

**AN EXPLORATORY, PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE STUDENTS**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

of

The University of Guelph

by

LAURA GATTO

In partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

October, 2009

© Laura Gatto, 2009

## ABSTRACT

### AN EXPLORATORY, PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE STUDENTS

**Laura Gatto**  
University of Guelph, 2009

**Advisor:**  
Professor A. Lauzon

**This thesis is an investigation of the lived experience of first generation female students in their first year of study at the University of Guelph in Guelph Ontario, Canada. The study highlights the importance of learning about the lived experience of first-generation female students, from their perspectives and in their own words. As previous research focuses most often on the demographics, academic performance, and persistence rates of first-generation students, this study is significant as it approaches the female first-generation student experience from a phenomenological standpoint. The women spoke at length about the effect their parents and siblings had on their academic lives. They talked of their experiences transitioning to university and the issues and challenges associated with their new environments. The participants in this study also shared what advice they would give to other first-generation students entering higher education.**

## Acknowledgements

It took a ‘village’ to conceive, develop, and produce this thesis.

First and foremost I would like to thank the most important person in my life, my wonderful husband Pete. Without him, I would not have had the time to complete this thesis. Thank you Pete for regularly taking our three children and two dogs on day trips, camping trips, and extended family vacations so that I could have the peace and quiet required to write. I am blessed to have such a supportive and loving partner.

I would like to thank the ten women who participated in this study. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with me. I appreciated your honesty and openness and wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

I could not have completed this thesis without the help of my very supportive advisor, Professor Al Lauzon. You were always available when I had questions and needed guidance. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and knowledge with me. I could not have done this without you.

My co-advisor, Professor Nathan Perkins, and the Chair of my Defence, Professor Glen Filson, were also valuable resources. Nate, thank you for sharing your infectious enthusiasm with me. I appreciated all of your comments and your thoughtful advice. Glen, thank you for challenging me to make this thesis even better and especially for introducing me to Bourdieu.

Thanks are also in order to my parents Marlene and Jim. Your constant encouragement and support for my educational pursuits has given me the confidence to pursue my academic goals and instilled in me a love for life long learning. Mom, it also helped that you looked after the household for three weeks during the data collection phase of this study.

I would further like to acknowledge my boss Brenda. Thank you for giving me the idea to pursue this research topic and for your willingness to support my professional development. You are an amazing mentor.

Finally, I would like to thank the Office of Student Affairs who funded this research.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Chapter I: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem	3
Research Goal	4
Significance of the Research	4
Research Context	5
Methodology	7
Limitations and Assumptions	9
<b>Chapter II: Literature Review</b>	<b>14</b>
Research Themes	16
Research Limitations	17
Research Findings	18
Characteristics.	18
Pre-college preparation.	19
Motivation to attend higher education.	20
Academic performance.	22
Persistence and degree attainment.	24
Advanced degree attainment.	26
Social integration.	27
Research Theories	28
Environment of higher education.	29
College knowledge/cultural capital.	30
Lack of social integration.	32
Lack of academic preparedness.	36
Engagement.	36
Lack of parental support.	38
Struggles with identity.	42
Struggles with race.	44
Struggles with gender.	45
Research Recommendations	48
Support services.	48
Skills development.	53
Summary	56

<b>Chapter III: Methodology</b>	<b>57</b>
Interview Schedule Development	58
Participant Selection	60
Data Collection	62
Data Analysis	64
<b>Chapter IV: Research Findings</b>	<b>68</b>
Background	68
Participants.	69
<i>Patricia.</i>	69
<i>Carly.</i>	70
<i>Dee.</i>	70
<i>Elizabeth.</i>	71
<i>Felicity.</i>	71
<i>Genevieve.</i>	72
<i>Heather.</i>	72
<i>Sarah.</i>	73
<i>Veronica.</i>	74
<i>Bev.</i>	74
Family	75
Role of parents in education.	75
<i>Atmosphere at home regarding education.</i>	76
<i>Parental support.</i>	78
<i>Parental/family pride.</i>	80
<i>Contact with parents while at university.</i>	81
<i>Parental lack of understanding about university experience.</i>	84
Role of siblings in education.	86
<i>Younger siblings.</i>	86
<i>Older siblings.</i>	88
Compensation for lack college knowledge.	90
<i>Academic support in high school.</i>	91
<i>Mentors in high school.</i>	92
<i>Information gathering.</i>	93
<i>Decision-making power.</i>	97
<i>Value of independence.</i>	99
Transitioning to Higher Education	100
Differences between high school and university.	101
Experience of Change.	103
<i>Changing behaviours.</i>	104
<i>Changing expectations.</i>	107
<i>Changing extracurricular activity levels.</i>	109
<i>Changing levels of physical activity and health.</i>	110
Issues and Challenges	112
Academic experience.	113

<i>Sources of academic support.</i>	113
Financial experience.	116
<i>Sources of money.</i>	116
<i>Money for the future.</i>	119
<i>Spending habits.</i>	121
<i>Value of paying for school.</i>	122
<i>Money and marks.</i>	123
Social experience.	124
<i>Making new friends.</i>	124
<i>Friends from home.</i>	128
<i>Socio-emotional support.</i>	130
First-generation Student Identity	132
Informing others of their first-generation status.	133
Advice for first-generation students.	135
<b>Chapter V: Discussion</b>	<b>138</b>
Conclusion	146
Support Program Recommendations	148
Recommendations for Future Research	150
<b>References</b>	<b>156</b>
<i>Appendix A</i>	163
<i>Appendix B</i>	164
<i>Appendix C</i>	165

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Student transition in the first year of higher education is of primary importance to post-secondary institutions as research has demonstrated that retention and graduation rates are affected by the success of first-year orientation programs. Orientation programs are defined as any effort to support first-year students to “make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and enhance their success” (Upcraft, 1989, p. 82). Therefore, a significant amount of human and financial resources are dedicated to providing programs and services that support students as they begin their first year of higher education.

First-year transition and support programs are particularly important for students who come from backgrounds associated with a higher risk for attrition. One such high-risk cohort is labeled ‘first-generation’: students where neither parent attended an institution of higher education for any length of time<sup>1</sup>. Research, predominately from the United States, has shown that the number of first-generation students in higher education has increased (McConnell, 2000; Nunez, 1989; Orbe, 2004). Furthermore, this cohort of students is at a disadvantage in higher education and is more likely to struggle academically, socially, and financially compared to students whose parent or parents have a post-secondary education. This holds true even when other variables are taken into account (e.g., academic background, socioeconomic status) (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004;

---

<sup>1</sup> The definition of ‘first-generation’ can vary depending on the literature reviewed. For purposes of this research, ‘first-generation’ is described as any student where neither parent has attended higher education (college or university) at any time.

Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2005). As such, there has been increased interest in supporting first-generation students as they navigate through higher education. In Ontario, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU)<sup>2</sup> has targeted this group as a priority in higher education. As a result, the Ministry has dedicated funding to post-secondary institutions to improve support for first-generation students.

In addition, gender was a prevalent theme in much of the research conducted on first-generation students. In particular, first-generation students are more likely to be female (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; University of Guelph, 2008). For example, Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that 57% of first-generation students in their study were female compared to 51% of non-first-generation students being female. These women were also more likely to be older than average (13% of first-generation students are age 30 or older versus 3% of non-first-generation students). Furthermore, Ishitani (2005) found that first-generation female students were more likely to drop out of school compared to first-generation male students. It was also noted in a study by Inman and Mayes (1999) that the female first-generation students in their study did not enter higher education immediately after graduating from high-school and were more likely to have dependants. One study recommended that further research be conducted regarding first-generation status and gender. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) commented:

Among the FGS [first-generation students] in this study, females - who constitute the majority of first-generation students - were significantly less likely than males to persist. Even though women have entered higher education in greater numbers,

---

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities is the provincial governing body in Ontario for post-secondary training and education (e.g., universities, colleges, and apprenticeship programs).

gender-based inequities in educational opportunities still exist. This finding is cause for concern and calls attention to the need for further investigation. (p. 419)

Even though gender is a social construct and not necessarily linked to the biological sex characteristics of being female, learning about the experiences of female first-generation students might give more insight into the difficulties that they face in higher education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The majority of research regarding first-generation students has been conducted in the United States and most often examines demographics, grade-point averages, persistence rates, withdrawal rates, and graduation rates. There has been little qualitative research that addresses first-generation students' inability to transition and integrate to higher education and even fewer studies that examine the specific lived experiences of first-generation students as they enter higher education (Thomas, 2002). As a result of this gap, there has been a call for increased qualitative research examining the social and cultural transition for first-generation students. "Qualitative research can shed light on the micro-level dynamics of this cultural navigating for first-generation and non-first-generation students" (Nunez, 1998, p. 26). Additionally, Pascarella et al. (2004) stated that "surprisingly, little is known about their college experiences or their cognitive and psychosocial development during college" (p. 250). Pike and Kuh (2005) also commented that "little is known about their college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents" (p. 276). Furthermore, as the majority of research demonstrates that first-generation students are more likely to be female and/or non-white, "additional research could be

conducted to explore the interactions of gender and race as predictors of academic success” (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 547).

This gap in qualitative, phenomenological research, coupled with the research findings that support that first-generation students are more likely to be female and not persist in higher education poses the question: is higher education addressing the needs of first-generation female students during their first year in higher education? This can best be accomplished by first understanding the lived experience of this population.

### **Research Goal**

The goal of this study is to provide a qualitative examination of the lived experience of this specialized cohort and to accurately capture and describe the phenomena in order to be able to develop an understanding and description of what it is like to be a first-generation female student in her first year of higher education.

### **Significance of the Research**

Not only do post-secondary institutions recognize that they can dramatically affect student experiences, but they also know they have a responsibility to support students: “institutions have an obligation to support and enhance the freshmen year” and they “can intentionally and successfully help freshmen achieve their academic and personal goals” (Upcraft, 1989, p. 4). A main objective of higher education is to support all students, regardless of their backgrounds, so that they can achieve academic and personal success. More important, they want students to graduate. However, these goals

can only be achieved if the needs of the students entering higher education are understood.

As previously stated, this research is significant to post-secondary institutions in Canada because there is no research conducted in this country on first-generation female students. Furthermore, there is little research that focuses on the ‘lived experience’ of this cohort. One could argue that institutions of higher education will not be able to support first-generation female students until they understand the essence of their lived experience.

This research will increase understanding of the lived experience of first-generation female students. Once we gain understanding, we will be able to better support the needs of first-generation female students. As well, this research will provide a starting point for other Canadian research to examine the qualitative experiences of first-generation female students.

## **Research Context**

The University of Guelph (hereinafter called the “University”) was established in 1964 in Guelph Ontario, Canada. It is a residence-intensive, comprehensive university focused on teaching and research. Its main campus in Guelph spans 1,017 acres (412 hectares). Nationally recognized, the University consists of seven colleges that offer a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs involving the natural and physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The participants in this study began their first semester at the University in September 2008. That year, 17,521 full-time undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled. Of that total, 15,521 were undergraduate students

and 2,000 were graduate students. In addition, there were 2,009 students enrolled part-time. Of that number, 1,808 were undergraduate students and 201 were graduate students. Approximately 4,500 undergraduate students lived on-campus in residence.

To understand the context of the experiences of the participants in this study, it is also important to provide a brief overview of the demographics of the entire student population. The Incoming Student Survey is an annual survey administered by the University to students in their first semester at school. The Incoming Student Survey for 2008 was administered in paper form with a 44% response rate from students in their first semester.

In 2008, 31% of students who took the Incoming Student Survey at the University self-identified as first-generation. The percentage of first-generation females at the University has consistently been higher compared to first-generation males, which is congruent with previous research findings. The percentage of female students who self-identified as first-generation has ranged between 30% and 37% since 2002, and was 33% in 2008. The percentage of males has ranged from 25% to 32% and was 26% in 2008 (University of Guelph, 2008). Because of the significant numbers of first-generation students, the University started a volunteer opt-in program called 'Bounce Back'<sup>3</sup> in 2007, which is aimed at all first-year students who are placed on academic probation. Students are on academic probation if their overall average for all courses at the end of their first semester of study falls below 60%. In 2007, the Bounce Back program was offered to 204 students, 76 (37%) of who were identified as first-generation. In 2008,

---

<sup>3</sup> Bounce Back is a program operated jointly by the Centre for New Students and the Undergraduate Academic Information Centre at the University of Guelph. The program occurs in the winter semester and targets students with a cumulative average of less than 60% after their first semester, specifically encouraging involvement from first-generation students within this group.

171 students participated in the program, 66 or 39% of who self-identified as first-generation. However, this program only supports students who are significantly struggling academically and is open to all students.

With respect to demographics, there were some additional highlights from this survey that are of interest to this study. According to the 2008 survey, 33% of respondents were male and 67% female. The majority of the incoming population was Caucasian (86%) and born in Canada (91%). The most common age was 18 (75%) followed by 19 (20%) and 20 (1%). Only 2% of the respondents indicated that they were 21 years of age or older. Of the total respondents, 82% lived in student residences on campus and the remaining students lived off campus.

## **Methodology**

This study was qualitative and exploratory. I employed a phenomenological methodology to learn more about the experiences of female first-generation students in their first year of university and to capture and describe their experiences. This research focused on “exploring how human beings made sense of the experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This methodology does not look for cause and effect relationships. As Penner and McClement (2008) note: “a phenomenological analysis does not aim to explain or discover causes”...it is “to clarify the meanings of phenomena from lived experiences” (p. 93). To achieve this, I adapted Giorgi’s (1997) Human Scientific Phenomenological Method, and approached the research in three steps: 1) gather verbal data; 2) examine the verbal data; and 3) separate the data into parts. As phenomenology is the study of

essences, the objective was to capture the essence of the experiences of these women, delve more in-depth into those experiences and determine if shared meaning existed among first-generation female students.

Purposeful criterion sampling was used to find women who self-identified as first-generation. Ten women self-selected to be participants in this study, all of them meeting the criteria of being female, in their first year at university, and where neither parent attended post-secondary education at any time. Each of the 10 participants met with me on two occasions. For the first interview, standard open-ended questions and an informal conversational style of questioning were used during the in-depth, face-to-face interviews. During the second interview, each participant was asked follow-up questions that were specific to their responses during their first interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to written text for analysis.

In the data analysis process, the two transcripts from each participant were reviewed in their entirety three times to allow for a holistic picture of each participant's experience to emerge. Following this review, I highlighted common elements that emerged from the participant's two transcripts. For example, all comments relating to parental support were noted, as well as all comments referencing academic difficulties. Once the participant transcripts were organized into elements, irrelevant elements were removed and common elements were organized into themes. The themes that emerged from a particular participant were considered a case. After the ten cases were determined and analyzed as individual entities, cross-case analysis was employed to determine if there were any common themes shared by the participants across cases.

## **Limitations and Assumptions**

As with any type of research, there are limitations to this study.

Phenomenological research, although an excellent approach to gathering rich, substantive and in-depth information, has its weaknesses. In particular, researcher bias and purposeful sampling could have affected the reliability and generalizability of this research. Furthermore, the face-to-face interviews as a data collection method might have increased the risk of participant bias and prevented disclosure of personal information.

Qualitative phenomenological research involves data gathering and data analysis, which is performed and interpreted by the researcher. Therefore, there is a high risk of researcher bias. To reduce this risk, I followed Patton's (2002) recommendation that the researcher "explore one's predispositions, making biases explicit, to the extent possible, and engaging in mental cleansing processes" (p. 553). Before this study began and during the data gathering, data analyzing, and report writing processes, I consistently reviewed any biases or standpoints that I had that could affect the validity of this study. Regardless, my particular viewpoints and experiences could have affected the research findings.

How I acquired my sample size might have also limited the generalizability of this study. Purposeful criterion sampling, especially self-selected purposeful sampling, does not allow for confident generalizations nor does it control for selection bias. In this case, the research findings could be strongly influenced by the types of women who self-selected to participate in this study. For instance, all the participants were single, childless, between 18 and 20 years of age and did not have full-time or part-time jobs,

which is not consistent with past research findings. One reason for this may have been that first-generation female students who are working while attending school or married, older, and with children, may not have self-selected to participate believing that they did not have the time. In addition, first-generation students who may not be managing their course work, and/or who are severely struggling with time-management may not have been able to participate. Each participant was also paid for their participation in this study. As such, students who were in financial need may have been more inclined to participate. Because this research targeted first-generation students in their second semester at school, I did not include first-generation students who may have left university during or after their first semester. The timing of this research did not allow me the opportunity to interview first-generation students who had already left school.

Past research also indicated that first-generation students are more likely to be older than average. Yet mature students (older than 25) did not respond to the call to participate in this study. At the University, the majority of first year students are between 18 and 19 years of age (only 2% are over age 21) (University of Guelph, 2008). As such, there may not have been first-year, older-than-average female first-generation students in this particular entering class. Previous research also found that first-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, but only two of the 10 participants in this study were off-campus students. This may be explained by the demographics of the University; 82 % of the first-year students entering in September 2008 lived on campus (University of Guelph, 2008). Regardless, I cannot guarantee that I have a representative sample of female first-generation students at the University.

In addition, the process of purposeful sampling also impeded on the breadth of the study and reduced my ability to confidently generalize patterns outside the context of this research. Because of purposeful sampling, some of the participants knew each other and had similar backgrounds, most likely because participants referred their friends for the study. For example, two of the participants were close friends. Another three participants lived in the same residence area that houses only 30 people (although only one was referred by her suitemate). Therefore, the shared experiences noted in the research findings may have had more to do with their commonalities in living arrangements and learning environments and less to do with their first-generation status.

Furthermore, the participants being interviewed may have been affected by my demeanor and the types of questions that I asked. They could have modified their answers to fit into what they had predetermined to be the correct answers. As well, I could have unconsciously directed the discussion by affirming or exploring comments that I was partial to and/or influenced what was said with non-verbal communication (i.e. body language and facial expressions) to “make errors that conform to expectations” (Caplan, 1994, p. 26). Finally, I could have unintentionally created researcher-student power differentials; the very thing feminists fight against. This was a viable risk for this group given that the participants ranged from 18 to 20 years of age and were interviewed by an older professional woman who worked in the University’s Presidential Offices.

In addition, the informal conversational style and standard open-ended interview questions have their weaknesses. The informal conversational style created different questions administered to different participants leading to different information being collected. This method was less organized and succinct making data analysis quite

difficult. The standardized open-ended interview questions could reduce the flexibility of the researcher and may have impeded getting to the core of the phenomena (Patton, 2002, p. 349). I hoped that by combining the two styles, each style would compensate for the limits of the other.

Although in-depth face-to-face interviews are effective for exploring a particular area and uncovering a variety of variables that may influence a particular phenomenon, their effectiveness makes them extremely time consuming. Recording the data from an interview was also a barrier to this method. Participants may have been intimidated by having their comments audio-recorded and may have felt uncomfortable discussing personal information during the interview. Also, transcribed notes from the audio-recordings did not capture the facial expressions, tone, and pitch of the words and the body language of the interviewee. All of the above may have had significant impact to meaning.

In addition to the limitations of this research, some assumptions were made. It was assumed that first-generation female students of average age will have common experiences in their first year of University. It was also assumed that their experiences will be different from female students who have one or more parents with a post-secondary education. Because a control group of non-first-generation female students did not participate in this study, it cannot be determined whether the shared experience of the participants is common to all first year students, regardless of their parents' educational backgrounds. Future studies should be expanded to include non-first-generation female students to determine if their experiences are significantly different compared to those of first-generation female students. In addition, to determine if the sex of a participant

affects their experiences, more specifically those experiences regarding gender identities and gender inequities, it would be prudent to conduct a similar study on first-generation male students.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Government and post-secondary institutions in North America have recognized the need to improve accessibility to higher education for people from diverse backgrounds. In the past, only students with affluent and well-educated parents and family members were afforded the opportunity to pursue a higher education. With increased accessibility comes diversity. Nowadays parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who do not have post-secondary educations have children who will go on to attend college or university. As such, post-secondary institutions have seen an increase in students who fit this criterion (McConnell, 2000; Nunez, 1989; 2000; Orbe, 2004). As previously discussed, these first-generation students are students who have parents without any post-secondary schooling.<sup>4</sup>

What is of particular interest to academic institutions is that first-generation students are more likely to struggle academically, socially, and financially and to leave higher education before attaining a degree. This holds true even when other variables that can make a student at risk for attrition are taken into account. Research has shown that a parent's level of education is directly related to student success:

Even after controlling for variables such as academic preparation and post-secondary achievement, parents' education continued to be a significant factor in determining whether students persisted, were enrolled at their initial institution three years after entering, or stayed on the persistence track. (Warburton et al., 2001, p. viii)

This finding is echoed by Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998):

Even when controlling for many of the characteristics that distinguished them from their peers, such as socioeconomic status, institution type, and attendance

---

<sup>4</sup> The definition of first-generation can be varied. For purposes of this thesis, first-generation refers to students who have parents without any post-secondary education.

status, first-generation student status still had a negative effect on persistence and attainment (p. iv).

Chen (2005), Choy (2001), and Pascarella et al. (2004) also report that when a variety of variables (both demographic and pre-college) are controlled, first-generation students are at a disadvantage in higher education compared to non-first-generation students, regardless of students' academic skills prior to entering college or university. Furthermore, data from Statistics Canada found that parental education levels are strongly related to children's academic success, even more so than income levels:

Of particular interest is the finding that young adults whose parents had post-secondary education (e.g., college or university) and fell in the lowest income quartile were more likely to participate in post-secondary education themselves, compared with those whose parents were in higher income quartiles but without secondary education. (Thomas, 2002, p. 2)

This information is extremely important as the numbers of first-generation students who attend post-secondary institutions has grown considerably in recent years (Nunez, 1998) and is expected to continue to increase (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Grayson (1997) studied first-year first-generation students from York University. He reported that only 29% of the participants had fathers that had completed a university degree. Furthermore, only 19% of participants reported that their mothers had a university education (Grayson, 1997). He also compared this data to results from surveys from seven universities in Canada. When the results were averaged for the seven universities, only 37% reported that their fathers and 26% reported that their mothers had completed a university degree. Therefore there are a significant number of students who have parents without a post-secondary education in Canada. In 2008, 31% of students who took the Incoming Student Survey at the University of Guelph self-identified as

first-generation students (University of Guelph, 2008). These numbers are significant and reflect that there is a substantial population of first-generation students' enrolled in Canadian universities. This finding is also congruent with research from the United States. Nunez (1998) reported that in a longitudinal study from 1998 to 1990, 43% of students were identified as first-generation.

