
2. How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc) impacted your overall college experience and success? (Past)
3. What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain (Past)
4. Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they? (Present)
5. What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why? (Present)
6. What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How? (Present)
7. How much of a financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies? (Future)
8. How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient? (Future)
9. Going forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities? (Future)

Appendix B

Interview 1 Participant 1:

Researcher: Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. How are you?

Informant: Hi, thank you for inviting me to take part of your research. I am good but a little nervous.

Researcher: We want you to feel comfortable and as such, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. To begin we are going to give you this information for you to read, analyze, and sign if you feel comfortable with us sharing this interview and interviewing you. Take as long as you need.

Informant: Thank you

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: I am currently a junior at this school and i can say my first year was not the best. My story is not the most pleasant and I haven’t had an easy life. I am a foster child and have been moving around since I was young so coming to college has been a big step but not the easiest. (mhm) Because I explained my situation of not having a place to live, no job, and no parents when I applied to school I have been lucky that my expenses have been covered for the most part. My first year navigating college was hard because i felt like everyone around me was too smart, dressed nice, and had money and then there was me. I mean, don’t get me wrong it was not jealousy I think it was resentment because I always had to work hard for everything I have. Anyways, I did not have help navigating school my first year. Being a college kid is different than being in high school because you always had someone to help you but here I was alone. I did not know where things where, who to talk to, and where to go to for anything. It was hard but here I am I guess.

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: wow, that’s a hard question to answer and so much to think about but I will try my best. Lets see. (oh man) well, I think the only reason why I haven’t dropped out is because I do not have any other choice but to graduate. So in a way you can say all the bad things that have happened in my life has led me here. My college experience has been shit excuse my language but it is the truth. I feel like it is a struggle getting help here and people make it hard for you to be successful. Like things are bad enough already and the school is always giving students a hard time for things they can’t control. Like this past summer, I did not have a place to stay but I couldn’t stay on campus because they required me to take classes and I did not get any financial aid for it but even after speaking to people who work here they weren’t able to help. But looking on the bright side I am still here and I graduate next year so I have come far and still achieving.

Interview: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: As a foster kid well at least for me it is hard to know much about college. Like, all you ever think about when you are young is to get out and get a better life for yourself. (sighs) so no, I didn’t have much preparation before college. I think what help though was high school because my counselor told me I needed to apply to schools and I found Montclair online and filled out the application but I did not think I was going to get in. I mean, I have always liked school but having a disability, being unstable, and not having a support system screwed me up I think. Like, I wish I was more informed, if it was not because I did the research I wouldn’t be here. In high school counselors only encourage students to apply to community college as if that is all that they can aim for.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: Resources. (mhmm) I mean I know financial aid helps a lot if you don’t have much money but I don’t know. Would an advisor be considered a resource for us? I mean, I know there are clubs like LASO that a lot of Latinos go to but I don’t know what else. Wow, I just realized how bad it sounds that I don’t even know of things that can help me. It is a shame but I don’t know whether it is my fault or the school but I don’t hear anything like most of what I hear going on around campus are like greek events or like something in the quad but nothing helpful for students like me. But let me say, I always appreciate a free shirt.

Researchers: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Haha, I was just saying how I don’t really know of any resources so my list of complaints about the things I wish this school had is pretty long. For a student like me, I feel like I am always trying to figure things out and never know where to go and who to talk to because I feel like I am bothering people. It is funny because schools are supposed to help students not make them feel hopeless but this is not the case. Anyways, one of the major things I wish this school had is a support group for students like me; students who are navigating the system for the first time or just someone who has someone that understand. I think that is really important. I think this school should have a department for like you said at the beginning low-income and first generation students where it is like a one-stop-all. What I mean by this is you can have help for all the questions you have at one place. I think something like that would be awesome. (mhm) That is all I can think of right now but trust me If I could make a list and bring it to you it would probably take me days.

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: Oh, that’s an easy question. Multiple jobs. I think having to work a couple of jobs while going to school is hard because it is a constant battle between deciding which one is more important. Like sometimes I think I should just quit school because I am making a bit of money but it is more than what I had my whole life and just the thought of graduating and having loans scares me. Like who knows if I am even able to find a job or if I will have a place to live. I don’t know, I have so many questions but no one can answer them and no one will help me so.

Researcher: How much of a  financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: Let me start by saying I don’t buy books. I can’t. I mean I would if I could but I don’t have the money for them. With the jobs I have I need to buy food, pay for transportation, and school supplies like pens and all of that but books are too expensive. I feel like a month’s paycheck would cover probably one to two books. What I do and this is embarrassing but I try to get close to someone in every class that would let me borrow the books and I scan them. I spend hours at the library every start of the semester just doing this but that is the only way I can have the books. My financial aid doesn’t cover for books.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: I think this may sound crazy but I think what would have helped me is to have a relationship with my advisor. Like, my advisor is always busy and never has time to meet so I never know who to go to. It is frustrating because I look for help but no one ever has time. I think schools should invest money in hiring people and assign advisors to students who are required to meet with them weekly but this will never happen. It only takes one person tho. One person.

Researcher: Going Forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities ?

Informant: (mhm) current students via email definitely. I think as a student here you are always checking your email because if you don’t you would literally fail at life. All jokes aside though, I think for future students that is a hard question because you have to think of circumstances like mine, like what if they don’t have a place to live, no internet, and all of that. But, I guess they can create pamphlets and distribute them at high schools for students to see. I think students would be able to know about the school and what not.

Researcher: Well, those are all of the questions we had for you. Thank you so much for your time.

Informant: Thank you. This really helped me think about my experiences in college and my future. Let me know of the results and if you want to know anything else let me know. Have a good day and keep me updated please.

Appendix C

Interview 2 Participant 2:

Researcher: Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. How are you?

Informant: Hi, everyone. I am glad myself to be here today to take part of this research project.

Researcher:We want you to feel comfortable and as such, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. To begin we are going to give you this information for you to read, analyze, and sign if you feel comfortable with us sharing this interview and interviewing you. Take as long as you need.

Informant: Okay, and thank you

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: Woah, coming to Montclair State University for me was first a big step. It is something that within my family we have never seen. I came from a background, were my parents have only told me entering college is your only way out of poverty. I did as they told me, entered college and started to navigate my first-year as a college student. But I faced many obstacles, with just the basic necessities as college student. The major ones were the resources offered to get from point a to point b. It was like, how can I assure I have all my financial aid papers on time, to cover my living expenses, meal plans and books. Before coming to college, I had a part-time job at Shoprite to not depend on my parents Once, I came to dorm I had to find a job. Jobs on campus were only paying $8.25 and only working 15 hours. So, it was hard for me. I was juggling my life at home and the one at school to make ends meet. I came in with a purpose but at times I felt lost, but somehow felt like I was going to make it work out. I think this came as a shift in identity two, because I was just juggling to find myself at home and at school

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc.) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: Being a first-generation college student, and knowing so little about the institution was very difficult for myself. The hardest times for me started off with one of the basic areas of higher education, and that was lacking on knowing how to access financial aid. I was almost held back from my first semester, because I didn’t have all my paperwork completed. When I tried to access the office, the lines were so long and it felt like the financial aid advisors had little patience which made everything so triggering and it sort made me feel hopeless at time. But, I persisted. I think my struggles as a college student only made me value everything and understand my purpose. I think being a first-generation student over all made it difficult because I never had anyone to guide me or tell me this is how you do this and that. I had to always depend on an outsider to get that help. But, it just taught me to reach out and ask for help. The help is there you just need to find it.