With such substantial numbers of first-generation students and the link between first-generation status and lack of post-secondary success, there has been considerable academic interest in this student cohort. First, an overview of research themes, research limitations, and research findings will be discussed. Second, I will examine common theories used to explain the aforementioned findings. Finally, recommendations made by researchers regarding support for first-generation students and areas for future research will be discussed.

### **Research Themes**

The majority of researchers focus on the quantitative characteristics of first-generation students, specifically their background characteristics, enrolment rates, grade-point averages, persistence rates, and rates of degree attainment. Researchers who examine transition issues also tend to focus on academic achievements. Pascarella et al. (2004) characterized research pertaining to first-generation students into three categories: 1) comparing first-generation students to non-first-generation students with respect to demographics, high school preparation, and college admission characteristics; 2) examining how first-generation students transition from high school to higher education;

and 3) first-generation higher education outcomes (e.g., persistence rates, grade-point averages, career outcomes).

Likewise, Terenzini et al. (1996) categorized research on first-generation students into three categories: 1) pre-college experiences; 2) transition to college; and 3) college academic outcomes. However, it was noted that there is limited research regarding the qualitative experiences of these students as they enter higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

### **Research Limitations**

Much of the research examines first-generation students as a homogeneous unit (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). This is problematic as factors such as race, ethnicity, family of origin, gender, sexuality, family status, etc. will affect how these students experience their surroundings. Furthermore, these variables may magnify or nullify the impacts of being first-generation.

In addition to treating all first-generation students as the same, researchers define 'first-generation' differently. This impedes one's ability to compare results with accuracy and assuredness. For example, Inman and Mayes (1999) define students as first-generation if "no immediate family members could have attended any college, two-year or four-year, with or without having earned a degree" (p. 6). First-generation is also defined as "students whose parents never enrolled in post-secondary education" (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998, p. v). A University of California (2003) report defines first-generation students as "students who are the first-generation in their family to have any experience whatsoever with higher education" (p. 1). This implies that students with

siblings who have attended higher education will not be considered first-generation, even if their parents have no post-secondary experience. However, the most frequent definition for first-generation pertains to students whose parents do not have a post-secondary experience (McConnell, 2000). This definition was used as the criteria for this study.

Another difficulty is that the majority of research has been conducted in the United States. Differences in terminology (e.g., college vs. university) and the presence of two-year, four-year, private and public colleges make comparing American and Canadian data difficult. For the purposes of this literature review, the terms college and university will be interchangeable and will hereinafter be referred to as 'higher education'.

## **Research Findings**

There is a substantial amount of research, albeit mostly from the United States, that examines first-generation students. In particular, the characteristics of first-generation students (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status), pre-college preparation, motivation to attend higher education, academic performance, persistence and degree attainment, advanced degree aspiration and social integration are of particular interest to researchers.

### **Characteristics.**

First-generation students were more likely to be from low-income families (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Chen, 2005; Edmonson, 2003; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Inman

& Mayes, 1999; Van T. Bui, 2002; Lee et al., 2004; Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996); from minority families<sup>5</sup> (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Chen, 2005; Edmonson, 2003; Van T. Bui, 2002; Lee et al., 2004; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996); from single parent homes (Horn & Nunez, 2000), be women (Dennis et al., 2005; Giancola et al., 2008; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996; University of Guelph, 2007); live with financial dependants (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996); and older than average (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Giancola, Munz, & Tares, 2008); Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). As previously stated, these findings are applicable to the United States.

### **Pre-college preparation.**

Research shows that first-generation students are less prepared academically. A cross national study in the United States reports that first-generation students took fewer rigorous courses in high school (Warburton et al., 2001) and were more likely to attend rural and/or public schools (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Rural and public schools in the United States are thought to have less access to resources compared to more affluent private schools. Moreover, first-generation rural students often indicated that they did not start thinking about higher education until late in their high school careers (Schultz, 2004), leaving them at a disadvantage with respect to academic preparedness. Horn and Nunez (2000) also report that even if they were as qualified as their non-first-generation

---

<sup>5</sup> United States statistics; most often Hispanic.

counterparts, first-generation students did not engage in activities to support higher education enrolment: “Even after controlling for measures of achievement, family income, family structure (single verses two parents) and other related characteristics, first-generation students were less likely than their peers to participate in academic programs leading to college enrolment” (Horn & Nunez, 2000, p. 7). Because of a pattern of less preparedness and lower enrolment levels for first-generation students, the reasons for attending and choosing a post-secondary institution are often a topic of research.

### **Motivation to attend higher education.**

When examining motivation, first-generation students indicated that gaining financial stability and providing their children with better opportunities than they were given were reasons why they attended higher education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) also found that providing better opportunities for their children were cited by first-generation students as an important motivator to attend a post-secondary institution. The “desire to gain financial security” was rated as more important than “gaining political influence” while “gaining political influence” was more often cited by their non-first-generation counterparts as a motivator to attend higher education (Nunez, 1998). In addition, “a desire to improve career opportunities” (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005, p. 30), and to “attain a rewarding career” (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 232) were cited as primary motivators.

Gibbons & Shoffner (2004) report that the desire to get a good job motivated first-generation students to attend higher education. Correspondingly, Nomi (2005) found a

greater percentage of first-generation students indicated “to have a steady, secure job” as very important compared to students who had one or more parents with a post-secondary degree (p. 5). First-generation students were also more likely than non-first-generation students to rate factors associated with financial security and “being very well off financially” as very important (Nunez, 1998, p. 9).

Given that first-generation students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, it is not surprising that first-generation students place more importance on “not being able to leave home, needing a college close to home, and needing night courses” (Inman & Mayes, 1999, p. 12) when it came to motivating factors for attending college. Similarly, first-generation students are more likely to report that being able to live close or at home, and being able to work while in school are important factors in their decisions to attend a college (Chen, 2005; Giancola et al., 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students are also more likely to work off campus (Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996; University of California, 2003). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) and Warburton et al. (2005) report that more first-generation students, compared to non-first-generation students, worked full-time and/or attended school part-time. This would also explain why it is important for this group to be able to live at home and attend classes without having to relocate. On the other hand, Hertel (2002) did not find a significant difference in work patterns among first-generation and non-first-generation students. However, his sample population was first year students who were 17 to 19 years of age and did not include older than average students.

In one study of first-generation women, it was reported that this group was motivated to attend higher education because they believed their current limitations were attributed to their working-class backgrounds (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Being considered as ‘first-generation’ was also a motivator. According to Orbe (2004), the majority of participants felt that being first-generation motivated them as they were the first in their family, and often the first in their neighbourhoods, to earn a degree. For those students who were motivated to enrol and able to attend higher education, their ability to academically integrate was also of interest to researchers.

### **Academic performance.**

Research demonstrates that first-generation students struggle to integrate academically (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). These students reported that they experienced high “academic integration”<sup>6</sup> less often than non-first-generation students (23% compared to 33% respectively) and reported having low levels of academic integration more than non-first-generation students (30% compared to 19% respectively) (Nunez, 1998). Moreover, academic integration is strongly correlated with academic achievement (Moises & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Furthermore, first-generation students had lower grade-point averages and were less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree compared to their counterparts “even after taking into account many related factors, including students’ demographic backgrounds, academic preparation, enrolment

---

<sup>6</sup> Academic integration is determined by an average of responses indicating frequency of participation in lectures related to career, number of times they met with their faculty advisor regarding academic plans, how often they participated in study groups and the number of times they spoke with faculty regarding academic matters (Nunez, 1998). Academic engagement was measured with scales indicating library experience, active and collaborative learning, writing experiences, and interactions with faculty (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

characteristics, credit production and performance” (Chen, 2005, p. ix). A University of California report found that this cohort was also less satisfied with their grade-point average (University of California, 2003). In addition, Warburton et al. (2005), Lee et al. (2004), and Chen (2005) report that this cohort had lower grade-point averages, particularly in their first year.

This academic shortfall is pivotal, as first-year academic performance is a strong predictor of degree attainment: “credit completion and performance in the first year bore an important relationship with students’ success in completing their bachelor’s degree programs” (Chen, 2005, p. 47). Inman and Mayes (1999) did not find that first-generation students had lower cumulative averages compared to non-first-generation students. However, this finding compared students who remained enrolled after their first year and did not include those who had discontinued. Brown and Burkhardt (1999) also reported that it may not be first-generation status that impacts academic performance but other variables such as “parent’s value of education, family goals and priorities, social support, and other resources” (p.20) may come into play. However, the majority of research demonstrates that this cohort achieves less academic success than non-first-generation students. “They completed fewer credits, took fewer academic courses, earned lower grades, needed more remedial assistance and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses attempted” (Chen, 2005, p. ix).

This pattern of first-generation students taking fewer course hours was noted by many researchers (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Chen (2005) reported that first-generation students in their first year earned fewer credits per year compared to non-first-generation

students (18 compared with 25 credits, respectively). This pattern continued for subsequent years and resulted from “higher rates of late starts, disrupted enrolment, part-time attendance and leaving college without a degree” (Chen, 2005, p. v). Even though first-generation students report lower academic success, they report that they studied and prepared for class more, spent more hours in paid employment, and spent less time partying and engaging in leisure activities (University of California, 2003). Regardless, research shows that they are less likely to earn a degree compared to students whose parents have experience in higher education.

### **Persistence and degree attainment.**

Students who have parents who do not have experience in post-secondary education are less likely to persist (Chen, 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Even when controlling for variables such as socioeconomic and academic background, parents’ education levels were strongly associated with degree attainment (Nunez, 1998). Lower levels of academic integration, grade-point average, and course completion could explain why first-generation students have higher drop-out rates compared to non-firsts (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) report that after five years of enrolment, 44% of first-generation students attained a degree or certificate while 56% of non-first-generation students achieved those qualifications. Similarly, Lederman (2008) reports that only 11% of low-income first-generation students attained a bachelor’s degree after six years compared to 55% of students from higher income and higher educated families. Similarly, when examining the educational patterns of Grade 12 students over eight years, Chen (2005) reported that of the 43% of students who identified as first-generation when they entered college, only 24% graduated with a

bachelor's degree at the conclusion of the study. This is compared to non-first-generation students who reported a 68% graduation rate.

Lower degree attainment was true even when students had defined goals to earn a bachelor's degree. Choy (2001), in a three-year study, found that first-generation students who stated they had set a goal to earn a bachelor's degree were 45% more likely to leave school without a degree (compared to 29% of non-first-generation students).

Furthermore, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) report that in general, first-generation students did not achieve, in the traditional time span, the academic goals they indicated in the eighth grade. Of the 40.2% of first-generation students who aspired for a bachelor's degree in 1990, only 29.5% attained a degree by 2000. Of the 28.4% of non-firsts who aspired to finish a degree in 1990, 55.9% met their goal by 2000.

As previously stated, first-generation students often take fewer credits per semester, which could explain the lower levels of degree attainment after a fixed time. However, Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) report in their study that almost 45% of first-generation students did not earn a degree and were no longer enrolled, implying that they had left the institution. This is compared to 29% of non-first-generation students who did not attain a degree and were no longer enrolled. Ishitani (2005) also reports that first-generation students dropped out 8.5 times more often than students whose parent or parents had a post-secondary education.

When examining the drop-out rates of first-generation students, Ishitani (2005) found that they were more likely to drop out of higher education in both their first and second years, compared to students who had parents with some and/or a high level of

post-secondary education. This was mirrored by Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) who state: “being a Hispanic first-generation student, a lower-income first-generation student, or a female first-generation student, made first to second year persistence more problematic” (p. 418). However, unlike the majority of the research, Brown and Burkhardt (1999) found no significant difference in educational outcomes (e.g., retention, persistence, GPA) and employment characteristics among first-generation and non-first-generation students. Brown and Burkhardt (1999) suggest that other factors (e.g., family values on education, social support, access to resources), not first-generation status, may explain the previous findings. However, their study consisted of approximately 650 students in their first year at an urban two-year college in Southern California. Ishanti (2005), Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), and Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) used longitudinal studies that included students from all post-secondary institutions including four-year colleges.

### **Advanced degree attainment.**

In addition to less persistent and degree attainment, this cohort of students is less likely to aspire to earn advanced degrees. According to Hahs-Vaughn (2004) and Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), first-generation students had fewer aspirations for post-secondary education and were less likely to enrol in graduate school. Pascarella et al. (2004) also report that first-generation students had lower educational degree plans in both their first and second year of higher education. Hahs-Vaughn (2004) further report that these lower levels of degree aspirations continued through to their fourth year. Conversely, the University of California (2003) found that there was no difference in

post-baccalaureate degree aspiration between first-generation students and students whose parents had experience in higher education. The University of California (2003) used a random sample of more than 6600 undergraduate students from one university. Hahs-Vaughn (2004), Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), Pascarella et al. (2004) used longitudinal studies from students from a variety of post-secondary institutions. For example, Pascarella et al. (2004) had a sample size of over 3300 students from 18 different institutions. Therefore, the University of California (2003) may have a specific demographic of students and/or support programs in place that minimize any discernable difference among first-generation and non-first-generation students regarding advanced degree aspirations.

### **Social integration.**

Not only does this demographic struggle academically, but also socially. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) and Pike and Kuh (2005) report that first-generation students showed less social integration than their counterparts<sup>7</sup>. For many, social integration is far more difficult: “surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade-point average” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 3). Schultz (2004), who interviewed first-generation rural students, reported his most significant finding was that participants felt very different than other students because they were first-generation, from an agricultural background, and from a small rural area. As one participant added, “it’s just being a long way from any cows” (p. 50).

When measuring cultural involvement, Grayson (2007) found that students who

---

<sup>7</sup> Social integration is based on responses regarding how often students went out with friends, spoke with faculty outside of class, participated in school clubs, and attended student support services (Nunez, 1998).

had at least one parent with a post-secondary education scored significantly higher for cultural involvement. This is further compounded as first-generation students do not usually form a supportive network of peers and report “knowing less about their social environment at the university than did the other students” (Van T. Bui, 2002, p. 6).

Unlike the majority of researchers, Van T. Bui (2002) found no difference among first-generation students and non-first-generation students comparing feeling comfortable in their own decision-making about school, knowledge of academic programs before entering university and the feeling of acceptance at university. The University of California (2003) also reported the first-generation students were just as likely to say they felt that they belonged in higher education as their non-first-generation counterparts. Both studies were conducted at the University of California. Van T. Bui’s (2002) participants were recruited from the University of California’s program ‘Leading to Undergraduate Success’. It appears that this program could impact on first-generation student’s feelings of acceptance and belonging.

### **Research Theories**

Based on the research findings, there are some common theories that are used to explain why first-generation students appear to have more difficulties in higher education compared to non-first-generation students. An unwelcoming environment for first-generation students, lack of college knowledge/cultural capital, inability to socially integrate, lack of academic preparedness, low levels of engagement, lack of parental support, identity struggles, race struggles, and gender struggles were hypothesized as some reasons why first-generation students do not succeed in higher education.

### **Environment of higher education.**

For some, the post-secondary environment is seen as a bastion of elitism that represents affluence, privilege, and wealth. Because of the dramatic differences between the culture of academia and the culture of their backgrounds, first-generation students may often feel they do not have the necessary abilities to attend school and that they are not “college material” (Engle et al., 2006, p. 21). This could also explain why Pike and Kuh (2005) found that compared to students who had parents with post-secondary experience, first-generation students reported “less favourable perceptions of the college environment” (p. 287).

Those feelings of not fitting in or feeling different will be heightened for those individuals who do not originate from high socio-economic backgrounds. Professor Kenneth Oldfield came from a first-generation, working-class family and speaks to the “profound effects of social-class bias” and how social class impacts the academic culture (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2). For example, he describes not knowing the difference between a PhD and a MD. When his professors were referred to as ‘doctor’ he could not understand why medical doctors were hired to teach his classes (Oldfield, 2007). For people from less privileged backgrounds like Oldfield, higher education may appear unwelcoming and inaccessible. If and when students who are less privileged are able to access higher education, the transition is often difficult. They are entering the unknown:

Not only that they must leave home for an unfamiliar academic setting, but that they also must enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced. They are faced with leaving a certain world in which they fit for an uncertain world where they already know they do not fit in. (Thayer, 2000, p. 5)

In theory, first-generation students are entering an environment that is very different from what they have known and they must live and work without any knowledge of the rules of engagement. They experience culture shock (Inman & Mayes, 1999) and will often have difficulty successfully navigating the environment. Unfortunately for this student cohort, their ability to successfully navigate their academic environments will affect their ability to succeed (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005).

### **College knowledge/cultural capital.**

The terms ‘college knowledge’ and/or ‘cultural capital’ are often used by researchers to explain why first-generation students do not attend, succeed, or persist in post-secondary institutions (Engle et al., 2006; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lee et al., 2004; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Nunez, 1998; O’Connor, 2002; Oldfield, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Vargas, 2004). Made famous by Bourdieu (1930-2002), cultural capital is a term used to describe the prescribed language and behaviours that are associated with the privileged class. It is suggested that higher education reproduces and reinforces divisions in class by systemically excluding individuals that do not possess this capital (e.g., working class and rural peoples) (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Believed to be passed on by family members, in the context of first generation students, cultural capital is the “knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2). Basically, first-generation students are unaware how to do things or what the expectations are in a post-secondary environment (Thayer,

2000; Thomas, 2002). They are at a disadvantage compared to students who had parents who were able to transmit this knowledge and capital to their children. Furthermore, first generation students must assimilate into a culture and learn a professional language much different than their own.

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) report that the income of the family and their socioeconomic status is the predominate factor associated with cultural capital. As previously stated, first-generation students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; therefore, they often lack this valuable resource. The lack of this type of knowledge may prevent students from even applying to higher education as they often have “parents with less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of a post-secondary education” (Lee et al., 2004, p. 2). If they do apply, they have to do so without the benefit of parental experience (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

Even when encouraged by their parents to attend higher education, first-generation students’ parents do not have the knowledge or the experience to help their children succeed. For example, Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) report that first-generation students lack the college knowledge and receive few resources from their families to help them to prepare for higher education and develop and achieve their career goals. Inman and Mayers (1999) found that first-generation students report feeling less prepared for higher education compared to non-first-generation students. This finding was also supported by O’Connor (2002) who interviewed first-generation women and found that participants’ immediate families were not able to help them navigate the academic and financial application processes. According to Vargas (2004), first-

generation students are at a disadvantage with their limited college knowledge: “They often do not understand the steps necessary to prepare for higher education. These steps include knowing about how to finance a college education, to complete basic admissions procedures, and to make connections between career goals and educational requirements” (p. 7).

High school graduates who are first-generation students also report having lower academic expectations, being less prepared for academics, and receiving less parental support/assistance with respect to the application process (Choy, 2001). This was echoed by all of the participants in Byrd and Macdonald’s (2005) study. They indicated that first-generation students lacked sufficient guidance and support from family or high school counselors to help prepare for the higher education system. This theory attributes first-generation students’ lack of success to the limited experiences their families have of applying for, paying for, and navigating through higher education. Without the assistance of parental experience, applying for higher education is a daunting task (Gibson, 2004). Even when these students overcome these gaps in knowledge, the research shows that first-generation students are often at a disadvantage socially.

### **Lack of social integration.**

Not only do they have less knowledge about the admissions process and financial requirements, first-generation students are also unaware of the appropriate social choices they should make while at school (Pascarella et al., 2004). They regularly have difficulty making the transition from school or work to higher education and report significantly less social adjustment (Hertel, 2002). This transition is often more difficult as “first-

generation college students may be less well-prepared psychologically for college” (Inman & Mayes, 1999, p. 3). During transition, students move from the familiar to the unknown. For those from backgrounds that are different than the environment of higher education, this transition is often difficult. They may “encounter conflict between the cultures of their families/friends and their new college cultures. How first-generation students negotiate these conflicts may influence their ultimate success” (Nunez, 1998, p. 2). Negotiating these conflicts often requires social networking.

Essentially, first-generation students are “unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives” (Schultz, 2004, p. 48). This type of knowledge is defined as social capital: “a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). It is hypothesized that students whose parents have a post-secondary experience have more social capital than non-first-generation students. An additional challenge is that students can lose connections back home and are unable to develop new connections at school, which further affects their social capital.

For example, Saunders and Serna (2004) found that first-generation Latino students handled the transition from high school to higher education in one of three ways: They created new networks while maintaining connections with their old networks; they relied heavily on old networks and did not work to develop new relationships; or they simply did not maintain old networks or develop new networks. Students who were able

to develop new support networks and remain connected to their past networks persisted in higher education. Unfortunately, many first-generation students do not know how to develop new social networks. Even when students had the desire to develop new social networks, they were unable to because they often lived and worked off campus. Because they were not in close proximity of other students outside the classroom, they were unable to interact with their peers to develop new relationships. Bergerson (2007) conducted a qualitative study with one Latino woman who lived and learned in a college where 9% of the students were visible minorities. Bergerson (2007) reported that even though the student wanted to develop new relationships, she was unable because she had to work part-time to afford higher education.

Without college knowledge and social capital, first-generation students do not understand the importance of being engaged or even how to go about getting engaged (Pike & Kuh, 2005). They are more likely to have low academic and social integration and are less involved in activities that promote social and academic integration compared to students who have a parent or parents with a post-secondary education (Nunez, 1998). Because “both perceptions of college environment and integration were directly related to gains in learning and intellectual development” (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 285), their lack of social integration negatively affects their academic success.

Yazedijian, Toews, Sevin, and Purswell (2008) asked first-generation students how they defined success. The responses revealed three themes: getting “good” grades; being socially interactive; and having the ability to navigate the environment of higher education. This could be problematic for first-generation students who may not have the

‘college knowledge’ or ‘social capital’ to successfully navigate and socially integrate into college which may result in their feeling alienated and isolated. However, Yazedijian et al. (2008) found that the students were considered academically successful in their study when they integrated both their social and academic lives (e.g., formed study groups, took courses with friends as well as shared course materials). On the other hand, even if they can develop new relationships, first-generation students can become disconnected with their families and friends from their hometowns. London (1989) found that several participants did not discuss their experiences with their family or friends from home because they felt they would not understand what life was now like for them. Likewise, they did not feel comfortable discussing such issues with the more affluent students at their school: “already feeling out of place, and unsure of themselves, they did not want to call further attention to themselves as somehow ‘different’” (London, 1989, p. 146).

In general, first-generation students do not have a clear sense of community with other students from their college or university (Orbe, 2004). As previously stated, first-generation students may come from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender). This level of diversity within the group may prevent these students from developing supportive relationships which further compounds their isolation. In addition to poor academic performance, feeling alienated might explain why this cohort has a higher drop-out rate than non-first-generation students. Wentworth and Peterson (2001) report that “being responsive to feelings of alienation is key for helping [first-generation] students” (p. 20).

### **Lack of academic preparedness.**

Many first-generation students say that it is much harder to stay in higher education than it is to get into higher education and cite the lack of adequate academic preparation as a cause (Engle et al., 2006). It has been hypothesized that first-generation students fail to academically integrate and academically succeed because they are unprepared for the academic rigors of a post-secondary institution. Reid and Moore III (2008) report that the majority of the participants in their study felt unprepared for post-secondary education, particularly when it came to course work requirements and the study/time-management skills needed to prepare them for campus life. First-generation students also reported feeling less prepared and fearing failure more than students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Van T. Bui, 2002).

Hertel (2002) found that intellectual pursuits have a higher value for first-generation students with respect to adjustment in higher education compared to non-first-generation students. This may be because they have had less academic preparation in secondary school. If successfully academically prepared and integrated, first-generation students still enrolled after year one had the same grade-point averages as students whose parents had a post-secondary experience (Inman & Mayes, 1999). As such, academic and social integration is pivotal for this cohort, even more so than for their non-first-generation counterparts.

### **Engagement.**

There is a direct relationship between engagement levels and persistence. Lower levels of extracurricular engagement (both academic and non-academic) for first-

generation students has been theorized as a reason why this cohort has more difficulty integrating into campus life. In general, the research shows that certain types of activities (classroom, sports, social involvement, and hours on campus) (Grayson, 1997) benefit first-generation students' grade-point averages, especially in the first year. Even so, first-generation students are less likely to participate in these activities: "first-generation students' derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction than other students *even though they were significantly less likely to be engaged in these activities during college*" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 278).

Pascarella et al. (2004) also report that first-generation students who participated in extracurricular activities experienced more positive benefits compared to non-first-generation students such as improved critical thinking and writing skills. In addition, non-academic involvement (e.g., athletics, paid/volunteer work) had a greater negative effect on first-generation students. But involvement in academic activities (e.g., hours of studying, in class participation) had a strong positive effect on first-generation students compared to others.

It is theorized that extracurricular activities that enhanced academics have a greater impact on first-generation students because these experiences and levels of engagement may help them develop the cultural capital that they did not receive from their parents (Pascarella et al., 2004). Extracurricular involvement was also cited as having a strong influence on the professional development and emerging professional identity of first-generation students. It is believed that extracurricular activities help them develop leadership skills and relationships with peers (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). However, not all activities were found to be beneficial.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that participating often in school clubs was not positively related to persistence for first-generation students. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) say this may not necessarily mean that first-generation students do not benefit from club activities, “it could mean that institutions might not have arranged student activities in ways that contribute to and benefit FGS [first-generation students] and thereby promote their persistence” (p. 420). This could explain why Grayson (2007) found that club involvement (not including athletic activities) contributed to lower grade-point averages.

In addition, Pascarella et al. (2004) found that volunteer work, intercollegiate participation, and employment had a negative effect on first-generation students while classroom and academic activities had a positive effect. Grayson (2007) also found that classroom involvement and academic engagement were positively correlated with grade-point averages and persistence. According to Lohfink & Paulsen (2005) first-generation students were more likely to persist if they were “engaged in academic activities, especially those involving interactions with faculty” (p. 422). This was particularly true for activities that required students to participate in class discussions, develop collaborative learning partnerships, and interact with faculty (Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

### **Lack of parental support.**

As previously mentioned, even when other variables are controlled, parents’ level of education is directly related to their children’s post-secondary enrolment and achievement. Students who had at least one parent with a post-secondary education are more likely to enrol in higher education, even when other factors were taken into account (Choy, 2001). Therefore, limited parental support was hypothesized to explain why first-

generation students do not have the same academic success as students whose parents have a higher education.

Children are influenced by their parents' attitudes (or lack of) about higher education (Schultz, 2004). Parents who did not have post-secondary experience were less likely to participate in their children's high school course selection activities. In one study, 34% of parents without post-secondary experience participated in their children's high-school course selection compared to 48% of parents who had experience in higher education (Horn & Nunez, 2000). This is significant because high school curriculum is directly related to enrolment in higher education. Students who participated in advanced math programs in high school nearly doubled their chances of getting accepted to a four-year college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). It could be hypothesized that parents with lower levels of education may not encourage or advocate for their children to take an advanced syllabus in secondary school. Parents may also defer to school officials believing that they are the 'experts' and the most knowledgeable about their children's education plans.

Parental support to attend higher education was also examined for first-generation students who did enrol in college or university. Speirs Neumeister & Rinker (2006) report varying degrees of support from parents. Some parents encouraged post-secondary education, others did not actively engage in discussions about higher education, and some even discouraged educational goals. This concerned some researchers as "too many students said that a key adult – parent or family member, a teacher, a counselor, or a coach – actually discouraged them from getting involved in a pre-college program and/or from going to college" (Engle et al., 2006, p. 36). Being discouraged from post-secondary education was especially prominent for students from rural/agricultural

backgrounds. Schultz (2004) reported that many of the participants experienced resistance from their fathers about leaving the farm and/or their parents were reluctant to complete financial aid forms. Even when parents encouraged their children's academic pursuits, they were often unable to, or did not have the desire to be involved in the process.

Parental involvement has been shown to have a positive effect on students' likelihood of matriculating to higher education (Ishitani, 2005). Therefore, it is believed that first-generation students are at a disadvantage because their parents are less likely to be involved in the education process, mostly because they lack the academic experience and/or financial resources. For example, in a study of black female first-generation students, one participant spoke of a strong push in her family for literacy. However, her family was unable to support their daughter because of a lack of finances. She attributed these values to more affluent people: "my family, my mother and dad had middle-class and upper-class values. But didn't have the money to back it up" (O'Connor, 2002, p. 868).

First-generation students also expressed that their parents had less influence on their educational decisions (Nomi, 2005). This could explain why Horn and Nunez (2002) report that first-generation students are more likely to consult people other than their parents (e.g., close relatives, friends etc.) about their education plans. Similarly, Reid and Moore III (2008) say that all of their study participants discussed the importance of the relationships they had with people other than their parents who helped prepare them for higher education (e.g., high school teachers, counselors, administrators,

coaches). By contrast, parents with post-secondary educations are more likely to be involved in their children's academic lives (Hoover, 2008).

Parental involvement is a benefit to students. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 'helicopter parents' (parents who advocate and even intervene on their children's behalf) help students succeed in higher education. NSSE reports that students who indicate that their parents were actively involved and represented them (38% of freshman and 28% of seniors) were rated higher for being more active and satisfied with their post-secondary experience (Lipka, 2007). Correspondingly, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found a positive relationship between educational goals and parental involvement.

While research points to parent disengagement on the one hand, first-generation students may also face the exact opposite – extraordinary pressure from their parents to succeed (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Some students did not view their achievements as a sole accomplishment. Rather, they said it was a collaborative effort that involved the hopes and dreams of their families, both present and past generations (Engle et al., 2006). This is further compounded because their family members are often unable to understand the pressures they experience at school (Carachure, 2002).

In addition to feeling family pressure, some students report feeling guilty for what they perceive as taking and not giving back to the family financially, especially if they were taking non-vocational courses. One interviewee commented "but you feel guilty because you're not home working and donating to the family" (CNN, 2008). Another

student commented that he felt guilty when he travelled home and did homework instead of visiting with family members (Challenges of a first-generation student, 2003).

Some students report being venerated by family and friends and treated as ‘special’ when they returned home for weekends and holidays (Orbe, 2004). Others said they experienced a ‘backlash’ believing that some family members felt they were acting ‘better than’ them because they were in higher education (Orbe, 2004). The presence of family conflicts was pronounced enough that Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) recommend that counseling services be included in transition programming for first-generation students to help them to cope with the changing dynamics of their family relationships.

### **Struggles with identity.**

Many first-generation students believe that they have beaten the odds and, unlike the majority of their peers back home, are able to get a post-secondary education (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). As such, they develop new identities that distinguish them from their family and friends. They are exposed to new values and affirmations in higher education that can conflict with the values and affirmations they were exposed to growing up. This identity conflict between their previous identities at home and their new identities at school is another theory used to explain why first-generation students often have significant struggles in post-secondary institutions.

Participants report that the first semester was a time of renegotiating their identities (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001) because higher education provided the “freedom

to develop separate interests and values from their parents and hometown communities” (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006, p. 322). Essentially, they could ‘break away’ from their past and start anew (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). As their identities and interests change, they have less in common with their families (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Even so, it was reported that participants wanted to explore their identities, “even when this meant developing different values from friends, family, and community” (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006, p. 329). This identity transformation can be uncomfortable, especially if disapproved by their families (Hsiao, 1992). In addition to feeling estranged from their families and friends, this cohort of students frequently has difficulty identifying with other first-generation students.

Many students were not aware of the label ‘first-generation student’ and did not know that the term existed in the context of higher education. Furthermore, they did not know that there is research and resources dedicated to the topic (Orbe, 2004). It is important to note however, that students of colour, non-traditional female students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds described first-generation status as part of their identity. Comparatively, traditional aged, Caucasian males did not consider first-generation status as part of their identity to the same degree (Orbe, 2004). Students who are aware of the label, often do not disclose the information because they felt there was a stigma attached to the term and they were embarrassed (Orbe, 2004) or they didn’t want to bring further attention to themselves as ‘different’ (London, 1989).

### **Struggles with race.**

Identity was also an important factor for students who are members of visible minorities. Given that first-generation students are more likely to be members of visible minorities, a substantial amount of research has focused on race and what factor it has in the academic success of first-generation students. In the United States, a number of researchers studied the experiences of Latino first-generation students. For example, Saunders and Serna (2004) noted that the first-generation Latino students that they studied “owned their particular familial experiences, history and immigrant status” and how those “characteristics in terms of background, abilities, and opportunities affected the choices made after high school” (p. 152). Saunders and Serna (2004) also report that the Latino students who were successful in academia were able to develop support networks because they found space where they did not have to “self-protect and guard one’s self-esteem” (p. 159). In addition, Reid and Moore III (2008) suggest that the urban college students in their study (all African-American and immigrant students) came from secondary-school systems that may not have fostered their academic potential.

Moreover, O’Connor (2002), who did an historical analysis of the experiences of first-generation black women recommended that in order to examine how “White skin privilege might be implicated in the process of educational resistance” (p. 899), researchers must perform comparative studies on people of various skin colours and socioeconomic backgrounds. Another qualitative study by Gonzalez (2001) examined the experiences of two Chicano male first-generation students in a predominately Caucasian university. Gonzalez’s (2001) reported: “the primary finding of this study

was the forms of marginalization and alienation that these students experienced” (p. 548). He also found that these students (and himself) resisted being marginalized and alienated by becoming ‘cultural workers’: “I am not simply a cultural being from a minority culture, but a cultural worker – working to transform my cultural environment” (p. 560). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) also recommend that further research be conducted examining the interactions between race and gender and their impact on academic success. As previously noted, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that Hispanic, female and low-income first-generation students were less likely to persist in their first- and second-year of higher education.

### **Struggles with gender.**

The role of gender as a social construct was also noted by researchers. For example, all of the women in one study “resisted traditional gender role expectations common to their families and communities, and they tended to prioritize their career over plans for future family” (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006, p. 324). It was also noted that non-traditional aged female students deliberately avoided activities that focused on their academic lives (e.g., studying, reading books, discussing academic topics) when they were around their families (Orbe, 2004). As previously stated, this is significant because first-generation students are more likely to be female.

Similarly, Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) report that not only are first-generation students more likely to be female (57% compared to 51% for non-first-generation students), but they are more likely to be older (13% of first-generation students are over 30 versus 3% of non-first-generation students). Inman and Mayes

(1999) theorize that the first-generation students in their study were more likely to be women with families who did not enter higher education immediately after graduating from high-school. As such, first-generation female students with dependants may have different needs than their male counterparts.

When addressing the unique needs of high-ability first-generation women, Speirs Neumeister & Rinker (2006) note that “the variables of class background and gender, however, intersect with the culture of higher education to raise additional issues that may work against the achievement of these young women” (p. 305). Being a woman and first-generation may also heighten feelings of alienation. Wentworth and Peterson (2001) hypothesize that women from working-class backgrounds might be at risk of “having to negotiate feelings of alienation at the college, as well as feelings of potential disconnection from their family and cultural backgrounds” (p. 10). As previously noted, Lohhink and Paulsen (2005) recommend that more investigation is needed with respect to why first-generation females, even though present in greater numbers than male first-generation students, are more likely to drop out of school. Ishitani (2005) reports that compared to first-generation male students, first-generation female students are 57% more likely to leave higher education in their third year and 61% more likely to leave in their fourth year. Barriers related to gender could also be a factor when developing support programs for female adult first-generation students (Giancola et al., 2008).

Even though the vast majority of studies report that first-generation students are more likely to be women, two studies did not reach this conclusion. Brown and Burkhardt (1999) found no discernable difference with respect to gender and first-

generation status. This study included 653 students in a Southern California two-year college. This population was diverse with 33% Asian/Pacific Islander, 25% Hispanic, 18% White, 7% African American, 4% Filipino, 1% American Indian/Eskimo, 7% other, and 5% unknown. Different cultural values with respect to gender and education might play a role in the number of first-generation women in this study. In addition, Pike and Kuh (2005) report that first-generation students are more likely to be male and members of a minority group. Pike and Kuh (2005) used stratified (strata from six dominate Carnegie 2000 classifications for 4-year colleges and universities) random sampling of 3,000 undergraduate students from across the U.S. who completed the *College Student Experience Questionnaire*. The participant sample appeared to be traditional age; 95% were under 20 years of age. As well, 93% were enrolled full-time and 98% paid for less than half of their college expenses themselves (Pike and Kuh, 2005). As first-generation students who are female are often older than average and attend school part-time, one could conclude that the institutions in this study do not attract members from this cohort.

In addition, not all research shows that gender plays a role in academic success. McCarron & Inkelas (2006) report that first-generation males and females did not differ in their attainment of degrees; however, females were slightly more successful in attaining degrees above the graduate level. Further study is needed to determine if there are other variables that account for the contrasting results.

## **Research Recommendations**

### **Support services.**

With increased access there is increased responsibility on the part of the education system to provide support to meet the needs of a diverse population. “Access to higher education must be understood to mean not only admission to some post-secondary institution, but also ‘access’ to the full range of college experiences and to the personal, social, and economic benefits to which those experiences and degree completion lead” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 281).

As mentioned, first-generation students are at a disadvantage when it comes to their ability to succeed in higher education, especially in their first year. As one participant stated, the first semester “makes or breaks you” (Engle et al., 2006, p. 30). Unfortunately, McCarron & Inkelas (2006) suggest that first-generation students may not be getting the support they need in higher education. Therefore, researchers recommend that post-secondary institutions develop strategic, targeted, and intentional support systems especially around transition issues (Ayala & Striplen, 2008; Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2007; Engle et al., 2006; Filkins & Doyle, 2000; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Hsiao, 1992; Van T. Bui, 2002; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Oldfield, 2007; Orbe, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Schultz, 2004; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2002).

Post-secondary support systems greatly influence a student’s success, especially for the disadvantaged student: “the creation of a campus environment that supports

optimal student learning and development can serve to mitigate some of the pre-college risk factors that they bring to college” (Filkins & Doyle, 2002, p. 15). Hahs-Vaughn (2004) found that in the first year, college experiences were a greater predictor of educational outcomes than pre-college experiences. Additionally, non-first-generation students’ college outcomes were more influenced by pre-college experiences compared to first generation students (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). This is significant because it demonstrates the large impact that higher education can have on the learning abilities of first generation students. It is also clear that there is a need for “campus and public policies designed to increase first-generation students’ involvement in the academic and non-academic systems of the institutions they attend” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 279). However, many institutions may not be doing enough to support this ‘at risk’ group.

Recall, there is a lack of ‘college knowledge’ and experience passed to first-generation students by their families. Therefore, this cohort needs deliberate support from their post-secondary institutions:

Because first-generation students are less able to rely on family for support in college, there is a higher reliance on support from faculty, advisors, and peers while in college. The need for mentoring, academic, and social support within the college environment becomes a necessity for success of first-generation students. (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004, p. 497)

As such, making the environment more welcoming, developing first-generation communities, mentoring, intentional faculty-student interactions, summer bridge programs, and increased scholarship and bursary programs have been suggested as some ways higher education can minimize the barriers first-generation students encounter.

First, changing the campus environment to be more inclusive of all backgrounds and not a reflection of the socio-economically advantaged will help students better integrate socially: “the ultimate goal should be reforming the campus culture so that it better reflects the lives of all who go there, irrespective of their socioeconomic background” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 3). Oldfield, (2007) goes on to recommend that higher education strive to hire socio-economically diverse faculty.

The environment must also be inclusive of diversity including ethnicity, race, and gender. As previously mentioned, first-generation students are more likely to be from minority groups and be female, so it is important that academic environments are free of racism and/or sexism. One study notes that this cohort reported experiencing higher rates of discrimination compared to non-first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Second, given that decreased social integration and increased social isolation is of particular concern for this cohort, many researchers recommend that first-generation students have the opportunity to live and study in clusters with other first-generation students. This involves first-generation students rooming together in the same residence areas and attending the same classes with other first-generation students. This peer-to-peer contact will increase comfort levels (Reid & Moore III, 2008). This is significant as Dennis et al. (2005) report that peer support, not familial support, is a stronger predictor of college grades and adjustment for ethnic minority first-generation students. Even though parents may provide emotional support, they are unable to provide the “vital instrumental support” that students need (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 233). As such, this cohort needs to develop contacts with other first-generation students, especially as roommates and mentors (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). First-generation students

will look to other first-generation students for support. One interviewee noted that first-generation students supported one another and looked out for each other (Rolph, 2008).

Third, faculty relationships play an important role in first-generation student success. Increased faculty-student interactions resulted in more pronounced gains in personal and social development for first-generation and low-income students: “engagement in such educational practices (i.e., involvement in active/collaborative learning activities and interacting with faculty) was positively related to their cognitive and affective growth during college” (Filkins & Doyle, 2002, p. 13). Unfortunately, first-generation students perceive faculty to be “less concerned with student development and teaching” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 17). Therefore, Giancola et al. (2008) recommend that faculty learn the unique needs and backgrounds of this demographic, especially in cases where their students are older than the average (e.g., over age 25). Unfortunately, more often than not, discussions around support programs for first-generation students do not include faculty and “the role that faculty members can play in facilitating a cultural environment that enhances the success of FGS [first-generation students]” (Orbe, 2004, p. 12). Therefore, intentional and deliberate pairing of faculty members who are first-generation students with students from similar backgrounds will be of substantial benefit. First-generation students can develop a sense of community with faculty and students from similar backgrounds and garner that much needed peer-support.

An additional valuable service for first-generation students is pre-college and/or bridge programming (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2007). Schultz (2004) recommends an extended orientation and a deliberate focus on this demographic, as well

as pre-first semester summer bridge programs. Moreover, Gibbons & Shoffner (2004) report that higher education preparation while still enrolled in high school is very beneficial to first-generation students. In addition to summer bridge programs, Ayala and Striplen (2008) recommend an early intervention strategy that uses a career introduction model to help first-generation students increase their often lacking occupational knowledge, get them connected to a resource centre, and help them to become self-effecting and involved in their career development.

Finally, scholarship programs are recommended. As previously mentioned, this cohort is more likely to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to non-first-generation students. However, many first-generation students are not aware of the scholarship programs available to them: “financial concerns including lack of awareness of financial aid availability was an area in which participants felt particularly underprepared” (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005, p. 32).

It is important to note that regardless of the type of support needed, it must be accessible and meet the availability needs of this cohort. As first-generation students are more likely to be older than average, work full-or part- time, and have children, it is also imperative that support programs are accessible, especially for non-traditional aged students with families (Pike & Kuh, 2005). That means that activities and services should be offered during the evenings and weekends and should include partners and children. Currently, many of the programs are not applicable to adult students (Giancola, 2008).

According to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) first-generation students are also less likely to live on campus compared to the non-first-generation students, 16% versus 40% respectively. As Pike & Kuh (2005) found, living on campus had a positive correlation to learning and intellectual development. Therefore, living off campus could further disadvantage first-generation students. This also has serious implications as many transition programs and services are targeted to residential students.