Researcher: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: Being a student from Passaic High School, gave me some preparation and awareness of how the process of college would be because we had a college bound process. But, not the more in-depth parts needed to help me in the areas that I lacked in now which were more the financial and academic part I had no background. Before applying for college, I had no idea how to do my FASFA and I had to ask for help. My parents couldn’t afford to pay for my SAT courses or SAT test and thankfully to a program called Gear-Up I was able to get the help I needed. Knowing looking back, I was lucky to visit college because had it been for my parents I would have never attended any open-houses or touring of university because my parents lacked the resources needed.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: To be honest, I really don’t know. I think that there are resources offered like CAST (Center for Student Advising), ASRP (Academic Success and Retention Program), and EOF (Educational Opportunity Funds Program); that help with academic advising. But, resources targeted towards our population not really. I want to say the EOF program but I don’t know much about the program. Only thing I know is this program you must apply to before entering college which I had no idea about and only learned once I was in Montclair. But, they help first-generation college students from low-socio economic backgrounds but that’s it. I think not a lot of emphasis is put on low-income students that because we are just another group of students.

Researcher: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Umm. I think resources just in general to support low income, first-generation college students are to a minimum here at this institution. I think all the resources allocated are offered for all students, not just a specific population.  I think being such a big institution some of their  
programs should be driven to different population of students as each student face different needs. Yes, it is okay to offer program but make them more driven to different students to help them feel welcomed or noticed. As a student, I was often scared to ask for help, because I didn’t want to be let down or looked down on.

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: There are many things that can impact my education, and the biggest thing for me is working full-time while being a full-time college student. At times, I want to choose between dropping out or just continuing with my education. I come from poverty, and understanding how to break out of that cycle is learning how to juggle what is important and not.

Researcher: How much of a financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: When I think about the financial strain and what I might go through next semester I always take it upon myself to request an additional loan. I use this loan to pay of my books, parking passes, school utilities and so forth. I know there was a time where I needed to get a new laptop because I was so dependent on the school and it's utilizes that I ended up taken an additional loan to pay for it. I am already going through a financial burden to further my education and taking out additional loans isn’t going to cut it. But, it is part of the process. Thankfully, I get financial aid, tag, grants, and loans to cover my expenses. But, education is expenses and I could only imagine if I’m going through this how peers in my similar shoes  
doing.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: I think this institution lacks with this one and its advising the students. When we are looking for questions to be answer we always look for someone to help us answer those questions, but those individual never give us that help they are academic advisors. I am assigned an advisor, who never made it an interest to learn about me or better yet questioned how to help my college experience. I think advisors, are a key point to students journey until graduation. But, in my case my advisor did 1% investment to learn about me. I took it upon myself, to make a connection with my major advisor to assist me with my core classes and to know me. But, advisors especially for students like myself should really help us as we are students who have no background on college and so forth. I’m just grateful.

Researcher: Going forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities?

Informant: I am going to say that Montclair State does a really good job with informing its students on everything that is going on and one of its biggest ways is through email. I know they use something else like Hawk Sync and the campus newspaper to tell us everything that is happening. But, I have noticed that it is hard to just share information about a specific population of students, because if they do it for one they must do it for all populations of students. But, I think a designated web-page that shares the resources needed for first-generation college students can be very helpful. They could enclose like success-stories, they can bring awareness of financial aid, information on scholarship, I know that there many students who come from similar backgrounds who would serve as a mentor to another student to guide them along their college process. I know if this would have existed I could have had someone better guide me and not feel as lost as I did. I know everything that I do because I took it upon myself to educate and learn things to help me. But, it is hard when you lack the resources or knowledge of a department.

Researcher: Well, those are all the questions we had for you. We, thank you for your time.

Informant: I want to say once again, thank you for allowing me to take part in this research. I hope this project helps other students who are in my same shoes find answers and reflect on their own personal experience. Being part of this research, has really made me rethink my purpose with my education and I just want to say thank you.

Researcher: You are welcome, we will keep you informed.

Appendix D

Interview 3 Participant 3:

Researcher: Good Morning, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it.

Informant: Hi, no problem, I have a lot to say about being a first-gen student.

Researcher: I am looking forward to speaking with you and hearing your responses. Remember please feel comfortable to ask questions or ask for clarification if something doesn’t make sense.

Informant: sounds good, I am ready whenever you are.

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: Good question, well let’s see there were a lot when I started. I felt like I didn’t know where to go or who to talk to and I didn’t dare complain about this to my mom. She would have yelled at me saying I was lucky to even go to school and I am a big girl. Well, I initially did not know where the financial aid office was. I remember having to ask around in my dorm because I did dorm freshman year, I was lucky. I had a couple of girls on my floor that were friendly towards me. Once I found it, I remember the office was not that nice and I was confused about their directions for the FAFSA and the other forms I needed. It was kind of a mess. Listen, I started my undergrad a while ago so at that time it was not as easy as googling answers. There were more steps to everything. The financial aid part was the biggest issue I remember. Oh, one other things, finding money to get books and stuff. I remember I had a class where I asked a girl that sat next to me if I could pay her to photocopy the pages for me. She was reluctant but what college student is gonna say no to twenty bucks. That was how I got through that freshman year bio class.

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: well, at that time I actually had a serious boyfriend I remember he was not helpful or understanding of my decision to go to college. He barely finished high school and was super jealous that I would be in a dorm. I remember we had a fight a night I picked going to a party over seeing him one weekend and we did not speak much after that. It eventually fizzled out. He was a supermarket cashier at the time I started college and I think he works at a gas station now. We just were not on the same page. At the time though I was devastated about the breakup and all the fighting, Struggling in school also made it so tempting to just quit and drop out and go back home. I remember telling my mom that it was so hard and I had no money and she laughed and said I was lucky to be the first in the family to go to school and live there. I had no chance to complain or vent. My whole family resented me it seemed like and expected so much of me. I barely got to enjoy myself at school without thinking of why I was there and feeling like I didn’t want to let down my family. Oh and also I remember I filled out some financial aid forms incorrectly, yes I missed a deadline and had to actually use whatever savings I had from my summer jobs to pay the bill to get the hold off my account. I couldn’t dare ask my mom, she would have freaked out on me. It was really hard.

Researcher: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: there was seriously none except my mom saying, you have to go, no choice. She did not care how much financial aid and loans I had to take out, she insisted. My high school did not do much, they just seemed like they wanted you to go but there was no pushing. I also did not like my guidance counselor so I did not really ask anything. I remember thinking that college seemed like this big, far off idea. I only picked the school I went to so I could use financial aid, they also gave me a partial scholarship, which helped.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: So like I said, when I started college (before I had my baby) I was very in the dark about services and I do not think there were many of them, but when I went back I started seeing flyers everywhere and I saw emails to my school account. I also found out different organizations and clubs that supported students. I definitely noticed a difference. Did I really take advantage of these offices though after knowing about them? No, not really. I felt like I was now an adult and did not want anyone’s help. It would have been nice the first time I was in college though.

Researcher: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Okay, so this a good question. I wish there was a non traditional office or club or even like I don’t know a mentor that could help me, because I am unique. I am first-gen and low income but I also have a baby now and I am older than the average college student. I would like to see more offices or mentor programs started because there are other women like me. We all want to feel supported in college you know?

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: So when I started it was the pressures of my family, my mom, my boyfriend at that time, and the finances. Now, I would say my relationship takes a toll, my baby, I want to be around more often to see him and take care of him. It is hard to give a baby a bath and then do a paper. I am struggling with that. I wish I had more money to afford longer babysitting hours. I would say that this impacts my school work. In a class where I know I could get an A, I am getting a B because of the focus on my child and working. I have to work a lot to afford my child’s care and I want him to have the best life.

Researcher: How much of a  financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: It is not easy, thankfully Amazon and Chegg have saved me. My first time in college  I was not so lucky, the internet did not become a main thing just yet. I am so thankful for amazon’s used books. I am usually able to afford all my books but it definitely adds up. I feel guilty ordering textbooks when I could be buying food and diapers, I am not gonna lie. Having a baby, that takes center stage to school even though I am determined in school too. I also wish I had more help and support from my mom but unfortunately, I don’t. She can’t afford to help me.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: Wow, another good question. I would see availability and marketing. I want a school to be thinking about how they can connect with these first-gen students because trust me, we are out here struggling. We are wishing we knew better and sometimes hating ourselves for not knowing better while we see girls walking around with a new backpack and not a care in the world. If I said I wasn’t jealous sometimes of kids whose parents helped them, I would be lying. I am so angry with my mom a lot of the time for not trying to help me more. I would also say involving the parents in the college process even more than they do. We did not go to my orientation, I do not remember why, but I hope now they have a special orientation for parents who are new to the college world because it is so different. These parents, they are just as lost as are. They need a whole website for us oh and mentors. I said that before but we need that too.

Researcher: Going Forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities?

Informant: Like I said, a separate orientation for new to college parents, and their kids and for first-gens too. I also think having a section of the website would be huge for us. We could have a place to type in a question or look at faqs. I think it comes down to us feeling supported. It is hard enough to go to college without support it feels easy to give up. I also think that mentors could be good. They could point students in the right direction. I even need one now.

Appendix E

Observation 1: The Educational Opportunity Fund [EOF] program

Observer: Paolah Chaparro    Focus: Advising Appointment serving a FGLI student

Date: 10/18/2017                    Time: 2:00pm

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 2:00 | Advisor was sitting in his office waiting for her 2 o'clock appointment to arrive. While her appointment arrived she was answering emails from students. | Did not have a lot of unread emails. Checks her inbox frequently. |
| 2:05 | Student arrives and apologizes for arriving late. She has a “friendly” conversation with the counselor (asked about her day). |  |
| 2:10 | Student quickly takes out a “tutoring” sheet hours and hands it in to the counselor. Advisor checks the form and asks the student about the tutoring (Is it helping you? Any complains? Are you still struggling in any of your classes? Have you been submitting everything on time?) | New students are required to attend tutoring 3 hours per week.  Advisor and student have a long conversation about tutoring. Student answers all questions without asking anything |
| 2:27 | Advisor asks the student, how is everything else? Student says everything is good. | Student hesitated to answer that question. Seemed as if she did not feel comfortable at the moment. |
| 2:29 | Advisor asks the student if she has any questions? Student says “no and thank you for your help, I will see you around.” Advisor says, “Okay, it was good seeing you, take care.” | Advisor always asks students if they have any questions before the meeting ends |
| Personal Notes: | Her office is decorated with pictures, stickers, books, and Greek life objects. She always tries to have her door open when she is not with a student (Foster the open door policy) |  |

Appendix F

Observation 2: Center for Advising and Student Transition

Observer: Danilda M. Soto    Focus: Academic Success Exercise for FGLI Student

Date: 10/19/2017                    Time: 1:00pm

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 1:00 | Student arrived to the meeting early, while the advisor finished up with their last student. In this session the advisor will do an academic success excise to evaluate the student's areas of needs. |  |
| 1:05 | Advisor thanks the student for allowing them to finish with the previous student. The advisor establishes a communication factor that was welcoming to the student. | Advisor established a relationship with the student last semester. |
| 1:10 | The advisor ask the student how many hours have they spent in school? Did they participate in clubs and/or jobs, how many hours? Did you speak to your advisor about your courses and grades? Were you surprised about your grades? What has contributed to your academic performance? Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject?  Student show enthusiasm to see the advisor concerned about their study. | The advisor made sure the student was getting all the questions answered before moving on. The student seemed interested in the |
| 1:20 | Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject? How comfortable are you at MSU? Do you feel like you getting the support that you need? What can I do to help your process? | Student was very open about her answers. The questions were asked with a quick response. |
| 1:30 | The advisor finalized the session asking the student if everything was meet. How helpful was the session. The student said really good, I will keep an update with their field advisor. They put semester goals together. | The advisor scheduled to meet with the student again towards the end of the semester and go over the road map. |
| Personal Notes: | The advisor office is very welcoming and cozy. The advisor has lots of plants and diplomas hanging around the office. Advisor has a message box in front of the office just in case they miss a student they can always get in contact with them again. |  |

Appendix G

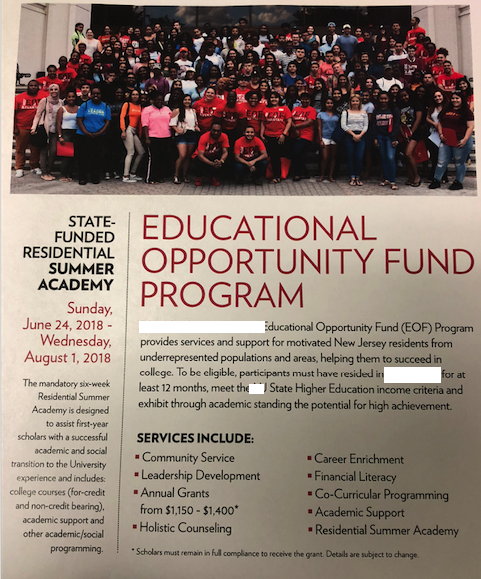
Observation 3: Academic Support Office

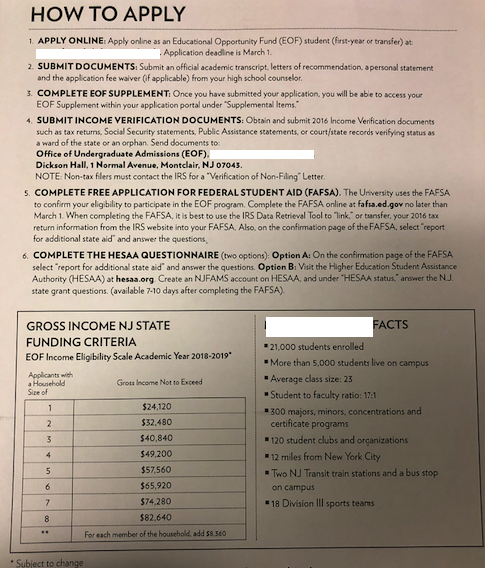
Observer: Lauren Sachs   Focus: Academic Success for FGLI Student