### **Skills development.**

Because this cohort reports a lack of preparation both academically and socially for higher education, they need to develop skills that help them to succeed. Researchers have noted the particular skills that first-generation students are more likely to lack, compared to their non-first-generation counterparts. The skills that were noted as critical for this demographic were time-management, self-motivation, goal setting, and learner self-advocacy. Furthermore, participants believed that these skills were even more important than academic skills (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005). According to Inman and Mayes (1999) first-generation students are also more concerned with building their self-confidence compared to students from higher-educated families.

First-generation students often say their lack of study skills and time-management skills impeded their ability to succeed in higher education (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005; Reid & Moore III, 2008). The University of California report (2003) also noted that skill development in writing, science, and math are very important. In addition, reading and writing skills were most often referenced by first-generation students as being the most

important academic skills; the same skills for which they were academically unprepared (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005).

The need for the aforementioned skills was evident in a handbook designed by, and for, first-generation students. Cushman (2006), a former first-generation student herself, interviewed several first-generation students from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, and gender) and developed a handbook for first-generation students pursuing higher education. In it she suggests that students keep a list of names and contact information for teachers, mentors, and friends who ‘stand behind them’ when they need help. This allowed them to keep in contact with people from their hometowns. She also recommends that first-generation students develop a concrete list of contact numbers for support services offered by the institution that they attend. She emphasizes the need to build networks while at school and encourages students to make connections with faculty and administrators because they can help support first-generation students in their current academic pursuits and their future careers.

Time-management, developing critical skills (e.g., reading, writing), personal identity, and connecting back home were important themes cited by Cushman (2006). This reinforces current research that recounts that found first-generation students lack critical skills, struggle with their identity, and have strained relationships with family and friends. She ends with the chapter *Pass it Forward*, which encourages this group of students to support and give back to other first-generation students (Cushman, 2006). Basically, she provides a step-by-step handbook to help first-generation students develop their ‘college knowledge’, build a network of support, and help others to succeed.

On a positive note, first-generation students have identified ways to successfully navigate post-secondary institutions. They recognize that their first-generation status has provided them with skills that can help them in higher education. Helping students to recognize these skills and use them to their advantage is another way of supporting first-generation students. For example, independence and strong work ethic are skills that first-generation students associate with their backgrounds. Students report that these skills helped them to achieve their professional focus (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Many first-generation students also report that they supported themselves financially. That, coupled with seeing their parents work several jobs, helped them develop a strong work ethic, which they applied to their academics: “non-traditional students may be more prepared than they think for the demands of college and, more over, that their life experiences may contribute to college readiness” (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005, p. 31).

First-generation non-traditional students (considered older than the average student) identified the skills that they possess that help them to succeed in higher education: a strong self-concept; the ability to advocate for themselves; focus on goals; and good time-management skills (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005). In particular, self-advocacy was often cited as a benefit for this demographic: “Self-advocacy emerged in this study a particularly important skill for first-generation students who might not have background knowledge of the college system to understand resources such as advising, financial aid, and student-professor relationships (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005, p. 33). It was also noted that, because of their age, older than average first-generation students felt more comfortable talking to faculty as peers and navigating the post-secondary

system (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005). Considering that first-generation students are likely to be older than average (e.g., over 25), these skills are beneficial. However, these attributes are not likely to apply to traditional aged first-generation students.

## **Summary**

Based on the results of the reviewed research, first-generation students are more likely to struggle financially, academically, and socially in higher education compared to students who have a parent or parents with post-secondary experience. The dominant theory is that first-generation students are unable to adapt to a culture that is extremely dissimilar from the one in which they were raised and their parents are unable to help them with this transition. By making a concerted effort to find out about the experiences of this cohort, institutions can continue to develop and refine their support programs to meet the needs of first-generation students. If and when post-secondary institutions develop the appropriate support programs, first-generation students should be able to achieve academic success and attain a degree in a fashion that is similar to their counterparts.

Based on the literature, first-generation students with the same degrees as non-first-generation students appear to be on-par with respect to salaries and employment characteristics (Nunez, 1998). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) also report that those students with similar degrees had the same employment patterns and salaries, regardless of whether they were first-generation students. As a result, research that helps this cohort succeed in higher education will have far-reaching effects for future generations.

### Chapter III: Methodology

As mentioned, there is limited research in Canada regarding the experiences of first-generation students. As such, first and foremost, this was an exploratory and qualitative study with the goal of learning about this relatively new phenomenon. Exploratory research is the most advantageous “where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 193). The goal of this study is to provide a qualitative examination of the lived experience of this specialized cohort and accurately capture and describe the phenomena in order to develop an understanding and description of what it is like to be a first-generation female student in her first year of higher education. To achieve this goal, a phenomenological methodology was utilized. With roots in philosophy and applications in psychology, phenomenology strives to learn about and accurately describe without prejudice how a phenomenon is experienced by a particular subject. In essence, phenomenology:

...shifts the point of sight of its investigation first into thinking subject and focuses from this place on the objects within the object world of this thinking subject; it then takes hold of the thoughts and opinions which the thinking subject harbours about the object and, in so doing, refrains from taking any stand with regard to these opinions, while taking the objects and the object worlds merely as the counterparts (seen thus or so by the subject) of his thinking consciousness, without allowing itself any [claims to] transcendent knowledge of these objects. (Stanage, 1987, p. 44)

To meet the requirements of a phenomenological methodology, I adopted the Human Scientific Phenomenological Method proposed by Giorgi (1997). I approached this research by adopting the first three steps of Giorgi's (1997) method: 1) gather verbal data; 2) examine the verbal data; and 3) separate the data into parts. Although this

methodology may reduce generalizability, it allowed for a rich, in-depth, contextual and holistic analysis of the first-generation female student experience. It is also a very effective tool with regards to capacity development in adult education. Phenomenology as an “approach to adult education opens up new directions for research and uncovers new layers of clarity in perceptions, conceptions, actions, and practices” (Stanage, 1987, p. 45).

### **Interview Schedule Development**

A standardized open-ended interview style was combined with an informal conversational interview style. This marriage of styles allowed me to be flexible and to probe areas that the participant felt relevant to their experiences, while also providing a systematic framework for questions that afforded the opportunity for comparable data collection (Patton, 2002, p. 349). Furthermore, by combining the two styles, it was possible to capitalize on the strengths of each style while minimizing their limitations. As such, the inability to be flexible with the standardized questions was compensated by the contextual fluidness afforded by the informal style. As well, the disjointedness and diversity created by having dramatically different questions posed to each participant with the conversational style was compensated by the standard open-ended questions posed to all 10 participants.

To employ the standardized open-ended style, predetermined questions were decided upon before the interview (see *Appendix A*). I wanted to keep the questions broad enough to not be presumptive, yet I still hoped to provide some structure to the interview. They were posed to each participant during the first interview regardless of

the direction the interview took with respect to the informal conversational style. However, the questions were not always administered in the same order. The questions were broad and only provided a framework for focus as it was important that the participants spoke freely and openly about their lives at school. Highly structured questions would have prevented my ability to capture a holistic picture of what it is 'like' to be a first-generation female student. I designed the standard questions using examples from both Moutakas (1994) and Patton (2002) regarding phenomenological research. For example, one suggestion was to have the participant give advice to others who would be experiencing the same phenomenon, hence the question "Suppose I was a first-generation high school female student who has decided to go to university. What would you tell me it will be like?" Another recommendation was to ask the interviewee about a particular event. As such, I added the question: "Tell me what it was like for you the first day you arrived at the University of Guelph?" In addition, I included questions that pertained to information gathered during my literature review. The majority of research indicated that first-generation students tended to have more difficulties socially, financially and academically. Thus, I developed questions pertaining to each of these subject matters. I also included some background questions to help frame the context of each participant's experience.

With respect to the informal conversational interview style, I allowed the participant to control the flow and direction of the discussion. For example, during an interview, one participant spoke of her experiences of losing her young aunt, who had a genetic disorder. I asked her more questions about this experience and she revealed that she and her father also had the disease. She talked about how it affected her and how she

managed the disease while in school. These questions were not predetermined and were not asked of any other participants. With the informal conversational style, I learned she was visually impaired in one eye and that she had not registered at the Centre for Students with Disabilities, even though she had missed a substantial amount of school because of her disability. I also learned that she was concerned about her and her father's mortality. I may not have been able to understand her unique standpoint had I only used standard open-ended questions.

### **Participant Selection**

To gather the qualitative verbal data required in step one of the Human Scientific Phenomenological Method (Giorgi, 1997), purposeful sampling was used to encourage female first year students who self-identified as first-generation at the University of Guelph to participate in the study. I used a type of purposeful sampling called 'criterion sampling' which involved choosing participants who met a particular criterion (Patton, 2002, p. 348); in this case, being a female, first-year university student whose parents did not attend a post-secondary institution at any time. To sequester participants that met the criteria, posters advertising the research were placed around campus at the start of the second semester<sup>8</sup>. This was to ensure that students had completed one semester of university and could speak about those experiences. However, it did impact this research in that I was unable to interview first-generation students who may have dropped out of school in their first semester.

---

<sup>8</sup> At the University of Guelph, each year the first semester begins in early September and concludes with the end of final exams in mid December. Semester two begins in early January and concludes after the end of final exams in mid April.

In order to target first-year students, posters were strategically placed in the four main residence buildings that accommodate new students. Because research has shown that first-generation students are more likely to be older than average and live off campus, posters were also placed in the Older Than Average Student (OTAS) Lounge and the Off Campus University Student (OCUS) Lounge to encourage participation. Posters were also located in the Athletics Centre lobby and Athletics Centre women's change room. Finally, an email advertising the study was sent to students involved in the Bounce Back Program which supports students in their first year of study who are struggling academically (below 60% average in their first semester).

Once the posters were visible across campus and the emails sent out to Bounce Back participants, 33 women responded and inquired about the study. Each respondent was sent a participant letter with a brief description of the study's goals and objectives, the Research Ethics Board approval, my commitment to confidentiality, the time commitments involved, and a description of what they would gain from their participation (refer to *Appendix B*). In the letter, they were also asked to commit to a face-to-face interview ranging from one to two hours long at a location, date and time suitable to them. They were asked to meet with me one additional time to answer any follow-up questions that may have resulted from the initial interview. Of the 33 women who expressed interest and received the participant letter, three women responded that one or both parents had taken some college courses so they were unable to participate. Others did not reply after receiving the letter. Ultimately, 11 women self-selected to participate who met the research criteria. During the end of January and the month of February, first interviews were conducted with 10 of the 11 women (one participant was

unable to participate due to a scheduling conflict). The second follow-up interviews for the 10 participants occurred at the end of February and were concluded by the middle of March.

Every participant communicated by email to arrange the date and time of their interviews. I conducted all 20 interviews (two interviews per participant) personally on the University campus. Before each interview, each participant reviewed with me the written consent form (refer to *Appendix C*) and gave written and verbal consent to participate in the face-to-face interview. With their permission, the interviews were recorded via a digital recording device, which I later used to transcribe the verbal data to written form for analysis. Each woman was also notified that she could stop the interview at any time and for any reason. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, even after they had completed their initial interview and follow-up interview. None of the ten participants withdrew from the study.

### **Data Collection**

To gather the kind of verbal data noted by Giorgi (1997), open-ended and informal questions were used during the in-depth face-to-face interviews. As phenomenology strives to understand the experiences of others, open-ended and informal questions allowed participants to talk about their experiences on their own terms and in their own words. As Patton (2002) wrote when describing phenomenology and interviewing:

...how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interview with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have 'lived experience'. (p. 104)

As mentioned, the purpose of the interviews was to explore women's perceptions in *their* own words. This was also extremely important to be in keeping with feminist research that speaks against the appropriation of voice: "learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Some participants were very vocal about sharing their stories while others were more reserved so the interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to more than one hour. At the conclusion of the first set of interviews, each participant received \$20. Each audio-recording was then transcribed by me to written text.

After the conclusion of each initial interview, I reviewed the transcript noting any follow-up questions and/or areas where more description and exploration was needed. The follow-up questions were specific to each participant and related to their individual transcripts so the follow-up questions were different for each person. Once the review of a transcript occurred and the follow-up questions noted, I contacted the participant via email to schedule a second interview. As with the first interviews, all of the second interviews occurred on campus in the same locations. At the start of the follow-up interview, all participants were once again required to sign the consent form. They were also reminded verbally that they could withdraw from the study at any time and gave consent to have the interview audio-recorded. During this interview, participants were asked the follow-up questions pertaining to their transcript. For example, during a first interview, one woman said she was basically on her own when it came to school work. During the second interview, I probed: "You said you were basically on your own when it came to school work. Could you talk about that a little more?" Or for another participant, one of the follow-up questions was, "You said your Mom kind of pushes

herself in. What did you mean by that?" Some participants received more follow-up questions than others. It should be noted that the women I interviewed first required the most follow-up questions, most likely because I became more skilled at asking probing questions the more people I interviewed. In hindsight, I should have conducted some practice interviews to develop my skills before conducting the first interviews. As well, participants who were more reserved during the initial interview tended to have shorter transcripts so they also received more follow-up questions. I found the second interviews very beneficial because they provided me the opportunity to delve more in-depth into specific experiences. After the follow-up questions were asked, all 10 participants were encouraged to share additional thoughts or comments they may have about being a first-generation student. This was intended to allow the participants time to reflect on what they shared during their first interview and to expand on those reflections during the second interview. At the conclusion of the second interviews, the participants were given an additional \$10. Once again, I transcribed each audio-recording into written text.

### **Data Analysis**

As previously mentioned, Giorgi (1997) described the Human Scientific Phenomenological Method as a process. The second step of this process required me to analyze the verbal data. First I read each participant's two transcripts in their entirety three times. This was important because it allowed me to create a picture of each participant's experiences as a whole, flowing and interconnected phenomenon. As well, it allowed me to fully appreciate the participant's experiences from a holistic perspective (Giorgi, 1997), which was important. When reviewing the transcripts, I employed two

tools in phenomenology: epoche and bracketing. These tools were employed before the data was organized into distinct parts or themes and before any cross-case analysis was performed. First, I engaged the data from a perspective of epoche:

In taking on the perspective of *epoche*, the researcher looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material, that is eliminate, or at least gain clarity about, preconceptions. Rigor is reinforced by a 'phenomenological attitude shift' accomplished through epoche. (Patton, 2002, p. 485)

I utilized this tool throughout the entire data gathering and data analysis processes. To do this, I was acutely aware of my preconceived notions based on my standpoint as a feminist. For example, as a feminist researcher with an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies, my area of study demonstrated my preconceived bias: I consciously chose to focus my study on the experiences of first-generation students who are female. This is illustrative of my own orientation and interests and could have affected how I analyzed the data, highlighted the themes, and constructed the report. I was conditioned to be critical of gender and power imbalances. In addition to my academic background, at the time of this research project I was employed as the Assistant to the Associate Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Guelph. I was knowledgeable about the programs and services designed to support students on campus, including first-generation students. Furthermore, my mother was a first-generation student and often shared with me how difficult it was for her when she left a small Northwestern Ontario mining town to attend college in Southern Ontario. She had never lived in a community with street lights or buses and expressed how isolated and lonely she felt in higher education. I, on the other hand, had two educated parents who were able to help support and guide me as I pursued higher education. My family background, professional life, and academic degree

had the potential to influence this research. For these reasons, I was very cognizant of my personal and professional experiences when I approached and conducted this research, and was vigilant about refraining from having my personal standpoint influence the data analysis process.

In addition to epoche, I engaged in phenomenological reduction by ‘bracketing’. Bracketing is the process of ‘teasing out’ the experiences from their contextual framework and viewing them as an isolated phenomenon free from preconceived ideas or past knowledge (Patton, 2002). This allows the phenomena to be purely identified without external influence (Giorgi, 1997; Patton, 2002). This was especially challenging because I had already conducted my literature review which had embedded the phenomenon within the context of other research. As such, I had to ‘bracket’ the data from the conclusions that I had drawn from the literature review.

Once epoche and bracketing were employed, the transcripts were analyzed and, following the third part of the Human Scientific Phenomenological Method (Giorgi, 1997), the data was separated according to meaning. I analyzed the transcripts one element at a time. To do this, I put a line whenever one idea ended and a new one began, separating the participant’s words by meanings. I then labelled the element as part of a category (e.g., parent support). For example, analyzing a response from this participant resulted in:

*But other than that my parents helped me bring up my grades (parental academic support)/. And then eventually the material got advanced for them (parents unable to help)/ so like ‘ok, well, we can help as much as we can’ (parents wanting to help but unable)/. But no, high school for me (feelings about high school)/ and my brother was pretty easy (siblings and high school)/. Like he is doing really well right now too cause he is in grade 10 (feelings about siblings performance in school)/.*

Once the elements were revealed, the elements were ‘horizontalized’ and elements that did not pertain to the study were removed. Patton (2002) describes horizontalization as the process whereby: “the data are spread out for examination, with all elements and perspectives having equal weight. The data are then organized into meaningful clusters. Then the analyst undertakes a delimitation process whereby irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data are eliminated” (p. 486). I followed this process four times for each transcript to ensure that the elements were consistent with each analysis. I then reviewed the different comments and combined like comments together (e.g., all comments involving parents). In the end, I combined elements from each participant’s transcripts into themes. This then became a case. Ultimately, I had ten case studies (one per participant).

Taking these ten cases, I used cross-case analysis to determine what, if any, themes were present among the ten cases. This involved comparing the themes from each case and associating and noting themes among the cases. This allowed me to determine if there were common themes across the cases that would allow for contextual generalizations which may have the potential to direct future study.

## **IV: Research Findings**

### **Background**

The participants in this study were full-time, first-year students in their second semester at the University of Guelph. Seven of the participants were pursuing Bachelor of Science degrees and three were enrolled in Bachelor of Arts programs. Two participants were also registered in the Co-operative Education Program. All but two of the participants came to school directly from high school. All of the women are considered to be of average university age, ranging from 18 to 20 years old. At the time of the interviews, four women were 18 years old, four were 19 and two participants were 20. The participants in this study were unmarried and childless. Eight of the ten students lived on campus in student residence buildings and two participants rented rooms off campus in the City of Guelph. All the participants were from Ontario, with hometowns that were located anywhere from a 40-minute to a six-hour drive from Guelph. The majority of the women were Caucasian; however, two participants were Chinese-Canadian, with one being born in Canada and the other immigrating to Canada when she was five years old. One participant's father was Indonesian and her mother was Caucasian. In addition, two of the participants' parents were separated at the time of this study. Of those, one participant lived in a blended family with her mother and stepfather and the other grew up in a single-parent home with her mother. Two participants indicated that they had medical/health issues. All of the participants had parents who did not attend a post-secondary institution for any period of time (e.g., university or college). Of the 10 participants, four had mothers who had completed high school and eight reported their fathers were high school graduates. Five of the participants heard about

this study from their friends, two saw an advertisement poster in the Athletics Centre, and one saw a poster advertising the study in her residence building. Two participants received an email from the Bounce Back Coordinator regarding this study.

### **Participants.**

The research findings do not include participants' given names. Pseudonyms are used to provide reasonable confidentiality to the women who volunteered for this study.

### ***Patricia.***

Patricia was a single, 20-year-old Caucasian woman. Prior to coming to Guelph, she resided in a community of approximately 30,000 people located about one hour southwest of Guelph with her parents and younger brother. She was the first in her immediate family to pursue higher education. Patricia's father was a custodian for the local school board and her mother worked for a large national computer company doing efficiency testing. Both of her parents graduated from high school. Patricia was enrolled as a full-time student in Molecular Biology and Genetics. She lived in the largest residence building on campus, which houses 1,800 students. Because her cumulative marks were below 60% in her first semester at the University, she was invited to participate in 'Bounce Back.' She heard about this study from the Coordinator of the program.

*Carly.*

Carly was a single, 19-year-old Asian woman who was pursuing a bachelor's degree in Applied Human Science and Nutrition and was a full-time student. Carly and her family immigrated to Canada from China when she was five years old. Carly's mother completed school up to grade six and her father completed high school. Both of her parents were cooks in a Chinese-Canadian restaurant. The family lives in a city about five hours northeast of Guelph that has a population of about one million people. Carly was the second person in her immediate family to attend university. Her sister graduated from their hometown university with a degree in Aerospace Engineering. However, Carly was the first child to leave home to attend school. Carly lived off campus in a house with other university students. She heard about the study from a friend who was also participating.

*Dee.*

Dee was from a community of approximately 165,000 people, located about one hour southeast of Guelph where she lived with her parents and younger sister before coming to university. Her mother completed high school and her father was only one credit short of earning his high school diploma, but he began working and never completed his final credit. Her mother was a medical secretary for a general surgeon and her father worked at a major car manufacturing plant. He had been laid off for three months. She was 18 years old, single, and enrolled as a full-time student in the Bachelor of Science, Psychology program. She lived in the largest residence on campus and

roomed with a good friend from high school. According to Dee, her friend saw the posting of the study in the Athletics Centre and told her that she should participate.

***Elizabeth.***

Elizabeth was enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts, Environmental Governance program and was a full-time student. She was the younger of two children and her brother was enrolled in law school overseas at the time of this study. Prior to coming to Guelph, she lived with her mother in a very large metropolitan city just east of Guelph. She was not married, 18 years of age, Indonesian and Caucasian and lived on campus in a Living Learning Centre (LLC)<sup>9</sup>. Elizabeth's parents were not together and she had not seen her father since she was 12 years old. Her father is from Indonesia and had completed schooling equivalent to a high school diploma. Her mother completed half of high school and was working with children with disabilities as a teacher's assistant in a primary school. Elizabeth saw the poster for the study at the Athletics Centre.

***Felicity.***

Felicity was from a community of just over 100,000 people located six hours north of Guelph where she lived with her mother, stepfather and two younger half-siblings. She was the first in her immediate family to enrol in higher education, as both her parents left high school just before completing Grade 12. Felicity's mother worked

---

<sup>9</sup> The University of Guelph has four co-ed Living Learning Centres (LLC) associated with Internationalism, French, Arts and the Environment. LLC's have 25 to 50 students that live, learn and socialize with students with common interests. LLC's offer programming to encourage students to share and connect with others and gain experiential knowledge outside of the classroom.

as an assistant for a satellite University of Guelph Research Station. Her father worked at a convenience store/gas station in town. Felicity was 19 years old, single and Caucasian. She lived in the largest residence on campus and was a full-time student in the Bachelor of Arts, Criminal Justice program. She too saw the poster in the Athletics Centre.

***Genevieve.***

Genevieve was a single, 18-year-old Caucasian woman and full-time Bachelor of Science, Zoology student. Prior to coming to Guelph, she lived on a farm about 40 minutes west of Guelph in a community of approximately 7,000 people. At the time of the study, she lived on campus in an upper-year residence with a roommate from her hometown. She was the youngest of three children and had two older brothers. One of her brothers had his high school diploma and the other left before completing high school. Her mother and father owned a small organic vegetable farm with some beef cattle and pigs. Her mother completed Grade 11 and her father had his high school diploma. Genevieve heard about the study from a friend. She did not know where the friend saw the advertisement.

***Heather.***

Heather was from a large metropolitan city of approximately 2.5 million people about one hour east of Guelph. She was the first in her family to attend higher education, with one older brother who dropped out of high school. She was Chinese-Canadian, single, and 19 years old. Heather's parents immigrated to Canada when they were in their twenties. Her mother worked in a food processing plant and her father worked in a

factory that made windows and doors. Her father completed high school, but her mother did not. She was enrolled full-time in the Bachelor of Science, Nutrition program. She lived off campus and rented a room in a house that she shared with the owner. Heather's marks were below a 60% average in her first semester and she had volunteered to participate in the Bounce Back program. She heard about this study from an email sent out by the Bounce Back program Coordinator.

*Sarah.*

Sarah was an 18-year-old Caucasian woman who was enrolled in the Bachelor of Science, Bio-Medical Sciences program full-time. She was from a community of about 60,000 people, located about an hour's drive southwest of Guelph. Prior to coming to Guelph, she lived with her parents and younger sister. She lived on campus in a residence with about 250 other students. She roomed with a friend from her hometown. Sarah's mother and father both completed high school. Her mother was a legal secretary and her father was a machinist. She saw the advertising poster in her residence building. Sarah has a genetic disorder called Marfan Syndrome<sup>10</sup>. As this condition affects the connective tissue in her eyes, she was unable to see in one eye. In addition to the eyes, Marfan's can also affect the tissue in the heart. Her father has the same condition and had a mechanical valve put in his heart when Heather was a young girl. During her first

---

<sup>10</sup> Marfan Syndrome is a heritable condition that causes connective tissue, the tissue that holds the body together and supports growth and development, to become defective. The primary purpose of connective tissue is to hold the body together and provide a framework for growth and development.

semester, Sarah's aunt died of Marfan's. Because of her condition, Sarah missed the first week of school. Later in the semester, Sarah was also absent to attend her aunt's funeral.

***Veronica.***

Veronica was from a community of approximately 30,000 people located about one hour southwest of Guelph. She was 19 years old, Caucasian and was enrolled full-time in a Bachelor of Science, Environmental Sciences Co-operative Education program. Prior to coming to Guelph, she lived with her parents and had two older half-siblings in their thirties who had both graduated from university. Her mother was from a farming family. When Veronica's mother was a young woman, her parents became sick. As a result, Veronica's mother did not attend high school and remained home to take care of the household. Veronica's mother did attend some night school as an adult. Her mother was a personal support worker who cared for people in their homes and her father worked with his brother in a money management company. Veronica's father graduated from high school. During the study, Veronica lived on campus in a Living and Learning Centre (LLC). She heard about the study from a friend and received the contact information from a poster in the Athletics Centre. Veronica did disclose that she had a history of anxiety and depression in high school and did experience some anxiety in university.

***Bev.***

Bev was a full-time student enrolled in the Bachelor's of Arts, Psychology Cooperative Education program. She was 20 years old and from a town of approximately

17,000 people located about 2.5 hours northeast of Guelph. She had two older siblings. Her older brother attended one semester of university and then left school and her sister did not complete high school. Bev's parents both completed high school. Her father was a mail carrier and her mother was a secretary. Bev lived in a LLC. She heard about the study from a friend who saw the posting in the Athletics Centre.

## **Family**

The common theme of family and the affect family had on the educational lives of the participants permeated throughout the interviews. Regardless of their backgrounds, participants spoke frequently of the role their parents played in their education, the affect their siblings had on their academic lives, and how they compensated for their parents lack of experiential knowledge regarding education.

### **Role of parents in education.**

Participants often discussed how their parents influenced their education. There were five areas that were commonly addressed. First, they talked about their home atmosphere when it came to education. They also talked about the support they received from their parents and the pride their parents felt because their children were pursuing higher education. Participants also indicated that they talked to their parents regularly while at school. Finally, the majority of participants said their parents did not understand what university was like for them.

*Atmosphere at home regarding education.*

When asked to describe the atmosphere at home regarding education and learning, there were two common experiences among the participants: parents' inability to offer academic help with homework, especially in high school; and, parental flexibility and/or nonchalance regarding education.

For example, Carly referenced her parents' inability to help her with homework and said she felt little pressure from her parents to succeed:

They [parents] do not really have any higher education. They didn't really involve [sic] in my education. They couldn't really teach me anything or help me with my homework. So basically I was on my own. Some parents are really strict on that and push their kids. My parents don't really push me, 'just try your hardest, if you can't do it then change to another program or do something easier.' They're flexible. Well, they're not like 'if you don't do it then your life is over' or something like that.

Even though Carly immigrated to Canada with her family from China when she was 5 years old, her experiences were very similar to those of Patricia, who was born and raised in Southern Ontario. Like Carly, Patricia felt her parents were not strict about school because "it was never really forced upon us." She also spoke of her parents' inability to help her with schoolwork as she progressed: "eventually the material got advanced for them so like 'ok well, we can help you as much as we can.'"

Dee had the same experience regarding parental academic support:

Once it got to high school, it was kind of, I couldn't really go to them. I couldn't really go to my dad for math help in grade 12 because I was taking Calculus and he had never taken Calculus. He knew like basic math. So it was kind of different. Once I got into high school it was like I was kind of on my own help-wise.

Dee also said she did not experience pressure from her parents to excel academically:

They're not really the type of parents to be like, 'oh you have to do well on this quiz.' They don't really know what's happening in my school life. I tell them stuff when I want to but they're not always constantly down my throat, like 'you have to do well.'

Similarly, Genevieve, like so many others, shared that her parents "wanted me to do well but they didn't push it too much." Similarly, Bev used the term 'lax' to describe the atmosphere in her home regarding education.

Although the majority of participants had similar experiences when it came to parents' inability to help them with their homework and a relaxed attitude about school achievements, two participants said their mothers were highly involved in ensuring homework completion. Elizabeth shared:

She [mother] was a teacher's assistant so she's always, my whole life she was really really hard core about you know education is like the number one priority kind of thing. So it was always really, it was really expected to just do well in school kind of thing. Just no exceptions. Every time the first thing I did when I came home from school, all throughout elementary school, we always used to sit down and go through the agenda and see everything that is going on. In high school she got a little more, she gave me a little more independence with my education, but she was still always every time I came home it was like 'did you get any marks today?', 'when's your next test?', 'when's your next exam?', sort of thing.

Similar to Elizabeth, Felicity described her mother's high level of involvement with homework, but said it was still her choice to pursue higher education:

My mom would learn it first and then kind of help us do it at the end. We weren't allowed to go to school without having it done. Well, homework was a big thing. My mom *made* us do our homework but like they always said 'if you don't want to go to school that is fine. If you do then we will let you go.' Well not *let* you go but support you type of thing. So it's always kind of my choice so.

It's worth noting that Elizabeth and Felicity do differ from the other participants in that their mothers are affiliated with educational institutions. Recall that Elizabeth's mother was a teaching assistant in an elementary school and Felicity's mother worked for the University at a satellite research station.

***Parental support.***

Many participants spoke of their parents' inability to help them with their homework, but they also shared how their parents supported and motivated them, even though they could not offer academic support. Whether it was through words of encouragement or by hiring a tutor, parents were actively involved in helping their children succeed in school, regardless of their inability to provide instructional academic support.

Patricia talked about her parents' strong influence in motivating and encouraging her in high school and in university: "they [parents] kind of just keep me motivated to find help, 'well we don't really know what is going on but here, you can try and do these things.' They were always encouraging, 'stay focused.'" She said her mother often encouraged her by being "the devil's advocate." Patricia was the only student who spoke of wanting to leave university in her first semester: "Well I wasn't sure if this is what I wanted to do and then she's [mother] like 'ok, well if you drop out of school now you will probably end up at Zeller's.' I'm like 'right, all right, keep going.'" Similarly, Carly shared that her parent's encouraged her: "they do try to support me by encouraging me, 'try harder' stuff like that." As did Sarah, who continually said her mother played a pivotal role in supporting and encouraging her:

...and even if we did fail something, like me and my sister take that hard. We don't like failing so we would get disappointed, discouraged and she'd tell us like 'you tried and there's nothing we can do, we can just keep moving on.' She's encouraging. My mom always did that. Having the support of your parents is the main key. If I didn't have my mom always telling me that 'ya, life goes on, it's ok,' I'd be like screwed up. I would have dropped out by now 'cause I didn't do as well as I should have and I think she is also really supportive cause she's never done it. She's new at this so she doesn't know what to expect either. She tries to help by like emailing me or saying like 'oh, make sure you study for that,' or telling me to get enough hours of sleep. She does like the little things that add up. It really does help.

In addition to encouragement and motivation, Veronica said that her parents supported her with other types of emotional support: "Well it's just like I had a rough period where I went through a lot of anxiety and depression and stuff and they just kind of were always there for, if I wanted to talk to them about it."

Many of the participants also discussed how their parents, unable to help them with their homework themselves, provided alternative academic support. Dee explained: "they would back me up and if I needed a tutor for something they were more than willing to get me a tutor and stuff so they were good that way." Sarah also talked about how her parents supported her by hiring a tutor: "Eventually she [mother] realized that she couldn't help me in the science so I got a tutor in elementary school and Grades 9 and 10." Heather added that her parents helped by getting the answers she needed from their friends or tutors: "If I had questions they'll try to help me solve it; but then, their education wasn't as high. So then they'll try to ask, get tutors or ask other family members that might know how to do it."

Because of parents' encouragement and motivation, as well as parents' willingness to obtain external academic support, it was clear that the participants felt supported by their parents' efforts to help them succeed in school.

*Parental-family pride.*

The majority of participants discussed how proud their parents and extended family members were because they were attending university. In general, parents would directly express to their children how proud they were of their achievements and/or would tell others of how proud they were because their daughter was in school. In a few instances, the participants described their parents pride in relation to the lack of achievement of their siblings and/or extended family members (e.g., cousins).

Parents often told their daughters that they were proud of them. Bev's parents told her directly: "My Dad, every time I talk to him on the phone, he's like 'I'm so proud of you.'" Sarah also shared that her parents regularly remind her how proud they are. In the case of Veronica, pride was the only word she used to describe her parents' feelings: "They're proud I went to school, that's all I can say. I think they are proud pretty much. It's the only word I can think of."

Not only was parental pride expressed to the participant directly, but it also was conveyed to extended family members and friends. Elizabeth recounted: "Well, every time I talk to my relatives all she tells them is, 'oh, Elizabeth is in university, she's doing good' kind of thing so it gives her something to kind of be proud of having both her kids in university." When asked how she felt about that, Elizabeth responded: "It's annoying sometimes to just have my relatives come up to me and be like 'oh, your mom, she talks about you all the time, she's so happy.'" Felicity used the term 'proud' when asked how her parents felt about her being in university: "I think they are really proud. They talk about it all the time. And it's like the first thing they say to people."

In addition, three participants described their parents' feelings of pride as it related to others' lack of success. When a sibling or member of the extended family did not succeed in education, it was noted. Dee shared:

Well, they were really proud of me, and I don't think, 'cause my sister doesn't do very well in school, so I think they're kind of expecting her to go more towards like college maybe. So they were excited that one (laughs) of their children went to university. And I'm like the first one in my, not just immediate family, but outside of my family. My cousin went to college, Fanshaw, for a year and now she is just working. Then she's going to go back to school. But I was the first one to go to university, so it's kind of exciting I guess.

Similarly, Genevieve described her family's feeling of pride in relation to her brothers, who did not attend higher education: "They [parents] are very proud cause my brothers didn't go so they're like, they are really proud of me." Heather's success was also in relation to her brother: "They're [parents] proud cause my brother couldn't go to university so I could." Sarah explained that in her extended family, she was one of the first to attend higher education. According to Sarah:

They [parents] were excited cause, even my aunt, they have three, two sons and one daughter, and the two sons never went to school and my cousin just went to Australia for school, so I was like basically the first one where you can actually see how improvement [sic] 'cause she's across the world and I'm the only one. They are really excited. They are proud of me.

### ***Contact with parents while at university.***

Frequently talking to and/or going home to visit parents while at university was another common experience the participants shared. With the expectation of Carly, who had only called her parents three times since the beginning of her second semester, the majority of participants communicated with their parents regularly (and in many cases daily), most often by email or MSN. Saying that, a few participants did say that as their work load increased, their frequency of contact decreased. Participants who lived

relatively close to the University often saw their parents when they went home on weekends. As a result, parents were still an important factor in the university experience of these students, even though the participants no longer lived at home.

Genevieve shared that she regularly went home to see her parents: “I usually call them during the week and I go home every two weeks ‘cause I live close by so and email too, so a *lot* of contact.” Dee also went home for some weekends, although she found she had less time to contact them:

I live 45 minutes away, so last weekend I was home. The weekend before that I was home for a night; but, when I am here for a prolonged period of time I find I don’t call them as often because I just don’t have time. I forget to, but, I talk to them at least once a week for sure. And then I was just home for the whole weekend, so pretty often.

Similarly, Heather expressed that she used to speak with her parents daily but contacts them less often now because of her workload: “At first I called them everyday but then, as the workload increased, I only called them every so often.” In addition, she would see her parents two to three times a month because she went home to visit or her parents came to Guelph. When they visited, they would bring her pre-cooked meals to eat during the week. Elizabeth also saw her mother regularly: “Every two, three days maybe I will give her a call, that sort of thing, email. My mom’s living by herself so I usually kind of pop in every maybe week and a half, two weeks, that sort of thing.”

Felicity, the participant who was the farthest distance from her hometown, expressed that she *had* to email her mother every day:

My Mom emails me every day and I *have* to email her back every day. And then we usually, I usually call her around every Sunday. Ya, she gets upset. She thinks I am ignoring her. I think she’s just not used to having her kids leave home. I think she’s just as interested as I am ‘cause she’s never done it before. She’s probably learning just as much as I am about it.

Patricia was the only participant that reported struggling with the lack of family contact. She reported calling her parents once a week and talked to her mother daily on MSN: “It’s been pretty, it’s been hard sometimes because were just so close and not seeing them every day. It was, it was the biggest thing, well, ok, I can’t actually joke with my brother.” Sarah also talked about speaking to her mother daily:

We email a lot ‘cause my Mom works at a desk so she always emails me and sees how I am doing throughout the day. Like today, I got an email before I went to pick up my Chemistry so she’s like ‘how did you do?’ And I had a midterm last night and she’s like ‘how did that one go?’ So she keeps updated.

Carly was the only participant who expressed that she did not communicate with her parents very often while at school:

I don’t really call often. So far, ever since the beginning of the semester till now, I only called three times. I’m closer to my sister to. With them, not so close ‘cause their thinking is kind of simple and traditional so there’s not really things I can consult them with ‘cause they don’t understand the situation I am in. So, all they know ‘it’s hard, just try your best’ but they don’t really know, understand what my stresses are or how I’m doing really. It’s hard to communicate with them. Well, they don’t really know. Seeing that they never went to university, they don’t know how the process works or anything involved with university so there’s not much I can go to them for help. They get somewhat of how university is hard from people they work with and their friends who have their daughters or sons go to university as well. And since my sister went to university she sometimes, she has some suggestions ‘cause I didn’t really get any advice from my parents. So all my advice came from my sister and sometimes when I don’t know what to do I go to my sister for pointers.

Even though Carly was the only participant who reported having limited contact with her parents’ while at school, she was not the only participant to express that her parents did not fully understand the university experience. This was also a common theme referenced during the interviews.

*Parental lack of understanding about university experience.*

Participants often talked about their parents' lack of understanding about what university is like for them. The majority of participants believed that their parents did not have an adequate understanding of university life, especially with respect to the academic workload and pressure. Those with older siblings and/or relatives with some higher education experience did say that their parents gained some knowledge of university life, but it was limited.

Dee shared that her parents did not understand what it is like for her at university even though she was open with them:

I have a very open relationship with my parents so I can talk to them about anything. I talk to them. I don't think they really understand, but like how many classes I have and what each class requires, but I don't know. I guess 'cause they don't know. I don't think they have the full concept, they know, like from what I tell them. They probably think that it's just all fine and dandy, like happy all the time. But I don't think they understand the work part of it. Like how much work goes into it.

Bev had similar feelings: "I don't know if they realize what it takes academically. Like I do what I have to do here. I don't even know if *I* know what it takes academically to do."

For two other participants, a lack of understanding was resulting in their parents trying to learn as much as possible about university life. They reasoned that their parents' constant questioning was one way for them to learn about higher education. For example, Felicity said:

...she [mother] pushes herself in there (laughs). Like there's nothing that I have not had to tell her, so I mean 'cause it's kind of like a learning experience for her too. I think so 'cause like it's easier for her to kind of talk about it if she knows what's going on, which is totally understandable.

When asked to explain what she meant when she said her mother “pushed herself in,”

Felicity responded:

She'll call and email and she'll come up with almost a list of questions every night just about whether I've done this or if I've remembered to do that. She hasn't done it either and she likes to know what is going on and stuff. Just 'cause she's never done it and she doesn't know what to expect and I mean she really doesn't know what is going on so you can't really blame her. 'Cause I'm the first one to leave right? She's curious. Well, curious and worried I guess.

Sarah echoed Felicity's comments, explaining how her mother was trying to experience the university environment along with her daughter:

She [mother] feels kind of like through me she's kind of in university. She's always asking, 'oh, how many people are in your class?' Each class she wants to know. 'Is it a big class...a small class?' She's kind of like in the environment. I don't think she understands the workload. I don't think she understands that. She says she does but I don't think she does 'cause its completely different than high school.

Participants who had older siblings or cousins who attend or attended higher education expressed that their parents had some understanding of what it was like to be a university student, but did not fully comprehend its meaning. Veronica explained:

They [parents] never had the experiences so I don't think they know; but, they kind of know from my sister. My mom's experienced going down to UW and bringing my sister lasagna and stuff like that. But other then that, they have actually not been in a school setting like this before so I don't think they totally understand how much work it is and just how different it is from high school, from regular school.

Elizabeth's older brother was a university graduate who lived at home while working on his undergraduate degree. Elizabeth commented that her mother had a “well-rounded idea” of higher education: “She did a lot of work with my brother when he was

in university so I think she has an idea where my courses stand and pretty much what residence is like.”

The reference to siblings as part of their experience in education was not limited to helping parents understand the university environment. Siblings were regularly referenced throughout the interviews.

### **Role of siblings in education.**

Siblings received a lot of attention during the interviews. Literature regarding first-generation students did not emphasize the role of siblings or the impact they had on a first-generation student’s experience. However, siblings were important players in the academic and social lives of the participants in this study. Whether they took on the role as mentor or received guidance, both younger and older siblings affected the experiences of this group.

### ***Younger siblings.***

Participants were aware of their younger siblings’ education plans and would critique and reflect on their siblings’ abilities or lack of abilities in education. In addition, participants with younger siblings talked about taking an active role in encouraging and supporting their younger siblings to help them to get to higher education.

One example of this was Sarah, who talked about how she was helping her sister. Even though Sarah stated that she did not think her sister had the skills to attend university, she was still engaged in her little sister’s education: “...I like to bring her here because I like this school a lot and she’s always like ‘oh ya it would be fun’ but I

don't think she can handle it, the schoolwork. She can't stay on task long." Regardless of her personal critique of her sister's attention span, Sarah often referenced the ways she would support her sister by learning from her own mistakes:

I left everything to the last minute. I should have brushed up on my math skills 'cause I had Calculus last semester and I didn't realize that there was this package on-line in the summer where it's just like see where you strengths and weaknesses are. I never did that and I should have for sure. If my sister ever goes I am going to guide her towards making sure she knows her stuff.

In addition, Sarah spoke of having her sister come to campus to attend classes:

I brought her up and showed her campus and let her stay in my residence so she got the experience. I tried to. I brought her, not to my class 'cause she's not in science, so I brought her to some of my friends' classes. That was exciting, like a business course that she would take.

Later in the interview, Sarah also talked about how much money she and her family were spending on her education and how it would impact on her sister: "Well, once that money drains out and if I don't have enough money, then I kind of want to get out of it without debt in case my sister wants to go."

Like Sarah, Felicity stated during her interview that she wanted her younger siblings to go to university. She talked about actively helping her brother choose courses in high school that would make higher education more accessible to him. When asked why she wanted her younger siblings to attend university, Felicity responded:

I enjoyed it and I think eventually it is going to be harder to get a good job if you don't have an education. And they'd enjoy it. Well, my brother's just going into high school this year so I've been trying to push him to take the good classes and not waste your time on just the fun electives and things like that. Because I have already done it I am just going to keep giving him tips like 'well you know, make sure you do that and don't forget to do this' kind of thing.