Date: 10/17/17                  Time: 9:00am

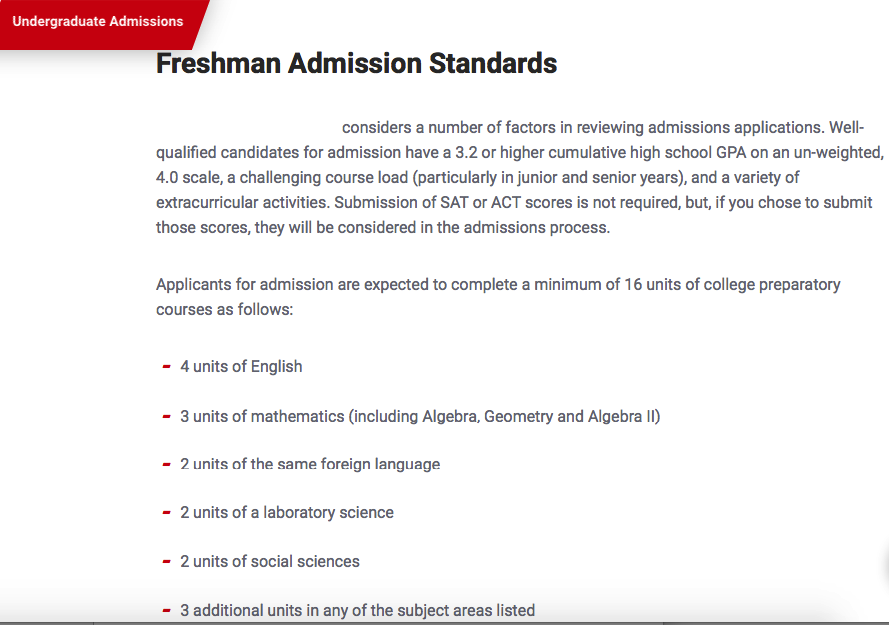
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 9:00 | Academic coach arrives at work and immediately checks email and speaks with front desk staff about appointments that day. | Answers emails and numerous phone calls that come in right as the academic coach unlocks her office. |
| 9:30 | First appointment arrives and the student is excited to see the academic coach. | The academic coach and student have clearly built a strong relationship. There is good rapport and respect. Student is at appointment on time. |
| 10:00 | Student leaves the office and comes out to the front desk to schedule their next appointment in two weeks. | Front desk staff is courteous and friendly to this student. It seems like they know each other already. |
| 10:30 | Next appointment comes in. In the meantime, the academic coach allowed themselves thirty minutes to input notes on first student appointment’s progress and emailed them some information on tutoring and the writing center regarding the conversation they had.  Next student comes in and seems eager for their appointment. They seem alert and enthusiastic. | Academic coach comes out and high fives the student. They state “how’s it going, you ready to discuss the semester?”  The student smiles and seems invested in the appointment for that day. Definitely shows that they want to be here. |
| 11:00 | Student leaves appointment and goes to the front desk to make their next appointment. | Student does not seem to know the front desk worker but seems comfortable in the office. |
| 11:30 | Academic coach goes to a class to speak about the academic support center. |  |
| Personal Notes: | The academic coach seems to have built strong relationships with the students they work with. Both the students coming in for appointments and the front desk workers are comfortable with the academic coach.  Students seemed eager to have appointments and not nervous or intimidated at all. The environment felt like a positive, low-risk one. | Students both made their appointments to come back that day. |

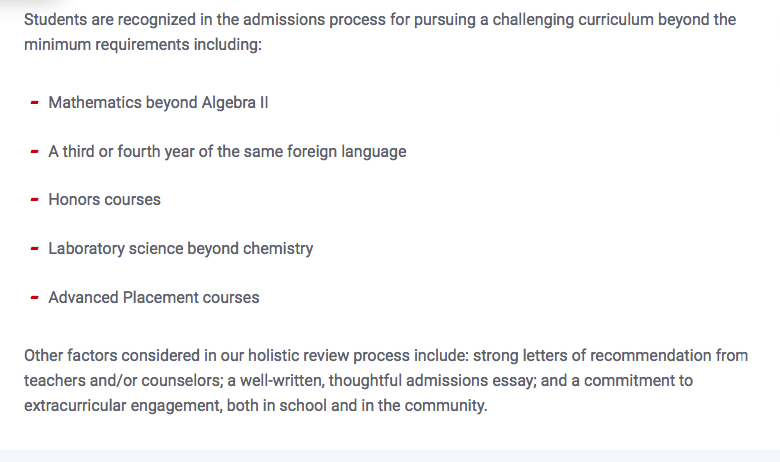
**Appendix H**





**Appendix I**





Appendix J





**FGLI Feedback Survey**

Date:

Institution:

Year:

Major:

1. What services have you used on your campus in your college process? Please list and briefly describe
2. Did you feel these services were useful? Explain
3. If no, why weren’t they useful and what would you change?
4. Who would you say inspired/motivated you the most during your college experience? Explain
5. If not for this person do you feel you have finished school and obtained your degree?
6. What is it like to be a First-Gen student?
7. How can schools positively impact First-Gen students’ lives?
8. What can they do differently at your school within the next year? Give details on specific ideas or programs you would like to see them create.

Appendix K

Interviews Color Coded

\_\_\_ Negative                     \_\_\_ Dropping Out Feelings                                \_\_\_Resources Needed

\_\_\_ Positive                        \_\_\_ Awareness of Resources/Departments       \_\_\_Experiences

\_\_\_ Financial Constraints

Researcher: Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. How are you?

Informant: Hi, thank you for inviting me to take part of your research. I am good but a little nervous.

Researcher: We want you to feel comfortable and as such, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. To begin we are going to give you this information for you to read, analyze, and sign if you feel comfortable with us sharing this interview and interviewing you. Take as long as you need.

Informant: Thank you

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: I am currently a junior at this school and i can say my first year was not the best. My story is not the most pleasant and I haven’t had an easy life. I am a foster child and have been moving around since I was young so coming to college has been a big step but not the easiest. (mhm) Because I explained my situation of not having a place to live, no job, and no parents when I applied to school I have been lucky that my expenses have been covered for the most part. My first year navigating college was hard because i felt like everyone around me was too smart, dressed nice, and had money and then there was me. I mean, don’t get me wrong it was not jealousy I think it was resentment because I always had to work hard for everything I have. Anyways, I did not have help navigating school my first year. Being a college kid is different than being in high school because you always had someone to help you but here I was alone. I did not know where things where, who to talk to, and where to go to for anything. It was hard but here I am I guess.

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: wow, that’s a hard question to answer and so much to think about but I will try my best. Lets see. (oh man) well, I think the only reason why I haven’t dropped out is because I do not have any other choice but to graduate. So in a way you can say all the bad things that have happened in my life has led me here. My college experience has been shit excuse my language but it is the truth. I feel like it is a struggle getting help here and people make it hard for you to be successful. Like things are bad enough already and the school is always giving students a hard time for things they can’t control. Like this past summer, I did not have a place to stay but I couldn’t stay on campus because they required me to take classes and I did not get any financial aid for it but even after speaking to people who work here they weren’t able to help. But looking on the bright side I am still here and I graduate next year so I have come far and still achieving.

Interview: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: As a foster kid well at least for me it is hard to know much about college. Like, all you ever think about when you are young is to get out and get a better life for yourself. (sighs) so no, I didn’t have much preparation before college. I think what help though was high school because my counselor told me I needed to apply to schools and I found Montclair online and filled out the application but I did not think I was going to get in. I mean, I have always liked school but having a disability, being unstable, and not having a support system screwed me up I think. Like, I wish I was more informed, if it was not because I did the research I wouldn’t be here. In high school counselors only encourage students to apply to community college as if that is all that they can aim for.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: Resources. (mhmm) I mean I know financial aid helps a lot if you don’t have much money but I don’t know. Would an advisor be considered a resource for us? I mean, I know there are clubs like LASO that a lot of Latinos go to but I don’t know what else. Wow, I just realized how bad it sounds that I don’t even know of things that can help me. It is a shame but I don’t know whether it is my fault or the school but I don’t hear anything like most of what I hear going on around campus are like greek events or like something in the quad but nothing helpful for students like me. But let me say, I always appreciate a free shirt.

Researchers: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Haha, I was just saying how I don’t really know of any resources so my list of complaints about the things I wish this school had is pretty long. For a student like me, I feel like I am always trying to figure things out and never know where to go and who to talk to because I feel like I am bothering people. It is funny because schools are supposed to help students not make them feel hopeless but this is not the case. Anyways, one of the major things I wish this school had is a support group for students like me; students who are navigating the system for the first time or just someone who has someone that understand. I think that is really important. I think this school should have a department for like you said at the beginning low-income and first generation students where it is like a one-stop-all. What I mean by this is you can have help for all the questions you have at one place. I think something like that would be awesome. (mhm) That is all I can think of right now but trust me If I could make a list and bring it to you it would probably take me days.

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: Oh, that’s an easy question. Multiple jobs. I think having to work a couple of jobs while going to school is hard because it is a constant battle between deciding which one is more important. Like Sometimes I think I should just quit school because I am making a bit of money but it is more than what I had my whole life and just the thought of graduating and having loans scares me. Like who knows if I am even able to find a job or if I will have a place to live. I don’t know, I have so many questions but no one can answer them and no one will help me so.

Researcher: How much of a  financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: Let me start by saying I don’t buy books. I can’t. I mean I would if I could but I don’t have the money for them. With the jobs I have I need to buy food, pay for transportation, and school supplies like pens and all of that but books are too expensive. I feel like a month’s paycheck would cover probably one to two books. What I do and this is embarrassing but I try to get close to someone in every class that would let me borrow the books and I scan them. I spend hours at the library every start of the semester just doing this but that is the only way I can have the books. My financial aid doesn’t cover for books.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: I think this may sound crazy but I think what would have helped me is to have a relationship with my advisor. Like, my advisor is always busy and never has time to meet so I never know who to go to. It is frustrating because I look for help but no one ever has time. I think schools should invest money in hiring people and assign advisors to students who are required to meet with them weekly but this will never happen. It only takes one person tho. One person.

Researcher: Going Forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities ?

Informant: (mhm) current students via email definitely. I think as a student here you are always checking your email because if you don’t you would literally fail at life. All jokes aside though, I think for future students that is a hard question because you have to think of circumstances like mine, like what if they don’t have a place to live, no internet, and all of that. But, I guess they can create pamphlets and distribute them at high schools for students to see. I think students would be able to know about the school and what not.

Researcher: Well, those are all of the questions we had for you. Thank you so much for your time.

Informant: Thank you. This really helped me think about my experiences in college and my future. Let me know of the results and if you want to know anything else let me know. Have a good day and keep me updated please.

Researcher: Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. How are you?

Informant: Hi, everyone. I am glad myself to be here today to take part of this research project.

Researcher:We want you to feel comfortable and as such, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. To begin we are going to give you this information for you to read, analyze, and sign if you feel comfortable with us sharing this interview and interviewing you. Take as long as you need.

Informant: Okay, and thank you

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: Woah,coming to [this university] for me was first a big step. It is something that within my family we have never seen. I came from a background, were my parents have only told me entering college is your only way out of poverty. I did as they told me, entered college and started to navigate my first-year as a college student. But I faced many obstacles, with just the basic necessities as college student. The major ones were the resources offered to get from point a to point b. It was like, how can I ensure I have all my financial aid papers on time, to cover my living expenses, meal plans and books. Before coming to college, I had a part-time job at Shoprite to not depend on my parents Once, I came to dorm I had to find a job. Jobs on campus were only paying $8.25 and only working 15 hours. So, it was hard for me. I was juggling my life at home and the one at school to make ends meet. I came in with a purpose but at times I felt lost, but somehow felt like I was going to make it work out. I think this came as a shift in identity two, because I was just juggling to find myself at home and at school

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc.) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: Being a first-generation college student, and knowing so little about the institution was very difficult for myself. The hardest times for me started off with one of the basic areas of higher education, and that was lacking on knowing how to access financial aid. I was almost held back from my first semester, because I didn’t have all my paperwork completed. When I tried to access the office, the lines were so long and it felt like the financial aid advisors had little patience which made everything so triggering and it sort made me feel hopeless at time. But, I persisted. I think my struggles as a college student only made me value everything and understand my purpose. I think being a first-generation student over all made it difficult because I never had anyone to guide me or tell me this is how you do this and that. I had to always depend on an outsider to get that help. But, it just taught me to reach out and ask for help. The help is there you just need to find it.

Researcher: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: Being a student from Passaic High School, gave me some preparation and awareness of how the process of college would be because we had a college bound process. But, not the more in-depth parts needed to help me in the areas that I lacked in now which were more the financial and academic part I had no background. Before applying for college, I had no idea how to do my FASFA and I had to ask for help. My parents couldn’t afford to pay for my SAT courses or SAT test and thankfully to a program called Gear-Up I was able to get the help I needed. Knowing looking back, I was lucky to visit college because had it been for my parents I would have never attended any open-houses or touring of university because my parents lacked the resources needed.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: To be honest, I really don’t know. I think that there are resources offered like CAST (Center for Student Advising), ASRP (Academic Success and Retention Program), and EOF (Educational Opportunity Funds Program); that help with academic advising. But, resources targeted towards our population not really. I want to say the EOF program but I don’t know much about the program. Only thing I know is this program you must apply to before entering college which I had no idea about and only learned once I was in Montclair. But, they help first-generation college students from low-socio economic backgrounds but that’s it. I think not a lot of emphasis is put on low-income students that because we are just another group of students.

Researcher: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Umm. I think resources just in general to support low income, first-generation college students are to a minimum here at this institution. I think all the resources allocated are offered for all students, not just a specific population.  I think being such a big institution some of their  
programs should be driven to different population of students as each student face different needs. Yes, it is okay to offer program but make them more driven to different students to help them feel welcomed or noticed. As a student, I was often scared to ask for help, because I didn’t want to be let down or looked down on.

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: There are many things that can impact my education, and the biggest thing for me is working full-time while being a full-time college student. At times, I want to choose between dropping out or just continuing with my education. I come from poverty, and understanding how to break out of that cycle is learning how to juggle what is important and not.

Researcher: How much of a financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: When I think about the financial strain and what I might go through next semester I always take it upon myself to request an additional loan. I use this loan to pay of my books, parking passes, school utilities and so forth. I know there was a time where I needed to get a new laptop because I was so dependent on the school and it's utilizes that I ended up taken an additional loan to pay for it. I am already going through a financial burden to further my education and taking out additional loans isn’t going to cut it. But, it is part of the process. Thankfully, I get financial aid, tag, grants, and loans to cover my expenses. But, education is expenses and I could only imagine if I’m going through this how peers in my similar shoes  
doing.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: I think this institution lacks with this one and its advising the students. When we are looking for questions to be answer we always look for someone to help us answer those questions, but those individual never give us that help they are academic advisors. I am assigned an advisor, who never made it an interest to learn about me or better yet questioned how to help my college experience. I think advisors, are a key point to students journey until graduation. But, in my case my advisor did 1% investment to learn about me. I took it upon myself, to make a connection with my major advisor to assist me with my core classes and to know me. But, advisors especially for students like myself should really help us as we are students who have no background on college and so forth. I’m just grateful.

Researcher: Going forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities?

Informant: I am going to say that Montclair State does a really good job with informing its students on everything that is going on and one of its biggest ways is through email. I know they use something else like Hawk Sync and the campus newspaper to tell us everything that is happening. But, I have noticed that it is hard to just share information about a specific population of students, because if they do it for one they must do it for all populations of students. But, I think a designated web-page that shares the resources needed for first-generation college students can be very helpful. They could enclose like success-stories, they can bring awareness of financial aid, information on scholarship, I know that there many students who come from similar backgrounds who would serve as a mentor to another student to guide them along their college process. I know if this would have existed I could have had someone better guide me and not feel as lost as I did. I know everything that I do because I took it upon myself to educate and learn things to help me. But, it is hard when you lack the resources or knowledge of a department.

Researcher: Well, those are all the questions we had for you. We, thank you for your time.

Informant: I want to say once again, thank you for allowing me to take part in this research. I hope this project helps other students who are in my same shoes find answers and reflect on their own personal experience. Being part of this research, has really made me rethink my purpose with my education and I just want to say thank you.

Researcher: You are welcome, we will keep you informed.

Researcher: Good Morning, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it.

Informant: Hi, no problem, I have a lot to say about being a first-gen student.

Researcher: I am looking forward to speaking with you and hearing your responses. Remember please feel comfortable to ask questions or ask for clarification if something doesn’t make sense.