Dee also spoke of her sister when talking about being the only child to go to university. She shared that she was very different from her sister: "I was very studious

and she is not like that at all” and that her parents have come to realize that she will be the only child to attend post-secondary education.

### *Older siblings.*

Older siblings were often mentioned as providing support, knowledge, and even financial help to the participants. Those who had older siblings who did not succeed in attending higher education expressed learning from their older siblings’ failures as well.

Carly regularly referenced that her sister was a support for her as she pursued higher education. As she defined her parents as “simple, traditional,” she relied on her sister for support and advice regarding her education. Her sister also helped her when she applied to university. In fact, her sister played such an important role that when asked about how she felt when she first arrived on campus; her response was that she felt on her own because she was unable to “go to my sister for help or anything like that.” What was also significant about Carly’s sister was that she was the person to convince Carly’s parents to allow her to attend school at Guelph and major in nutrition. Carly expressed that her sister talked to her parents for two months in order to convince them to allow Carly to go away to school (her parents wanted her to attend university in her home town). Carly also said that she could also get financial support from her sister if needed: “I’m pretty sure I will be able to get OSAP and if not, I would probably borrow from my sister.” Her sister’s influence also had a significant impact on her social relationships. Carly recalled her first day on-campus:

I didn’t know them [roommates] very well and I was kind of shy and the first day they invited me to dinner and I didn’t really want to, felt shy and stuff. But then my sister urged me to go. Now that I think about it, if I didn’t go to socialize with

them it would make it more awkward and feel like I don't want to socialize with them but I do. So, like, it's important to, so open up yourself to people.... she [sister] knows that I'm shy and I'm going to have to face my roommates sooner or later and be friends with them so might as well do it now.

Carly noted that if it was not for her sister's encouragement, she would not have socialized with her roommates.

Veronica also spoke of how supportive her older siblings were regarding her education. She had two half-siblings in their 30s who both went to university near their hometown. One sister brought her to the Open House, an event on campus in the spring for prospective students and their families. According to Veronica, because of her sisters' academic paths, she assumed that she too would always go to university:

...it was kind of assumed I would go to university or something just 'cause my sisters did. I just always thought I would go to university. They never really had to convince me or anything. I just saw both my sisters went to university. I just assumed that it's what I was supposed to do.

Veronica's sisters also offered financial support, but only on the condition that she attended university:

I didn't even know my one sister, my one sister had saved up money. She just kind of told me in my last year of high school. She's like 'oh, by the way, I saved you like \$2,000' since I was like, since she started university or something, or she got out of university she started saving up for me. That was just a surprise to me and then my other sister, she just, like she's a teacher. She just had the money so she just gave it to me. But they said they wouldn't give me money unless I went to university so I wouldn't get it otherwise.

For those participants with older siblings who did not go to university, there was a value placed on them as the 'good' ones in the family. Genevieve had two older brothers who did not do well in school. As such, Genevieve recalled that she was the "good kid" for doing well in school. Moreover, Bev's siblings both dropped out after their first year

in higher education. She expressed that it was her siblings' lack of success that motivated her to do well in school:

I'm very competitive so I like to be better than them. Like my brother's really naturally smart so then I've always wanted to be better than he is. And like now I am (smile). Both of them never made it through a full semester so it's like I've already beat them so, just keep going. I'm just competitive and I just want to beat them so that's how I motivate myself. I like being my parent's favorite.

Bev recalled that her siblings' achievements in school made her shine and that she was the angel in the family: "I had excellent marks and 'cause my sister had such bad marks, so whatever I brought home was *great!*" Furthermore, Bev knew about what her financial expectations were regarding higher education by observing the experiences of her siblings:

I knew, like my parents don't have the money to, so I just knew that I have to support, like do it myself. When my brother went he had to get OSAP and my sister had to get OSAP so I was kind of, I'll have to get OSAP. So it wasn't like a big deal for me, I knew it was coming.

### **Compensation for lack of college knowledge.**

As previously stated, participants expressed that their parents were unable to help them academically with homework and that their parents did not understand what it was like for them in higher education. As such, participants recalled how they received supplemental academic support in high school and referenced having mentors who helped them succeed. In addition, when they decided to attend university, the women spoke of how they obtained the information they needed about higher education from sources other than their parents. Having final decision-making power regarding their education and how strongly they valued their independence and doing things on their own were also discussed by the participants.

*Academic support in high school.*

Many participants referenced their parents' inability to provide instructional support, and how, in addition to getting tutors, they had to find other avenues of academic support in high school. Friends, teachers, family members and the internet were often cited as sources of academic information.

For instance, Dee spoke of the strong academic support she had, even though her parents were unable to assist:

I couldn't go to my parents for help necessarily, but I had my teachers and my friends who took like almost all the same classes as me. I could go to my teachers and find tutors outside of school through them. So it's not like I was completely alone ...I have a younger sibling. It's not like I could go to them.

Like Dee, Carly relied on her peers and teachers: "Usually, just we work together with my friends or if they don't know, then just go to the teachers. Ask for some more hints."

Genevieve also spoke of using her friends and teachers for academic support: "I'd ask my friends maybe and if I really didn't get something, I would ask the teacher in high school and stuff. Or, I just wouldn't get it. I just wouldn't get it and then I just wouldn't get that part on the test." Sarah used formal support like tutors and teachers to help her academically, and said asking for help from teachers and tutors helped her succeed.

Patricia talked about receiving a lot of help from her older cousin, who was an engineer, as well as her teachers in high school.

In addition to going to friends and teachers, Sarah and Bev shared that they would use the internet to get information. Bev recalled: "If I needed to know something I would use the internet to, like, clarify." In addition to getting academic support in high school, participants also spoke of the mentors they had in high school.

### *Mentors in high school.*

Many participants talked about having a mentor in high school who helped them. In general, teachers and guidance counsellors played a significant role in helping these students to successfully enter post-secondary education.

Patricia spoke of her close relationship with her teachers, and said one teacher in particular showed a special interest in her:

As a whole everyone I interacted with kind of pushed me. My teachers are really good. They really got to know you as a person too. My one music teacher, she just kind of, I think I only had her once but like a minor class, but I was in the choir that she directed so we really got to know each other. So I don't know, she kind of, she's kind of, 'oh how are your grades going...did you get in yet?' And so I guess most of my teachers were really like that. They were really good, and like you see them in the streets now and they're like, 'hey how's it going, what's going on?'

Dee also talked about a teacher who had a huge impact to her academic path:

A teacher, Mr. Smith, he was my biology teacher, actually he was in Grade 9. It was his first year teaching at our school, or teaching *ever*, so we were kind of like his first class so he kind of took a liking to us right away. So I had the most classes with him out of all my teachers in high school. I had at least four I think over the years. So I don't know, he was really close with our French immersion group of friends so he helped a bunch of us out. He was actually the one who said that psychology would be a good fit for me...he kind of like grew as a teacher with us as we got like got older and stuff so, even in Grade 12 when I didn't have him as a teacher, I would always go to him if I had problems with anything because he, I don't know, it was like he was like the best mentor. He knew most about our grade kind of thing so a bunch of like Grade 12's in our school would go to him, like all my friends.

It was revealed from the participants that teachers and guidance counsellors often took an interest in the students' pursuits and, in some cases, would remind them of application deadlines for scholarships. According to Elizabeth, her teachers were involved in both her academic and extracurricular life and were "really caring people." In fact, some teachers had such an impact that a few participants said they chose their

major based on their experiences with teachers in high school. For example, Bev's program choice resulted from a teacher making the subject interesting: "Like my one teacher, I took an intro to anthropology, psychology and sociology that made me major in psychology. It was kind of in high school like I *loved* it so much and he just made it so interesting. That's the reason I wanted to go into psychology."

Guidance counsellors were often cited as valuable mentors during high school. Veronica relied on her guidance counsellor for support, as did Genevieve who talked about how "really helpful" her guidance counsellor was in high school. Heather talked about how she and her mother stayed up late one night trying to understand how to apply to university online. The next day, Heather recalled: "So I had to get my guidance counsellor. She helped out a lot actually 'cause I didn't know, like, how the whole university thing worked."

### ***Information gathering.***

As referenced in the literature review, the research often demonstrates that first-generation students lack 'college knowledge' because their parents were unable to provide practical and experiential knowledge about higher education to their children. Therefore, a common theme throughout the interviews was that participants actively sought out information about higher education from other sources. High school guidance counsellors, teachers, and the Internet were often cited as helpful sources for participants to get information. Many participants also attended campus tours and open houses to get a sense of what it would be like for them when they arrived in the fall. In addition to formal academic channels, friends and/or family members who had attended higher

education were consistently primary sources of information about the academic expectations and social environment of university.

For example, Sarah summed up the variety of sources she used to get information:

I did a lot of research. And I asked, like my friend's sisters and stuff 'cause my mom and dad really had no input, so they were interested too. We would go on the Internet. And someone called us from Guelph and we had a bunch of questions to ask them. That was really useful. And just word of mouth from my mom's work. One of her really close friend's daughter went last year. She's in second year now so she gave us pointers and stuff. So my Mom gave me, forwarded them to me. So it was good....we'd go to Google search and see. There'd be checklists like what's a good university, what's a bad university, what you should look for when you go to open houses.

Patricia shared that she got information from her high school and the University website. She also talked to her older cousins. When asked what they told her, she recalled:

Well, the social aspects. One cousin, he's like, I call him the frat boy kind of thing. He was the big partier, engineer. Kind of weird but I remember when he came home like the first Thanksgiving. He was the first one in our family to go and he came back and he was like 'it's kind of weird the profs not knowing your name but you're a number, so it's kind of like you have no identity basically' and I'm like, 'oh, that's really weird.' And then he just said all of his class sizes were *huge* so I was kind of like 'ok, I know it is going to be big and there's a lot of partying going on and stuff.'

Heather also revealed that she talked to her older cousins to learn about university and "to get a sense of what university is like." Heather shared that her cousin "just told me about how she found first year, so then that kind of helped what I should expect."

Carly spoke about getting information on the web and that she 'Googled' "how other university students felt about university and some tips on how to prepare myself like 'keep up with your work', all these clues, tips, hints." However, she noted that her

primary person for information was a counsellor in high school and her sister, a university graduate.

Dee heard about the University from older students in her hometown who went to the University of Guelph: “I know people who were older than me who went to my high school, who are here, and they, they loved it. They had a good time.” In fact, one participant, who like Dee had an older friend from her high school, was able to experience university first hand. Elizabeth visited her friend on campus while still in high school: “I didn’t take a formal tour at Guelph; but, I had a friend who was in first year last year and she let me come and stay in her residence for a weekend.”

Felicity, like Elizabeth, also had older friends who informed her about university life. She spoke about using the on-line forum to get information: “I mostly just, like I had a lot of friends, older friends that had been to university so I kind of just sparked up as many conversations as I could with them when I saw them and stuff just to kind of get the experience and stuff.” When asked to describe the conversations she “sparked up” with her friends, Felicity recounted:

Well at first it was about residence and stuff ‘cause they had lived in residence and things like that so I just wanted to know like all the details that aren’t in the book type of thing. Mostly just about classes. And I didn’t actually know anyone in my program but I mean, but it wasn’t like that big a deal ‘cause I wanted to know what the classes were like in general so. Just about class sizes and campus and what the profs were like and things like that. But it was mostly about residence though. Ya, I had enough people to ask.

In addition, Felicity’s mother, a University employee at a satellite campus, received information from her co-workers. Felicity had never been to campus as her parents did not “travel much.” In addition to talking to friends and her mother’s co-workers, Felicity also learned as much as she could about the University from the website.

Like Felicity, Bev had never been to campus before the first day of Orientation Week<sup>11</sup>. She talked about how aggressively she sought out information from her friends: “I would kind of badger them about what it was like for the first month and then they would tell me. And then another month or so I’m like ‘so, what are you doing now?’” According to Bev, this helped her to understand what to expect: “I knew what I was getting myself in to, like everyone had told me, like all my friends.”

Bev felt so strongly about seeking out information that when asked what advice she would give other first-generation students, she replied:

Just ask people who have had their parents [attend higher education], ask them what it was like because they probably talked to their parents about it. Just ask anybody really who has been to school. It doesn’t really matter if it’s your parents. Just, if you need something, if you need to know something just go find out. Don’t just sit there and think about it and be worried about it. Find out and then you won’t worry about it anymore. That’s why I asked my friends everything ‘cause I couldn’t ask my parents and it worked out well for me. I knew *exactly* what I was getting myself into. And I have myself to thank for that, and my friends.

In addition to speaking with friends, Bev used the internet to find out how to apply to her program and to learn university terminology:

I had no idea what undergrad or grad was. That was probably the most confusing thing when I was applying to school. I had no idea what that was. I had *no* clue so I ‘Googled’ it and I’m like ‘ok, I’ll be an undergrad.’ So that’s how I worked that out. Bachelor of Arts, like Bachelor of Science, Commerce, I had no idea. Honours, four years, I was like ‘*what?*’ I just logically sorted it out and was ‘ok, I *think* that is what I want’ and I picked it. And I picked the right one (*gleeful*). It worked out well. I research it, usually the Internet. Anything I need. Like for Guelph, everything I do is on the Internet and I know if I have a problem it can be fixed.

---

<sup>11</sup> Approximately one week before classes begin, new students are engaged in a variety of programs and activities to help orient them to campus and to meet new people.

### *Decision-making power.*

As previously reported participants noted that their parents were often unable to help them academically and did not understand their academic life. Another theme that emerged was that participants often expressed that they had the final decision-making power regarding their education, even if their decisions were not congruent with their parents' wishes. In general, participants made educational decisions without their parents' input, expressed that their parents trusted their decisions, and/or that they made decisions that went against their parents' desires, specifically, about their parents wanting them to go to university and live at home.

An example of this is when Bev articulated her parents' lack of influence in her life regarding the decisions she made academically: "They know if they did [tell me what to do] I would be like 'what are you saying?' 'cause they've *never* done it before. They're *really* not involved in my academic life!" She also shared that her parents trust her to make the correct decisions: "It's my life. They're like 'as long you know what you are doing. You have it mapped out. Go for it!'"

Similarly, Dee referred to her experience of making decisions without her parents' input and said they trusted her decision-making:

I didn't really talk to them about which schools I wanted to go to because I didn't really know which was going to be best for me. We didn't really have a conversation before but, they kind of trusted that I would do what I would want and what I like. They weren't going to fight me on it. They knew that I knew what I liked. I knew that I liked sciences and that I would be taking sciences. They weren't, they didn't really, I don't know. When I had course selections or whatever, I would do it by myself. I would not, I wouldn't even talk to them about it unless I was like 'oh, I don't know what to take, what do you think?' Unless I went to them and asked them like straight up kind of thing.

Having decision-making power was most evident when participants spoke of their parents' desire for them to attend school in or near their hometowns. In the end, the participants moved away to go to school even though their parents preferred for them to stay at home. Carly, Elizabeth, Felicity and Heather all said their parents did not want them to move away to go to school; but, in the end their parents accepted their decisions to attend Guelph. For example, Elizabeth expressed that her mother "really wanted me to go to U of T" and "acted out" about her decision to leave home. She later described how her mother wasn't involved in the decision-making process and "had her doubts, but like I told her, it was my No. 1 choice. She was alright with it eventually."

In a similar example, Heather expressed that her parents put a lot of pressure on her to stay in her hometown:

They wanted me to stay in Ryerson 'cause they offered me a scholarship whereas Guelph didn't. But then I just wanted to live on my own. So then they eventually had to accept it. I kind of just said 'that's what I want to do.' They were a little hesitant; they were trying to convince me not to. They just told me like, financially, it'd be better to go to Ryerson.

Despite her parents' wishes, Heather believed that it was "ultimately my decision" and that "they [parents] knew that it would be my choice in the end."

Conversely, one participant cited her parents as the reason why she was in school and that it was their influence that prompted her to attend higher education. Genevieve's parents appeared to be very important in her decision-making process; in fact, they convinced her to go to university even though she was questioning her decision. She recalled: "At one point I was like 'oh, maybe university is not for me' but then they're like, 'No, you should go to university.'" When asked to explain further, Genevieve shared:

I just had this weird moment where I was, well now I am not really sure what I want to do, you know? Maybe I could go to college instead but I don't know, I thought it would be easier on me. But then I decided. I am not really sure why, I was like well I have always wanted to go to university so. I was just at this weird point where I thought maybe it's too hard for me and stuff. Maybe I can't do it you know. Maybe it would just be an easier way out you know; instead of all this work and stuff. Then my parents told me 'no you have the potential for university.'

### *Value of independence.*

The concept of independence also resonated throughout the interviews. For the majority of participants, they were independent from their parents in the application and decision-making process. Independence was also cited as a trait that the participants felt they needed to succeed in school and a value that was admired. In some cases, participants criticized others for being too dependent.

Carly and Elizabeth talked about how they applied to university by themselves, without the involvement of their parents. Carly shared: "I kind of did the whole application process independently." She went on later in the interview: "I do value my independence, I like making my own decisions." Felicity also mentioned independence when asked what advice she would give to other first-generation students entering higher education:

I guess I would kind of warn them to be more independent because it's really, it's kind of, 'cause there will be times when you're just going to be by yourself and you have to figure things out. So, I mean, if you are like relying on your parents all the time or like you're a daddy's girl who gets all your money, you kind of have to break away from that so. I guess you can kind of separate the people when you get here. Those that have depended on their parents the whole time and those who have kind of stuck to their own path I guess.

Like Felicity, Sarah spoke of the need for independence in university:

...like certain people couldn't be able to handle it; but, personally I can 'cause I was always an independent person. I can take care of myself if I had to but some

people won't be able. Some people will abuse that I see, go to a certain extremes, spend all their money, take advantage of the rules in school or the rules in res. They'd slack off where they need their parents to say 'do their work,' 'eat this,' like 'eat proper meals.' So there's a lot of independence.

Sarah highly valued her independence, saying: "Sometimes I wish I went a little further. I don't have the option of going home for a weekend. I've had a bad day or I don't have the option of going home to do my laundry and stuff like that. It'd be more independent. I would be more independent, which I like." For Heather, one of the main reasons she came to Guelph was to leave home and be on her own: "It's good to be independent and just go off somewhere." Bev also talked about doing things on her own regarding her academics: "If I struggle I just have to do it myself. I've always been very independent that way."

Independence was not a new concept for Veronica; she talked about doing things on her own in high school and how being independent was a personal choice for her:

I've never really relied on anybody else to help me with school or anything in general really. I've just kind of always done things on my own. I value independence like a lot...I get great pleasure from just succeeding and doing stuff on my own. I tend to be more, I tend to do stuff better that way and I tend to get more done when I'm independent. I have always been the kind of person if someone has told me what to do I have never liked it and done the opposite. I think independence is kind of the best route for me when it comes down to it.

### **Transitioning to higher education**

Participants regularly noted during their interviews how different things were for them now that they were attending university. The most notable variation was the differences they experienced between high school and university. As such, their transition from high school to university was a time of change, as participants re-adjusted

their expectations and behaviours. Finally, with regards to transitioning to higher education, learning about and getting the most suitable academic support was also a common theme for participants.

### **Differences between high school and university.**

The majority of participants said that for them, high school was very different from university. Often the changes they experienced left them feeling unprepared for university life, specifically regarding academics. As a result, participants frequently talked about feeling unprepared, falling behind with schoolwork, and feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

Patricia, who expressed that she had believed she had adequately educated herself about university before coming to campus, was not prepared for what she experienced:

I kind of just went to as many seminars in high school as I could and talked to my other cousins and stuff. So I found out I was not prepared at all! I did not know what to expect. It was completely different in some aspects; the course loads and the classes. The whole social aspect of it was decent. I know I am going to live with a bunch of other people and have to deal with that. But the whole course loads and how much work they put on you, I was not ready for at all. It started out I know this stuff and I didn't really do the readings. I didn't do the homework and so then midterms came around and it was 'oh, I didn't actually study or do anything.' And then it became a time-management thing where I just couldn't catch up.

When asked to speak further about the differences she experienced, Patricia responded:

Well, living away from home. That was different. And just the way the classes were set up and how the information's presented is different from what it was in high school. So in high school, they'd give you an idea, but then they'd give you an example right away and go through it and make sure you understand it. But here it's just like 'here's the information, now figure it out on your own, now GO!' Like 'OH!' Those were kind of the big differences.

It was not a surprise then, that Patricia "hated" her first semester. When asked why,

Patricia explained: "I think it was just the stress. I was not ready for it and all that. I got

so far behind I didn't know what was going on and I was just like 'ahhhggg!'"

Genevieve also found it difficult to adjust:

It's kind of hard. It's a big change from high school. It's a lot of work. It's overwhelming the amount of work and just the, the responsibility is different too. In high school if, they'd take up homework, and then that helped you, you know, make sure you did it. But here, it's, you can do it or you can't so it doesn't matter if you do it. So it's your fault. I thought it would be a lot easier before I came so I didn't prepare that much. And then now, I'm like oh, I probably should have. In high school I probably should have had better study habits and stuff cause they definitely don't work for high school or university I mean. I thought high school was easyish so I thought it would just be just a little bit harder (laughs). It's actually a *lot* harder.

When asked what was harder, Genevieve clarified:

Just there's so much more work. And labs are a lot bigger deal. And usually in high school you do everything in class. But then in university it's like there's class and then other things, like quizzes outside of class time and labs, extra labs and things like that. And then quizzes, you have to do that on your own time and stuff like that you know. It takes more time to do it kind of thing. Concepts are harder I think 'cause they, and always, they usually fly through everything but in high school it takes them like three months to do a little thing you know.