Informant: sounds good, I am ready whenever you are.

Researcher: What difficulties did you face at this institution within your first year / semester?

Informant: Good question, well let’s see there were a lot when I started. I felt like I didn’t know where to go or who to talk to and I didn’t dare complain about this to my mom. She would have yelled at me saying I was lucky to even go to school and I am a big girl. Well, I initially did not know where the financial aid office was. I remember having to ask around in my dorm because I did dorm freshman year, I was lucky. I had a couple of girls on my floor that were friendly towards me. Once I found it, I remember the office was not that nice and I was confused about their directions for the FAFSA and the other forms I needed. It was kind of a mess. Listen, I started my undergrad a while ago so at that time it was not as easy as googling answers. There were more steps to everything. The financial aid part was the biggest issue I remember. Oh, one other things, finding money to get books and stuff. I remember I had a class where I asked a girl that sat next to me if I could pay her to photocopy the pages for me. She was reluctant but what college student is gonna say no to twenty bucks. That was how I got through that freshman year bio class.

Researcher: How have these difficulties/challenges you face (academic, personal, financial etc) impacted your overall college experience and success?

Informant: well, at that time I actually had a serious boyfriend I remember he was not helpful or understanding of my decision to go to college. He barely finished high school and was super jealous that I would be in a dorm. I remember we had a fight a night I picked going to a party over seeing him one weekend and we did not speak much after that. It eventually fizzled out. He was a supermarket cashier at the time I started college and I think he works at a gas station now. We just were not on the same page. At the time though I was devastated about the breakup and all the fighting, Struggling in school also made it so tempting to just quit and drop out and go back home. I remember telling my mom that it was so hard and I had no money and she laughed and said I was lucky to be the first in the family to go to school and live there. I had no chance to complain or vent. My whole family resented me it seemed like and expected so much of me. I barely got to enjoy myself at school without thinking of why I was there and feeling like I didn’t want to let down my family. Oh and also I remember I filled out some financial aid forms incorrectly, yes I missed a deadline and had to actually use whatever savings I had from my summer jobs to pay the bill to get the hold off my account. I couldn’t dare ask my mom, she would have freaked out on me. It was really hard.

Researcher: What kind of college preparation did you have before college? Did you feel you were aware and informed going into the college process? Explain

Informant: there was seriously none except my mom saying, you have to go, no choice. She did not care how much financial aid and loans I had to take out, she insisted. My high school did not do much, they just seemed like they wanted you to go but there was no pushing. I also did not like my guidance counselor so I did not really ask anything. I remember thinking that college seemed like this big, far off idea. I only picked the school I went to so I could use financial aid, they also gave me a partial scholarship which helped.

Researcher: Are you aware of any resources offered to low income, first-generation college students at your institution? What are they?

Informant: So like I said, when I started college (before I had my baby) I was very in the dark about services and I do not think there were many of them, but when I went back I started seeing flyers everywhere and I saw emails to my school account. I also found out different organizations and clubs that supported students. I definitely noticed a difference. Did I really take advantage of these offices though after knowing about them? No, not really. I felt like I was now an adult and did not want anyone’s help. It would have been nice the first time I was in college though.

Researcher: What resources do you believe your institution is lacking when it comes to supporting low income, first-generation college students? Why?

Informant: Okay, so this a good question. I wish there was a non traditional office or club or even like I don’t know a mentor that could help me, because I am unique. I am first-gen and low income but I also have a baby now and I am older than the average college student. I would like to see more offices or mentor programs started because there are other women like me. We all want to feel supported in college you know?

Researcher: What responsibilities do you have outside of school that can have a negative impact on school? Why and How?

Informant: So when I started it was the pressures of my family, my mom, my boyfriend at that time, and the finances. Now, I would say my relationship takes a toll, my baby, I want to be around more often to see him and take care of him. It is hard to give a baby a bath and then do a paper. I am struggling with that. I wish I had more money to afford longer babysitting hours. I would say that this impacts my school work. In a class where I know I could get an A, I am getting a B because of the focus on my child and working. I have to work a lot to afford my child’s care and I want him to have the best life.

Researcher: How much of a financial strain do you anticipate going into each semester when it comes to purchasing the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

Informant: It is not easy, thankfully Amazon and Chegg have saved me. My first time in college I was not so lucky, the internet did not become a main thing just yet. I am so thankful for amazon’s used books. I am usually able to afford all my books but it definitely adds up. I feel guilty ordering textbooks when I could be buying food and diapers, I am not gonna lie. Having a baby, that takes center stage to school even though I am determined in school too. I also wish I had more help and support from my mom but unfortunately, I don’t. She can’t afford to help me.

Researcher: How could your institution make the process of answering your questions and concerns more efficient?

Informant: Wow, another good question. I would see availability and marketing. I want a school to be thinking about how they can connect with these first-gen students because trust me, we are out here struggling. We are wishing we knew better and sometimes hating ourselves for not knowing better while we see girls walking around with a new backpack and not a care in the world. If I said I wasn’t jealous sometimes of kids whose parents helped them, I would be lying. I am so angry with my mom a lot of the time for not trying to help me more. I would also say involving the parents in the college process even more than they do. We did not go to my orientation, I do not remember why, but I hope now they have a special orientation for parents who are new to the college world because it is so different. These parents, they are just as lost as are. They need a whole website for us oh and mentors. I said that before but we need that too.

Researcher: Going Forward, how can this institution communicate important information to current and future students such as academic rules, degree requirements, individual course requirements, campus news and events, extracurricular activities, tuition costs, financial aid and scholarship opportunities?

Informant: Like I said, a separate orientation for new to college parents, and their kids and for first-gens too. I also think having a section of the website would be huge for us. We could have a place to type in a question or look at faqs. I think it comes down to us feeling supported. It is hard enough to go to college without support it feels easy to give up. I also think that mentors could be good. They could point students in the right direction. I even need one now.

Appendix L

\_\_\_ Negative                     \_\_\_ Dropping Out Feelings                               \_\_\_Resources Needed

\_\_\_Positive                        \_\_\_Awareness of Resources/Departments      \_\_\_ Experiences

\_\_\_ Financial Constraints

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 2:00 | Advisor was sitting in his office waiting for her 2 o'clock appointment to arrive. While her appointment arrived she was answering emails from students. | Did not have a lot of unread emails. Checks her inbox frequently. |
| 2:05 | Student arrives and apologizes for arriving late. She has a “friendly” conversation with the counselor (asked about her day). |  |
| 2:10 | Student quickly takes out a “tutoring” sheet hours and hands it in to the counselor. Advisor checks the form and asks the student about the tutoring (Is it helping you? Any complains? Are you still struggling in any of your classes? Have you been submitting everything on time?) | New students are required to attend tutoring 3 hours per week.  Advisor and student have a long conversation about tutoring. Student answers all questions without asking anything |
| 2:27 | Advisor asks the student, how is everything else? Student says everything is good. | Student hesitated to answer that question. Seemed as if she did not feel comfortable at the moment. |
| 2:29 | Advisor asks the student if she has any questions? Student says “no and thank you for your help, I will see you around.” Advisor says, “Okay, it was good seeing you, take care.” | Advisor always asks students if they have any questions before the meeting ends |
| Personal Notes: | Her office is decorated with pictures, stickers, books, and Greek life objects. She always tries to have her door open when she is not with a student (Foster the open door policy) |  |