Bev also noted the changes from high school: "In high school, actually I didn't, like a *never* had good study habits. I was like, I read things once it's in there. I got it, just go. So academically I wasn't that prepared at all. Just when I came here I was like 'oh, it's harder.'" She also noted in her interview how different professors were compared to her high school teachers. She found her high school teachers easier to know and less intimidating compared to university professors.

Carly, who had previously never been to campus, was overwhelmed her first day and noted that she "didn't know what to expect." Heather also found the changes difficult and said it is hard to adapt: "Like university, the style of learning and everything. 'Cause in high school they just teach you everything you need to know instead of you going to the textbook and just learning yourself." Sarah, like many others,

also related that “it’s different. It’s not what I expected actually.” She also shared that she was not prepared for the stress nor the workload: “I’m not a stressful person but when it comes down to it, university is so stressful. Oh my God!” Another example of this is a comment from Dee: “I wasn’t prepared I don’t think for first semester. First semester kind of hit me hard.”

On the other hand, a few participants did say that their high school curriculum helped to prepare them for the academic requirements of university. Even though Dee felt overwhelmed her first semester, she did note that her high school Chemistry teacher did help to prepare her for higher education. Dee expressed: “Chemistry is probably the hardest course that I am taking. So in high school, we had a really good chemistry teacher who definitely prepared us for what chemistry is like now.” Veronica had similar feelings: “I think my school prepared me pretty good. I went to a good school also. I think they did prepare me pretty well for the chemistry stuff and biology stuff ‘cause anything they’ve mentioned, I have heard before.”

### **Experience of change.**

In addition to not feeling prepared for the changes from high school to university, many participants also recalled adapting and changing to fit into their new environments. As such, change was a common experience cited by the participants. In particular, participants talked about changing their behaviours as well as their expectations, especially when it came to academics. They also talked at length about the changes in their extracurricular levels and noted some changes to their health and activity levels compared to when they were in high school.

### *Changing behaviours.*

The majority of participants talked about changing their behaviours, most often after their first semester. Participants had to ‘learn’ how to do well in university. Therefore, how to study and keep up with school work were common experiences among the participants. For example, several participants referenced getting behind in their school work, learning how to catch up, and the subsequent changes they have made approaching their school work in their second semesters versus their first semesters. Some students learned from their mistakes by trial and error, while others learned from friends and roommates or got involved in academic support programs.

Patricia seemed to have the most dramatic transformation regarding her academic success. She had failed two classes in her first semester and was on academic probation. As such, she enrolled in a voluntary program called Bounce Back. When speaking of her first year, she explained:

Well, first semester I really didn’t, like I kind of just had my high school attitude and it was like, ok, you go to class, you show up and you kind of learn that way. And that didn’t work for me (laughs), apparently not.

As a result, she fell behind:

...it didn’t seem to me that I had homework. ‘Cause in high school they tell you, like ‘ok, this is your homework.’ And they write it on the board and they have like columns on what you need to get done. But it’s just like I wasn’t really aware of the whole course outline and how you have to, they give you all the homework at once and you have to do it. So I wasn’t expecting to *find* my homework so that was kind of ‘oh well, they didn’t give me anything so I don’t have to do anything.

When asked how she felt first semester, Patricia responded:

It was pretty awful. I called home and like ‘Mom, I don’t like it here.’ But it was just the whole, I just kind of got overwhelmed by everything. So now I know what to expect and I have to actually do the readings and things and figure out as I go. If I don’t understand it, don’t just kind of like push it aside and hope that is

sinks in eventually. This semester I have been doing, trying to do my readings and if I don't understand a lecture I will read in the textbook or do questions about it. So right now I have been able to manage everything and it is enjoyable. I have been staying on top of everything, doing all the readings and make sure I understand everything. I started right away at the first of the semester. I started doing all my homework. So I think, as it comes I go through and understand it and am able to do the quizzes and things. Just kind of, if you don't get a good grade right away, instead of like 'ohh, I can't do this,' try to figure out why you did wrong and improve that way.

The changes she made had been positive. Patricia said she "loved" her second semester because, as she explains, "I am doing so well."

Like Patricia, Heather did poorly in her first semester and was enrolled in the Bounce Back program. During the first semester, Heather recalled: "I didn't keep up with all my readings and it just kept on piling up." But in her second semester, Heather also said she felt "not as stressed because I have been trying to keep on top of my work and not falling behind. I am picking up, learning from my mistakes and going for help." When asked what changed in her second semester, Heather responded: "Time-management, so then I'd do more reading now. And then I noticed that I work better in the library. So then I stay at school longer just to do work 'cause when I'm at home I get distracted more often."

Carly also shared her experience of falling behind and what steps she had taken to improve:

Well, for example the mid terms. I have one after the other and it's kind of hard to balance my study time. 'Cause I only have that much time and I still have to go to day classes. So what ended up happening this semester was I did really really well on one midterm and really poor on the other one. And I guess I just had to study much much more in advance before midterms come at me, be more prepared.

Another example of a participant learning from their mistakes was Bev. Like so many others, Bev did not do as well as she had hoped her first semester but was changing her behaviour in her second semester because she learned “I actually need to do the work.” Bev recalled, “I drank a lot (laughs). Didn’t want to do the readings and the work and so I didn’t, and my marks reflected that.”

Dee learned how to study as she progressed through her first semester at school: “By the end of first semester when finals were coming around, I found I knew how to study. Knew what studying techniques were best for me and so I kind of came here and learned academically how I have to be in university cause I wasn’t expecting it.” She changed by what she called “trial and error.” Dee said:

I got my midterms back and I didn’t do that well so I knew I had to improve somehow. So for finals, I think it’s just midterms generally I do worse then finals because you have everything still happening, going on while you still have midterms. So finals with like classes done and stuff and I would go to the library for like the whole day and study. So I learned what I needed to know for the finals. I knew the information better then I did for the midterms.

Dee also shared how she learned what study techniques for worked best for her:

Like for psychology for instance. For the final I made like a huge stack of flashcards to in that way, like there’s a huge stack that I had to memorize definitions. And I find that helped me and I also, when I am studying I tend to like talk out loud. So I found to study in my room for an entire day I would absorb knowledge better then going to the library and studying in a group. So I knew that for midterms when I was studying with my friends it didn’t work out properly.

Sarah also stressed the importance of figuring out what works best for her and how to study. Sarah, who missed a substantial amount of time because of Marfan’s Syndrome, also felt that her residence environment and her social life negatively affected her academic performance. Sarah plans to live off campus during her second year to help

improve her grades. She had self-appraised her strengths and weaknesses and had discovered the best way she retained information:

I probably have, not like ADD, but, I don't know, I can't stay on a task with like 100 things going at once kind of thing. So I have to fix that. To tell you the truth, I'm always like really lazy. So sometimes I can't do 8:30 a.m. classes. I learned that this year. I can't do that 'cause I'm more of a person that I can work from late at night. That's when [sic] my prime time, I can actually work so I stay up late and I sleep into maybe 9 or 10 a.m. And I learnt that this year 'cause I have chemistry in the morning which I can't miss and that's like a big thing. So I find myself really like tired in class. And then the one's that are like 3, 4 o'clock classes I can do. For sure, and I think I am better with a break in between class. Maybe like a half hour break would be good so I can absorb my information. 'Cause I am a person that learns in class opposed to reading a textbook so I have to go to class and stuff like that.

Like Sarah, Veronica also had health issues that have affected her academics. In high school she struggled with anxiety and depression. When asked how she is managing in university, Veronica responded:

I get, not so much depression any more, but I definitely get huge anxiety over exams and stuff. And actually this semester I dropped a class 'cause I was, I had six classes with my co-op class. So it was way too much for me and I had to drop the class. But, I don't know, I am adjusting I think. It's a lot better this semester than it was last.

Veronica shared that the anxiety she experienced during her first semester prompted her to change her study habits. To reduce her anxiety, she worked on her time-management in her second semester and tried to be more prepared for assignments and tests.

### *Changing expectations.*

As expectations and actual experiences regarding workload and academic rigor greatly differed, some participants ended up changing their expectations about their academic performance. Many of these women were in the top percentiles in their high schools, but their drop in marks caused them to change their expectations.

For instance, Bev had been warned that her marks would drop in her first year, but she still was not happy about the change. She was an “A” student in high school and was getting a low 70 average in university. She commented: “In high school had I got what I got now I would be so upset. But now I am like a 70 and I am like ‘YES, awesome, I didn’t fail, it’s great!’”

Similarly, Carly’s academic expectations changed by 10 to 20 percent in her first semester:

I want to get at least above 70 and that’s really hard to do that. At the beginning of the semester I aimed for 80’s or almost to a 90 but it’s really hard. So, anything over 70 I am OK with that. University is hard and I don’t think I, I’m not *that* smart I guess. I find myself, so I should lower my expectations. I mean you have to be really, really smart to get 90’s and you have to *know* your stuff. Not just pure memorization, you actually have to apply the knowledge and I’m not so good at that.

Only one participant, Heather, reported feeling pressure from parents to achieve a high-academic standing in university. Heather was sent to math and Chinese school while in elementary and high school to, as she shared, “help me improve.” She too was disappointed in her performance in her first year. When asked how she was doing in school, she responded: “Not so well. Like my studying and everything. But then like they [parents] think I should be doing better because I’m, I live off-campus so then I wouldn’t get distracted as compared to living in residence.” Heather also hid her marks from her parents. When asked why, she responded: “Because it probably didn’t meet their expectations, like 80’s and above.” She also mentioned that her parents compared her to their friends’ children, “just like their achievement and how well they do in school.” According to Heather, this left her feeling pressured.

### *Changing extracurricular activity levels.*

Another prevalent theme among the majority of the participants was they were less active in extracurricular activities than they were in high school. A heavy course load and/or not finding activities they wanted to do were cited as reasons. But the majority said they made a conscious choice to reduce their extracurricular activities until they 'got the lay of the land' in university. However, while most participants said they reduced their extracurricular activities while they adapted to the changes they experienced, they also said they were eager to get more involved in their second year.

For example, Elizabeth explained that she was involved much less than she was in high school and that she found it difficult to join in:

There's just a lot more people here so it's, there's just so many more choices like back- and -forth. There are a lot of organizations and then, partially because I don't know anyone else, so it's a little sketchy to kind of dive in to un-chartered territory every time. I think that's a lot to do with because it's just my first year here. I am just sort of settling in kind of thing. But I expect to get a lot more involved later on. I find when I get more comfortable in a place, like say Guelph, I start to kind of poke my head out a little farther.

Like many others, Elizabeth hoped to increase her extracurricular participation in second year: "I kind of want to get involved more with that. And like I thought that for my first year I would be a little more tame and see if I could handle my course work before I kind of got more into that. So I guess second year, definitely get more involved with that." Similarly, Patricia noted that her activity levels were "a lot less" compared to high school because she wanted to figure out how the system worked. She explained: "I don't really do any extracurriculars right now. I just didn't really know about them so it was kind of like, my first year was kind of just go in, figure out how this school system is going to work, get in and then, like last semester I just didn't have time." But like

Elizabeth, she hoped to get more involved in her second year because “I know what to except now with school so I have that sort of, so it’s kind of like do I add the extra challenge of working on juggling different things so.”

Carly and Dee also noted reductions in their extracurricular activities compared to high school. For Carly, the reasons were increased work load and making connections For Dee, workload was the issue. She consciously decided to be less involved and to concentrate on school: “Like I thought before I came here that first year was going to be like the hardest year. So I thought I should just like focus on school.”

As demonstrated in the three aforementioned examples, the majority of participants were much less involved in university compared to high school. In addition to the heavy academic workload, most participants cited waiting until they felt comfortable in their new environment as a primary reason. Felicity was the only participant who stated that she was more active in university compared to high school:

High school, I was shy. I wasn’t really worried about that stuff. I just wanted to hang out with my friends. But by Grade 12 though, I had tried to pick it up a bit and so I actually started to care. I think it might have to do with I took a World Issues class and I learned a lot in that class. And I think that’s what kind of got me started anyways, just knowing about various things.

Felicity did indicate however, that she reduced her involvement in club activities after the first semester to allow her time to better concentrate on school.

### ***Changing levels of physical activity and health.***

Most participants did not note any substantial changes to their health and/or activity levels when comparing high school to university. There were some references to eating more fast food/junk food and less healthy foods, and some increase or decrease in

physical activity, but the differences were not as dramatic compared to the changes participants experienced when it came to extracurricular involvement.

Carly commented that she ate more fast food and was not going to the gym: “I tried working out in the gym twice this semester compared to last semester, once. Not a big improvement. And for diet-wise, definitely gone down, I eat a lot more fast food, food court.” Dee reported: “I am pretty much the same.” However, she did note that her exercise levels had increased:

I go to the gym a lot more than I would last year. Just because I guess it’s right there so it’s more convenient for me. I guess I can like output my, like it is a *stress* reliever kind of thing so that’s good to have. And then I guess I am walking more on-campus, more than less in high school.

Felicity, like Dee, commented on her increased exercise activity: “I think I may be a bit more [active] because I didn’t really go to the gym at home, but eating habit-wise I think I am about the same.” When asked why she was exercising more, Felicity responded: “The gym membership was cheap and its close so I mean, might as well take advantage of it while I’m on-campus.” Heather commented that her health is “pretty much the same” but her activity levels decreased. She was unaware that her base membership at the gym was covered in her tuition: “I am not as active as I want to be. I didn’t know that the school had paid for your base membership for the gym so I didn’t go. But I found out about it this semester so I joined a fitness program there as well.” Conversely, Sarah’s physical activity levels decreased as she felt the gym membership cost was too expensive: “I was supposed to join the gym and I never did and now I found out it’s about \$30 dollars so I am not going to bother doing it.” Genevieve, who grew up on an organic vegetable farm noted her diet had changed, especially the amount of

vegetables she was eating: “I probably haven’t been eating as much, err I mean as well, because my parents aren’t here to be like ‘eat green stuff.’ But I don’t know I have tried to eat healthy. It’s hard though with all the, like in the UC [cafeteria] with all the yummy stuff.”

Regardless of changes to diet and exercise that was noted by participants, Veronica was the only participant who mentioned gaining weight in her first year:

...I gained like 10 pounds (laughs) ‘cause at home we make such healthy meals. My mom like makes really healthy meals three times a day and stuff and I just eat her meals. And then here, there’s so much junk food everywhere. It’s hard not to be tempted. But now, I’m trying to eat healthy again, I’m trying to make more meals for myself instead of always going out and definitely trying to get to the gym more so.

Elizabeth experienced the most notable change after arriving on campus: She became a vegan<sup>12</sup>: “I became vegan when I got here so that’s a little bit of a change, but it kind of forces me to eat less junk food I guess. I was pretty healthy all around in my diet in high school versus university.” The people she lives with in her Living Learning Centre (LLC) appeared to influence her decision to change her diet. “A *lot* of people in [LLC] are vegan so I thought ‘OK, I might as well give it a try.’”

## **Issues and Challenges**

Participants reported experiencing many issues and challenges as a first-year student at the University of Guelph. For organizational purposes, the issues and challenges they experienced were divided into three main categories: 1) academic, 2) financial, and 3) social.

---

<sup>12</sup>A vegan is defined as a vegetarian that only eats plant foods and excludes all meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, eggs, and honey.

### **Academic experience.**

As previously mentioned, the majority of participants experienced a significant change in their academic expectations in university compared to high school. As a result, many struggled academically during the first semester and/or received university marks that were significantly lower than their marks in high school. As such, during the interviews many participants discussed the types of academic support they wanted and needed in university.

### ***Sources of academic support.***

Given that many participants talked about struggling with the academic rigor of university during their first semester, their experiences of seeking out and getting academic support were often referenced during the interviews. Participants primarily relied on friends, roommates and peer support for academic needs. Similarly, students attended Supported Learning Groups (SLG's),<sup>13</sup> which are peer led study groups or had a student mentor. It is interesting to note that, with only one exception, none of the participants approached their professors in their first semester to ask for academic support.

Friends and roommates were strong sources of academic support. For instance, Dee, who had never gone to a professor for help, utilized her friends from high school who were in the same program: "...we're all in general science so I have a bunch of people I can go to and be, 'do you understand this?'" Dee said she even learned a study

---

<sup>13</sup> Supported Learning Groups (SLGs) are peer led study groups designed to help students succeed in a course. SLG's meet regularly in the library and also offer mid-term and exam preparation support.

technique from a friend in her residence room and that it was helpful during her Calculus mid-term exam. She also found it comforting to have academic support from friends:

I guess my friends are all in the same program so it's better for us to learn. If I have a question I can go to them and ask it. If I didn't have them here then I would have to do a lot more like going to the professors and so it's just easier, comforting that they're here. I can just go to their room and ask them a question, and whereas if I was alone I would have to do a lot more work.

Genevieve revealed that she has never gone to a professor for help because they were "so scary" and that she relied on her friends instead: "I have other friends in the course that help me out and they're, they live in the same area as me so we'll help each other out or whatever on assignments and stuff." Genevieve said her roommate was leaving the University next semester, and commented on the effect it would have on her academic support "'cause we help each other out a lot too, with our courses. So if my roommate was in Art's or something, I don't know what I would do." When asked who she would go to for help now that her roommate is leaving, Genevieve responded: "I wouldn't know? Try to make friends in classes so that people can help you."

Similarly, Sarah said having friends to go to for academic support was paramount to academic success. She demonstrated this by discussing her roommate:

She's really anti-social and she really hasn't met that many new friends and it has put a burden on her. Because all her friends are in science, which is what I'm in, and she's in environmental. And she's struggling and she doesn't have the access of different people in different courses to get the help through that way. She's on academic probation and she has a chance of being kicked out of university. And she's smart. But just the fact that she is with that same resource and she won't expand her resources.

When asked what she meant by 'resources', Sarah explained:

Friend-wise. She'll learn from meeting people in her program and at her labs. She's like 'oh ya, I met this nice person' and I'm like, 'well, did you get her email?' or like, 'are you going to do more of the labs together?' And she will be

like 'no.' Whereas you have to engage yourself. That kind of thing. Meeting new friends helps.

In addition to going to friends or roommates for help, many participants also attended Student Learning Groups (SLGs). Patricia, who was on academic probation, spoke of the help and support she received from SLG's as well as a mentor: "With MBG [Molecular Biology and Genetics] they paired us up with a fourth-year student as like a mentoring thing so. She's been helping me a lot; just questions of what to do kind of thing. She's been really helping figuring [sic] out how to study too."

Carly also attributed her academic success to the SLG program:

I go to a Chemistry SLG and I found it works a LOT. I did way better on my midterm for chemistry this semester than last semester and I'm like 100% certain it's from the SLG. Last year I went to, I would go to the one's right before the midterm where they gave out the mock midterm and stuff. So I just like made a deal with myself at the beginning of the semester that I would do it because I know with extra help I would do better.

Heather, who also utilized her friends and roommates and attended an SLG, said she was "a little intimidated" to go to a professor for support.

Felicity was the only participant who said she contacted a Professor, but even then it was only via email: "I would either go to my Prof or someone else in the class or someone. I find the Profs are really easy to contact. But I haven't actually talked to them face-to-face 'cause I'm shy, but email works."

Only one participant noted that she does not seek out academic support. When asked where she went for help Bev responded: "Nobody. I just, if I struggle I just have to do it myself. I've always been very independent that way. I just have to get it done. Go back on the Internet and find out what it is I need to know. I never really go to anyone for help."

### **Financial experience.**

The majority of literature regarding first-generation students cited the many financial challenges associated with being a first-generation student. Research indicated that first-generation students were more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This was apparent in the interviews. Participants often discussed the different types of financial sources they utilized to secure money to attend higher education, as well as how their spending habits had changed while at university. Furthermore, a few participants spoke of how they valued their education more than students whose parents paid their expenses. Finally, a relationship between marks and money was expressed by some of the participants.

### ***Sources of money.***

The majority of participants used the piecemeal approach when acquiring the needed funds to pay for university. They referenced a variety of sources of money from parents and family members, including sibling support and inheritance money, and using their own sources of money through employment, scholarships and bursaries. Many participants needed to, or said they would need to, access financial assistance from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP)<sup>14</sup> while in school.

For example, Patricia said that an inheritance is what allowed her to attend university:

I've got inheritance money when my grandpa passed away so it's been in savings. So that's pretty much what got me through this year. He passed away when I was like Grade 7 and so we have some money from there. My parents put it into a savings so it has kind of been growing from there.

---

<sup>14</sup> The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) is an integrated student loan funded by the Province of Ontario and Government of Canada for full-time post-secondary students.

Patricia shared that she was unable to get financial assistance from the government:

I didn't get OSAP because my parents made too much; but it's been hard for us. It has been pretty stressful on the family 'cause we still have mortgages, and my brother is out there doing different events because we were big into scouting.

Felicity saved money for university while in high school but still needed OSAP.

In addition, she also used money from an inheritance:

I had been working at Harvey's since Grade 10 so I just worked all summer and stuff. And even after I saved up money, I still needed OSAP though just 'cause my parents didn't really have money set aside for me to go. But then my uncle happened to die and then I got that Millennium scholarship.

Felicity added that her parents never had any extra money to save for her school, and that she will need to be on OSAP "for all four years definitely." She stated: "I didn't really have that much money saved up when I got here so the deal kind of was like my mom and my dad and OSAP would pay for the funding. And whatever money I saved up in the summer would be my spending money and I wouldn't rely on them for other money so."

Dee was awarded OSAP and also received money from her parents, her grandmother, and through scholarships:

I had OSAP loans. But that didn't cover the whole thing and I think my nana's helped me out *a lot* for my computer and stuff. My nana paid for my computer, my laptop, so she's been like a big help. But my dad I guess paid for this year 'cause I only had to pay close to \$5,000 or maybe less, \$3,000 maybe? \$2,000 to \$3,000 each semester because I had the OSAP loans and then I also got a \$2,000 entrance scholarship.

In addition to getting money from a variety of sources, many participants talked about working part-time jobs in high school and full-time jobs during the summer to save for university.