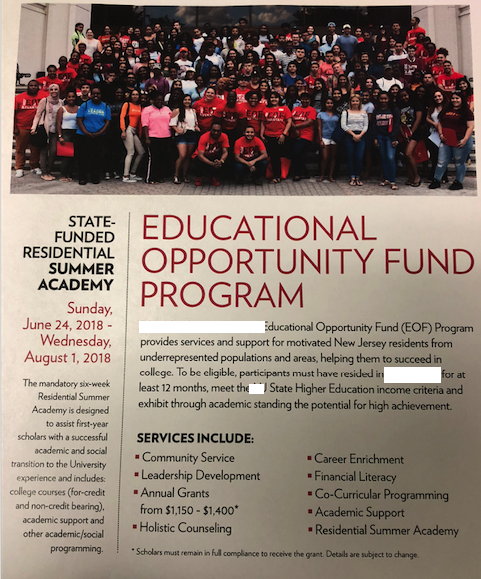
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| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 1:00 | Student arrived to the meeting early, while the advisor finished up with their last student. In this session the advisor will do an academic success excise to evaluate the student's areas of needs. |  |
| 1:05 | Advisor thanks the student for allowing them to finish with the previous student.The advisor establishes a communication factor that was welcoming to the student. | Advisor established a relationship with the student last semester. |
| 1:10 | The advisor ask the student how many hours have they spent in school? Did they participate in clubs and/or jobs, how many hours? Did you speak to your advisor about your courses and grades? Were you surprised about your grades? What has contributed to your academic performance? Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject?  Student show enthusiasm to see the advisor concerned about their study. | The advisor made sure the student was getting all the questions answered before moving on. The student seemed interested. |
| 1:20 | Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject? How comfortable are you at MSU? Do you feel like you getting the support that you need? What can I do to help your process? | Student was very open about her answers. The questions were asked with a quick response. |
| 1:30 | The advisor finalized the session asking the student if everything was meet. How helpful was the session. The student said really good, I will keep an update with their field advisor. They put semester goals together. | The advisor scheduled to meet with the student again towards the end of the semester and go over the road map. |
| Personal Notes: | The advisor office is very welcoming and cozy. The advisor has lots of plants and diplomas hanging around the office. Advisor has a message box in front of the office just in case they miss a student they can always get in contact with them again. |  |

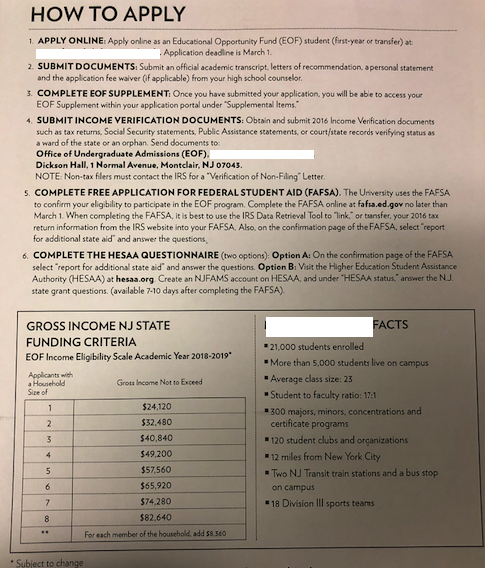
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Times | Note Taking | Note Making |
| 9:00 | Academic coach arrives at work and immediately checks email and speaks with front desk staff about appointments that day. | Answers emails and numerous phone calls that come in right as the academic coach unlocks her office. |
| 9:30 | First appointment arrives and the student is excited to see the academic coach. | The academic coach and student have clearly built a strong relationship. There is good rapport and respect. Student is at appointment on time. |
| 10:00 | Student leaves the office and comes out to the front desk to schedule their next appointment in two weeks. | Front desk staff is courteous and friendly to this student. It seems like they know each other already. |
| 10:30 | Next appointment comes in. In the meantime, the academic coach allowed themselves thirty minutes to input notes on first student appointment’s progress and emailed them some information on tutoring and the writing center regarding the conversation they had.  Next student comes in and seems eager for their appointment. They seem alert and enthusiastic. | .Academic coach comes out and high fives the student. They state “how’s it going, you ready to discuss the semester?”  The student smiles and seems invested in the appointment for that day. Definitely shows that they want to be here. |
| 11:00 | Student leaves appointment and goes to the front desk to make their next appointment. | Student does not seem to know the front desk worker but seems comfortable in the office. |
| 11:30 | Academic coach goes to a class to speak about the academic support center. |  |
| Personal Notes: | The academic coach seems to have built strong relationships with the students they work with. Both the students coming in for appointments and the front desk workers are comfortable with the academic coach.  Students seemed eager to have appointments and not nervous or intimidated at all. The environment felt like a positive, low-risk one. | Students both made their appointments to come back that day. |

Appendix M

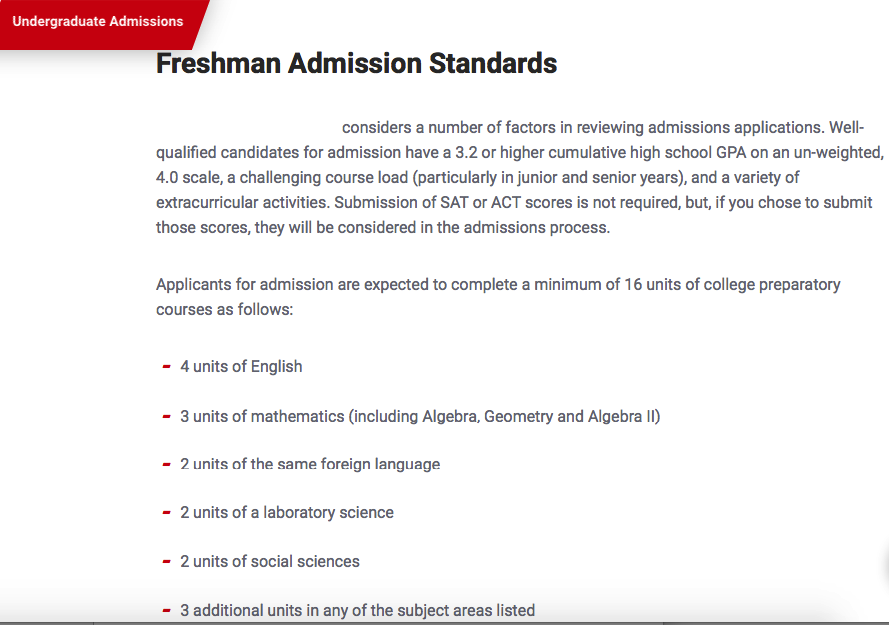
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Color Coded chart | | |
| Finding | Quote | Source |
| Negative | I did not have help navigating school my first year | Interview 1 |
|  | I did not know where things where, who to talk to, and where to go to | Interview 1 |
|  | I feel like it is a struggle getting help here and people make it hard for you to be successful | Interview 1 |
|  | Like, my advisor is always busy and never has time to meet so I never know who to go to. | Interview 1 |
|  | Student hesitated to answer that question. Seemed as if she did not feel comfortable at the moment. | Observation 1 |
|  | I was juggling my life at home and the one at school to make ends meet | Interview 2 |
|  | I think this came as a shift in identity two, because I was just juggling to find myself at home and at school | Interview 2 |
|  | financial aid advisors had little patience which made everything so triggering and it sort made me feel hopeless at time. | Interview 2 |
|  | I think not a lot of emphasis is put on low-income students that because we are just another group of students. | Interview 2 |
|  | I think all the resources allocated are offered for all students, not just a specific population. | Interview 2 |
|  | I am assigned an advisor, who never made it an interest to learn about me or better yet questioned how to help my college experience. | Interview 2 |
|  | I felt like I didn’t know where to go or who to talk to and I didn’t dare complain about this to my mom. | Interview 3 |
|  | I barely got to enjoy myself at school without thinking of why I was there and feeling like I didn’t want to let down my family. | Interview 3 |
|  | I feel guilty ordering textbooks when I could be buying food and diapers, I am not gonna lie | Interview 3 |
|  | I also wish I had more help and support from my mom but unfortunately, I don’t | Interview 3 |
| Positive | Advisor checks the form and asks the student about the tutoring (Is it helping you? Any complains? Are you still struggling in any of your classes? Have you been submitting everything on time?) | Observation 1 |
|  | Advisor asks the student, how is everything else? Student says everything is good. | Observation 1 |
|  | coming to Montclair State University for me was first a big step. | Interview 2 |
|  | I persisted. I think my struggles as a college student only made me value everything and understand my purpose | Interview 2 |
|  | I get financial aid, tag, grants, and loans to cover my expenses | Interview 2 |
|  | I am going to say that Montclair State does a really good job with informing its students on everything that is going on and one of its biggest ways is through email. | Interview 2 |
|  | The advisor ask the student how many hours have they spent in school? Did they participate in clubs and/or jobs, how many hours? Did you speak to your advisor about your courses and grades? Were you surprised about your grades? What has contributed to your academic performance? Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject?  Student show enthusiasm to see the advisor concerned about their study. | Observation 2 |
|  | Thought about declaring or minoring in another subject? How comfortable are you at MSU? Do you feel like you getting the support that you need? What can I do to help your process? | Observation 2 |
|  | The advisor scheduled to meet with the student again towards the end of the semester and go over the road map. | Observation 2 |
|  | I went back I started seeing flyers everywhere and I saw emails to my school account | Interview 3 |
|  | The academic coach and student have clearly built a strong relationship. There is good rapport and respect. Student is at appointment on time. | Observation 3 |
|  | Student leaves the office and comes out to the front desk to schedule their next appointment in two weeks. | Observation 3 |
| Financial Constraints | Multiple jobs | Interview 1 |
|  | With the jobs I have I need to buy food, pay for transportation, and school supplies like pens and all of that but books are too expensive. | Interview 1 |
|  | My financial aid doesn’t cover for books. | Interview 1 |
|  | I am already going through a financial burden to further my education and taking out additional loans isn’t going to cut it | Interview 2 |
|  | finding money to get books and stuff. I remember I had a class where I asked a girl that sat next to me if I could pay her to photocopy the pages for me | Interview 3 |
|  | I had no money and she laughed and said I was lucky to be the first in the family to go to school and live there. | Interview 3 |
|  | I have to work a lot to afford my child’s care and I want him to have the best li | Interview 3 |
|  | I also wish I had more help and support from my mom but unfortunately, I don’t. She can’t afford to help me. | Interview 3 |
| Dropping Out Feelings | I think the only reason why I haven’t dropped out is because I do not have any other choice but to graduate. | Interview 1 |
|  | I think having to work a couple of jobs while going to school is hard because it is a constant battle between deciding which one is more important. Like, sometimes I think I should just quit school because I am making a bit of money | Interview 1 |
|  | I want to choose between dropping out or just continuing with my education | Interview 2 |
|  | At the time though I was devastated about the breakup and all the fighting, Struggling in school also made it so tempting to just quit and drop out and go back home. | Interview 3 |
|  | It is hard enough to go to college without support it feels easy to give up | Interview 3 |
| Awareness of Resources/Departments | I mean I know financial aid helps a lot if you don’t have much money but I don’t know | Interview 1 |
|  | I mean, I know there are clubs like LASO that a lot of Latinos go to but I don’t know what else | Interview 1 |
|  | CAST (Center for Student Advising), ASRP (Academic Success and Retention Program), and EOF (Educational Opportunity Funds Program) | Interview 2 |
|  | emailed them some information on tutoring and the writing center regarding the conversation they had. | Observation 3 |
|  | Academic coach goes to a class to speak about the academic support center. | Observation 3 |
| Resources Needed | I wish this school had is a support group for students like me; students who are navigating the system for the first time or just someone who has someone that understand. | Interview 1 |
|  | I think this school should have a department for like you said at the beginning low-income and first generation students where it is like a one-stop-all. | Interview 1 |
|  | I think schools should invest money in hiring people and assign advisors to students who are required to meet with them weekly | Interview 2 |
|  | I think a designated web-page that shares the resources needed for first-generation college students can be very helpful. | Interview 2 |
|  | I wish there was a non traditional office or club or even like I don’t know a mentor that could help me | Interview 3 |
|  | I would like to see more offices or mentor programs started because there are other women like me | Interview 3 |
|  | I hope now they have a special orientation for parents who are new to the college world because it is so different. | Interview 3 |
|  | They need a whole website for us oh and mentors. | Interview 3 |
|  | We could have a place to type in a question or look at faqs. | Interview 3 |
| Experiences | I found Montclair online and filled out the application but I did not think I was going to get in. I mean, I have always liked school but having a disability, being unstable, and not having a support system screwed me up I think. | Interview 1 |
|  | For a student like me, I feel like I am always trying to figure things out and never know where to go and who to talk to because I feel like I am bothering people. | Interview 1 |
|  | I don’t know, I have so many questions but no one can answer them and no one will help me so. | Interview 1 |
|  | It is frustrating because I look for help but no one ever has time. | Interview 1 |
|  | I came from a background, were my parents have only told me entering college is your only way out of poverty. | Interview 2 |
|  | I was almost held back from my first semester, because I didn’t have all my paperwork completed | Interview 2 |
|  | My parents couldn’t afford to pay for my SAT courses or SAT test | Interview 2 |
|  | As a student, I was often scared to ask for help, because I didn’t want to be let down or looked down on. | Interview 2 |
|  | I remember telling my mom that it was so hard | Interview 3 |
|  | I remember thinking that college seemed like this big, far off idea. I only picked the school I went to so I could use financial aid, they also gave me a partial scholarship which helped. | Interview 3 |
|  | So like I said, when I started college (before I had my baby) I was very in the dark about services and I do not think there were many of them, | Interview 3 |
|  | In a class where I know I could get an A, I am getting a B because of the focus on my child and working | Interview 3 |

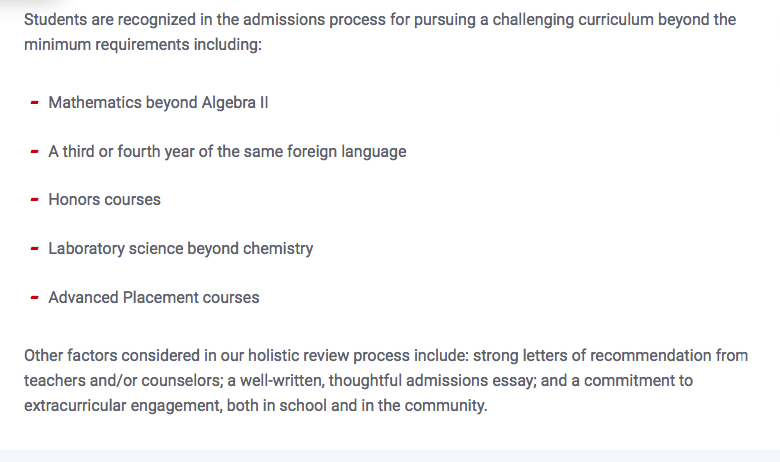
Appendix N





Appendix O



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Appendix P



**FGLI Feedback Survey**

Date:

Institution:

Year:

Major:

1. What services have you used on your campus in your college process? Please list and briefly describe
2. Did you feel these services were useful? Explain
3. If no, why weren’t they useful and what would you change?
4. Who would you say inspired/motivated you the most during your college experience? Explain
5. If not for this person do you feel you have finished school and obtained your degree?
6. What is it like to be a First-Gen student?
7. How can schools positively impact First-Gen students’ lives?
8. What can they do differently at your school within the next year? Give details on specific ideas or programs you would like to see them create.