Elizabeth had funded her university with external scholarships and through a part-time job during high school: "I worked about 30 hours a week all throughout high school

to kind of save up money to come here.” Similarly, Bev said it was out of “necessity” that she worked to pay for university. She took a year off after high school to work and applied for bursaries, scholarships and OSAP as well:

I worked and I got OSAP, so I paid for school myself. I got the entrance scholarships and the Queen Elizabeth Bursary, and then I applied for other bursaries. I think I have another scholarship coming in, another Guelph one. I can’t remember what it is but that helped pay for *a lot* of the schooling.

Parental support in the form of Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP’s)<sup>15</sup> was cited by two participants, Genevieve and Heather. However, in Genevieve’s situation, she still needed additional financial support and spoke of her inability to get OSAP:

We are not even allowed, apparently because of what my dad, like their income, it seems like it’s a lot or something. I don’t really understand it but it’s actually not like, after stuff on the farm I guess so I couldn’t apply. Right now it is getting harder I guess cause of the whole economy thing and so it’s been hard. We never made that much money ‘cause farming beef cattle, it doesn’t make that much you know, and so. But we were ok, like we weren’t like poor, so. Just because well, now the economy is going down so they have pressure that way and we were never really well off I guess being farmers, don’t really get much so.

Sarah, who worked part-time on her winter and holiday breaks, talked about saving her whole life for school:

I, well, since I was little my nono would give us \$20 bucks every time he’d seen us, so we had, we have probably the first three years saved for. I have been saving up part of my birthday money since I was little. I would have to put away to this account where it’s frozen. I can’t take anything or put anything in. And my Dad would put like extra change and money in there. So we’ve been saving since we were little, since we basically were born. I have that \$12,000 saved up so we didn’t have to tap from my mom’s salary or my dad’s salary or anything like that. And it also helped ‘cause we gradually did it.

---

<sup>15</sup> Registered Education Savings Plans are plans for parents, friends or family members to put aside money for a child’s post-secondary education.

On the other hand, Carly was one of two participants who did not experience financial struggles during her first year: “Oh, first year it’s not that bad because I got some scholarships from Guelph. But it pays majority for my first year, so second year will be harder for me.” Carly was not alone in recognizing that getting money for future years may be problematic. In fact, this was a common worry for many of the participants.

***Money for the future.***

One universal theme was expressed by all the participants regarding their financial experience: they had scraped together enough financial sources for the first year but were unsure of how to pay for subsequent years. They often used words like “I think” and “hopefully” when describing getting the proper financial support for their remaining years of university. It was unclear whether their first-year experience resulted in the realization of how much money they needed for school or if they had consciously decided to take it one day at a time financially. Many participants referenced the need to get a full-time, well-paying job during the summer and a part-time job their second semester to help with the financial requirements of higher education.

When asked how it will be for her financially next year, Patricia stated: “I think I have enough for tuition. But rent is going to be a big problem.” As a result, Patricia, who decided not to work her first year, was deciding whether she needed to secure part-time employment next year:

I kind of just wanted to see how it would go, see the work load. So I’m still kind of like do I want the job ‘cause I know it’s going to be pretty intense next semester too. I’m debating on that, kind of depending on how much I make in the summer and if I need it. Or I might just work out an arrangement to come back on weekends and work so I might try to do that.

During her second semester, Dee realized that she would need other sources of money next year: “I hadn’t saved up for first year. I am realizing now that I am going to have to get a job and save up all my money during the summer for second year.” She continued: “I’m going to get a part-time job in second year because I will definitely need it to pay for rent and stuff.” Given that her father was laid off from Ford since December 2009, Dee said she would need to get a full-time job for the summer.

Second-year finances were also a concern for Elizabeth, who was not on OSAP in her first year. Elizabeth planned on working during the summer and applying for OSAP if needed: “I have a job tree-planting for this semester, for this summer, so I figure that will give me enough to cover at least tuition for next year. And working part-time I think I will get by and do well. Maybe OSAP if that becomes an issue in the future.”

Similar to Elizabeth, Felicity mentioned OSAP as a safety net in case she was unable to secure the needed money for future years.

Genevieve indicated that she did not feel financial stress right now but worried about the future:

It should be OK for next year too, and then maybe half of third and then maybe the rest we have to somehow scrape up somewhere, I don’t know? I’ll see what happens like in terms of jobs and how much money I can save up but I’m sure we can do it.

It was clear that the participants were unsure of how they will support themselves for all four years of their degree programs. The majority stated that they planned to ‘scrape up’ the money through part-time and summer jobs and OSAP. However, one student noted that she was close to having financial difficulties in her first year. Bev, who would not have been able to attend Guelph without government assistance, was

relying on OSAP and part-time work to pay for her education. She said that things were getting financially tight, but hoped to make due until the semester's end.

*I think I can do it. I'm pretty sure I can do it. I have \$1,000 left. I think I can make it. My mom gave me \$50 dollars a week for groceries. I should be ok. I'm hoping. I just won't eat the last week of school (laughs).*

### ***Spending habits.***

With the financial burdens of higher education, some participants noted that their spending habits had changed at university, whether consciously or unconsciously.

For example, Dee stated:

*...I find that I'm not spending. In high school I had a part-time job that I would work weekends so I had \$200 every two weeks which I would just blow on whatever. But now I find since I have my meal card, I'm not paying for food. I don't really go off-campus that often to go shopping for anything so I'm not spending \$200 every two weeks. I don't really spend that much at all because I don't really have any money (laughs).*

But when asked if she deliberately changed her spending habits, Dee responded: "No, it wasn't conscious, it's just like I rarely leave campus."

Two participants spoke of trying to reduce their expenses by preparing food at home instead of purchasing on-campus food. Genevieve, who lived in a residence with kitchen facilities, commented that she limited her purchase of campus food because of the price:

*I usually don't spend that much, I try not to. But, I don't really buy much anymore. Just like groceries once a week and then that, so I don't really buy on-campus food that much. I find it really expensive but I still, I still sometimes, if I'm out and about or whatever.*

Heather, who lived off-campus, also limited on-campus food purchases: "Well, since I cook, I don't have to buy lunch and meals and then I don't use that much money because I don't feel the need to like go out and buy things."

Another example of someone who changed her spending habits was Felicity, who also noticed changes in her friends' habits:

At first it's kind of tough being five minutes from the mall. So I mean I found that I ran out of money really quick. But I knew better this semester. And 'cause I worked a bit over Christmas and stuff again, it's always like the first couple months that are the hardest. But now I know what I need and what I don't need so it's a bit better now. I wait until I get home to buy that, when I get a job, or do I really need it now, 'cause now I mean, like we've got like a month left and then its finals. So I mean there's nothing I really *need* before then. And so you kind of just have to figure out your wants and your needs. I find that's happening with all my friends now.

Bev, on the other hand, was a spender, and was aware of how much she was spending:

I know I have money from OSAP and scholarships and I kind of just spend my money 'cause I have it. I know I shouldn't. And I would like to change that but there's things I want to buy. The outfit I am wearing right now (jeans, superman T-shirt), I bought this last week 'cause I went and got my bursary cheque. I'm like, 'oh, \$400, awesome,' so I went shopping. Clothes and alcohol. *That* takes up a lot of it.

Bev was the student who noted that she may run out of money before the conclusion of the semester.

### *Value of paying for school.*

Money and education were intrinsically linked for two participants. Both commented on the connection between the value of school and their work ethic, and the fact that they do not rely fully on their parents to pay for school. This was also noted in some of the literature. The two participants commented that they felt people with less financial pressure in school were more irresponsible. By comparison, they felt they had

developed better skills because they were paying for the majority of their schooling themselves.

For instance, Felicity felt she learned more because she had to pay for school:

I just find the people that are always really dependant on their parents, like money isn't really an object to them and they're not, I wouldn't say they're not experiencing it as much but for the people who are actually working on their own and not getting money from their parents. I find you learn a lot more. And I mean, it's probably a better life skill to have 'cause you know how to manage things.

Elizabeth also referenced the importance of paying for school and motivation:

I think the pressure falls a lot more on the individual and I feel if everybody was paying for their education that a lot of people would take it a lot more seriously. I just have a lot of my friends are just kind of like, 'oh, I'm here because my parents are paying for residence and it'll feel like a fun experience' kind of thing. But I feel if people really worked harder, there'd be more of a motivation to do well then if it was just kind of a free ride from your parents.

### ***Money and marks.***

Money was also linked to increased pressure to perform. Some participants felt that their marks reflected whether they were wasting or valuing their parents' money.

Three participants made reference to this relationship during their interviews.

Carly, who throughout her interview mentioned the pressure from her family that she felt to take math or science with the goal of finding a job, explained that it was important to go to school to get a job: "They really wouldn't think that is a good idea because you're spending money on something that's not useful. To think that say philosophy is not easy to get a job or something like that. You're ditching a lot of money in to it, it's an investment right?" Veronica also mentioned the connection between doing well in school and money:

I think in high school, it used to just be about marks. Usually it was just internal pressure from me 'cause I'm a perfectionist naturally so I strive for higher marks.

But then when I came here and my parents are *paying* to have me come here, so it's an extra external pressure of pleasing them and not wasting their money and stuff like that too.

Finally Heather, who would not reveal her marks to her parents because she felt they would be embarrassed by her academic performance, said: "It's just like if I don't get the grades then maybe they'll feel that I'm not using their money well."

### **Social experience.**

All of the study participants moved out of their hometowns to a new city to attend school, so making new friends was a significant and shared theme. The amount of contact with friends from home, as well as how they gained socio-emotional support was also discussed.

### ***Making friends.***

Making friends and developing relationships with people was an important part of the first-year experience. Some of the women arrived on campus not knowing anyone, while others accompanied friends from high school and roomed with them in residence. Regardless, making friends was a huge part of the university experience for these students in their first semester. Furthermore, many of the participants stressed the importance of making friends as part of succeeding in university.

Patricia was the only participant who talked about struggles with roommates and fitting in. She feels there is a difference between people from small rural communities and people from large urban centres:

...they're all from Toronto or Hamilton or Calgary and I am this little town so I think it's like the big difference. They are like 'ok' well you're speaking of

yourself too highly for us' I'm like well, 'ok' but there is a lot of people from smaller towns in the rest of my tower and we are more accepting, we have to live with you now. Especially from Toronto, they're snobby (laughs). I don't want to be rude about them but that is what I found they're like uptight. And I am like small town, you kind of know everyone so you get to be friends with everyone. And their just like 'ok, I don't really want to know you, you're just here.' So it is like you have to work your way into their crowd.

A self-proclaimed "homebody," Patricia noted that her boyfriend, who was a second-year student she met on campus, helped her to make new friends: "My boyfriend, he's kind of like the social butterfly kind of thing so we've been going out that way. He's introduced me to some other people some at parties and things."

Carly came to Guelph not knowing anyone and expressed that she found the first few days lonely. However, when she started attending classes, she was able meet friends:

I don't know anybody who came to Guelph. I'm like the only one from my high school and so I was a bit nervous and the first two days were kind of lonely here. But then I started making new friends 'cause the majority of our classes are the same in our program. So I sometimes meet the same person in different classes. I met some people through that.

In addition, during her interview, Carly spoke of the importance of making new friends.

As an off-campus student, she recognized the need to find a social network: "I think that if you are living off-campus for the first time like me, it's important to socialize with your roommates and stuff."

In addition, Elizabeth spoke of meeting friends in her classes and at the Athletics Centre, and said making new friends was challenging:

...it was just sort of like OK, go to university, live in the residence, you know, make new friends sort of thing. But I think I only knew about one or two people at Guelph when I came here so. It was hard. It was hard to make new friends kind of thing but it was good.

Like Elizabeth, Heather did not have any close friends on campus when she arrived. She felt "kind of sad because there wasn't many people that applied to this

school from my high school.” However, she utilized the social networking site to meet people before arriving in Guelph and talked of meeting friends during Orientation Week and in her classes:

There was a website where you could meet, well they talked about orientation and so, kind of met some people there. And then we met up during that week. That is how I met Carly. And then I found out she was also in my program, so it was easier.

While some participants did not know other students when they first arrived on campus, three others were accompanied to Guelph by close friends from their high school and lived with them in residence their first year. For instance, Dee had come with a group of friends and credited her high school friends for her ability to make new friends:

It was easier that way to make like new friends when you weren't like completely by yourself. I think it's definitely helped that we came as a group because I don't know, I don't think, I'm not really that social on my own. When I'm with other people, I'll be social. But to be alone, it would be kind, I don't know, of stressful.

Felicity, like Dee, also came with friends and found that helpful, especially early on before she started to develop new friendships:

...it's helpful in like the first week, 'cause I mean you don't actually know everyone in your first week so you need someone to kind of fall back on. If I didn't have anyone to go with to somewhere, situations like that. If I had a question, chances are if they'd run into it already and stuff.

Felicity also noted how helpful it was that her friend's brother had also gone to Guelph: “One of the girls, her brother, well both of her brothers have gone here before so she kind of led the way.” Saying that, Felicity felt that she would have made new friends, even if she had not attended university with her high school friends: “I think it would be probably as easy 'cause the two girls in my alcove that I've become like really close with, it wouldn't have mattered if I had known the other two girls 'cause I would have met them anyways so. But it's just a bonus having them around I guess.”

Sarah, on the other hand, did not speak positively about having her friends from home accompany her to Guelph. In fact, she talked about trying to break away from her high school friends that she roomed with:

I am just really an outgoing person and I like meeting new people. In high school it was just everyone branched off, I'm like, I can still keep those friends but I want more friends, new friends. I don't know. The group of friends from high school was different. And they all came to Guelph and I was just like 'I'm over that.' They're more to themselves. Like none of them, that whole group came out of high school never met any new friends. That's basically it. There was like a whole group of us who came but then I just realized I am over high school kind of, and my roommate didn't realize that so she's still with them.

Bev also talked about the need to break away from her friends from high school and meet new people. She shared that she was apprehensive and unsure if she would make new friends prior to arriving in Guelph. Yet she deliberately chose a university that none of her hometown friends were attending. She also asked for a double room to force herself to socialize: "I said to myself 'I am going to be forced to be friends with a person' 'cause otherwise I was afraid I would just be like, stay in my room and just be alone. That didn't happen at all."

For Bev, university provided her with the opportunity to meet new people with whom she could relate:

I am a lot more social in university then I ever was at home because I am finding more people I have more interest, in common with. And you don't have to be around people that you don't want to be around and that's basically it. I have more friends that are, I can tell I'll be friends with forever, then I *ever* had in high school with cause we don't talk anymore...I think I fit in here better than I ever did at home. I have my close group of friends and then I have just general friends. I'm not, *not* friends with anybody.

A few participants did report having difficulties making new friends. Genevieve, who lived in residence with a friend from her high school, found it hard to have a social life because she was spending the majority of her time doing school work:

It's hard to have a social life 'cause I am always doing work and just always at the library and in my res room just doing work and stuff. So I really, I hang out with my roommate a lot and we get along so that's good. And they're just, I don't have that many friends, especially close friends 'cause I never got to be close with them.

Unfortunately for Genevieve, her roommate was leaving University at the end of the semester. When asked how she felt about that, she responded: "Sad. I don't want her to leave. I don't know what I am going to do." She also believed that her lack of closeness with others in her suite was based on the types of courses that her suitemates were taking: "Well, most people in my res, they're not in science and I find science, compared to something like business or arts, science is a *lot* more work cause I feel like I am doing work all the time and they are just always having fun." Like Genevieve, Sarah spoke of the divide between the Arts and Sciences students when it came to socializing:

It's really hard, especially being in a science and living, my whole floor, there's probably like five of us in science who are on my floor and the rest are all in business. So we're the ones who are always working and there the one's playing video games and stuff like that so it's hard. Just being, seeing them be able to goof around and not do as much assignments as we do and put time and effort into stuff we do it's kind of like, 'that's great (sarcastic).' It's harder.

### ***Friends from home.***

Even though making new friends was a significant experience for the students in this study, their friends from home played an important role. While some of their friends from home were with them at Guelph, others had stayed in their hometowns or gone to other post-secondary institutions. Many of the participants kept in contact with their hometown friends, mostly through online social-networking sites. Regardless, home friends were still integral to their university experience, even when they were not physically on campus.

Dee explained:

We all have MSN. We all have Facebook. We all have cell phones. So it's pretty easy to stay in contact with them. It's kind of sad that we're all, well we're not all separated; but it is sad that some of us are not with others. Like Guelph is definitely the school that most of my, even my Grade 12 grade in high school went to, so there's tons of people from my high school here compared to other schools. I talk to my friends pretty often on MSN.

Similarly, Carly and Heather spoke to their friends from home regularly on MSN.

Elizabeth, who frequently went home for weekends, talked about regularly seeing her friends: "I always have to call my friends up to go to lunch or something." Genevieve also kept in contact with some of her friends on Facebook. But both Genevieve and Felicity noted that as their work loads increased, the frequency of contact with friends decreased.

Moreover, two participants, Felicity and Veronica, shared that they were among a handful of people from their high school who were attending a post-secondary institution. Veronica was the only person from her core group of high school friends to go on to university. Even though she spoke of developing relationships on campus, she commented that she was still more connected with her friends from home:

My closest friends actually aren't university sort of people; they are actually more hands-on sort of people. My friend Jack, she's still at Stratford. She's like working at places there and my boyfriend; he's a hands-on sort of guy too so he does trades stuff. I like that. I don't really like too many people that are like me, like are academic. I kind of like hands on sort of simple people more so. I come from a farming family so I think I just, it naturally comes to me that I get along with people like that. I am more of a book smart person so I don't have much common sense so I surround myself with people that have street sense to sort of make up for my inability (laughs).

When asked if she felt like she fit in with people in academia, Veronica responded: “No, not really. Kind of, but I feel like I fit in more with people back at home but that’s cause we all kind of came from the same background.”

While the majority of participants shared that they kept in contact with their friends from home, Sara and Bev consciously wanted to separate themselves from hometown friends. For Sara, this realization came after she got to campus. Even though she was living with a friend from her high school who was, as she shares a “kind of security blanket,” Sarah realized: “I wanted new friends, and not keep high school lingering.” On the other hand, Bev realized before she applied to university that she wanted to meet new people. As previously noted, she consciously chose a school that none of her friends attended: “I also wanted to go where not a lot of my friends went so I would make new friends.” Bev went as far as to express concern that a friend from home may attend Guelph next year. When asked why she wanted to be away from her home friends, Bev responded:

I was just tired of the people from my town. I don’t know. There’s ‘cause living is such a small community it’s just everyone’s kind of like the sameish. I just wanted to get out and see how people are different and meet a lot more people than I know. And that was basically the idea of that. And it’s like in university you make life long friends and I wanted to get that whole experience. I find more people that are like me and it just works. I can tell like the friendships just feel better. They are more real. I can actually talk to these people about issues whereas friends at home it’s just kind of like ‘hey, what are you doing this weekend?’

### ***Socio-emotional support.***

Participants in this study reported having a wide variety of social networks, including new and old friends, siblings and parents. During difficult times, they would go to varying people in these networks for support. However, with few exceptions, most

participants expressed that they received socio-emotional support from friends and family from home. Some participants had home friends who were accessible on campus, but most had to seek out socio-emotional support off campus.

Heather's primary support came from friends and a cousin from home: "...my cousin or just like my friends. A few from here, majority from like home." Carly expressed that her sister was the person to whom she looked to for socio-emotional support. Her sister still lived in their hometown more than six hours away.

Genevieve received support from a friend from her hometown, which was important because she felt she could not approach her parents about some matters: "Friends. I guess that's really all I have. Like my one friend back home, she is like my best friend. Just cause our [parents], not that close. We didn't ever really talk about stuff so, like all throughout my life we never really talked about like, personal things you know." Like Genevieve, Sarah said she did not confide in her parents:

I am close with them like a bit but I am not *that* close that I'll be 'Oh ya, I'm having a bad day' kind of thing. I will tell them that I am stressed, they'll be 'why haven't you emailing me?' and I'll be like 'I've been busy, I'm stressed.' But, I don't know. We are not really that open in our family in that sense. I don't know how to explain it, it's hard, like some things we are open with and some things we aren't. We are getting better at that but we just haven't been like the open family where we can talk about everything kind of thing.

In addition, many participants got support from home friends who attended the University. Dee, who appeared to have the strongest network of friends from home at Guelph, enjoyed being able to rely on the people she lived with for support: "It's nice to have a face-to-face conversation." Similarly, Elizabeth received support from a friend in second-year at Guelph who was from her hometown:

I have a friend that I mentioned that I went to visit on-campus last year. She's one of my really good friends kind of thing. If I'm struggling with anything it

would be like she's kind of impartial sort of 'cause she's away from my social group of like [LLC] friends. So she's always kind of like off campus. I can just kind of go chill out at her house sort of thing. She's pretty, pretty good. And there's, if there's anything I can always go to my roommates. We're pretty close like that.

Elizabeth expressed that she could get support from her roommates in her Living Learning Centre, as did Veronica and Bev, who also lived in a cluster. These three participants were the only three who indicated that they received socio-emotional support from new friends they met while at university. For Veronica, her relationship with her new friends was strong because she could relate to them. They too had similar histories of anxiety and depression:

...two girls at my, in [Living Learning Centre] that deal with the same sort of problems I do. Because, there's another, there's two other girls; one deals with depression a lot, the other deals with anxiety a lot so I kind of talk to them cause they understand. But, even before them I usually call my mom or dad or something, or my sisters.

Bev also had a close friend in her living area: "I go to my best friend here 'cause she tells me everything and I tell her everything. And that's, it's nice to have someone, that one person you can always go to."

### **First-generation Student Identity**

Universally, participants had not heard of the term 'first-generation' before entering this study. Furthermore, they did not associate themselves with the term nor embrace the label. However, they did identify themselves as being the first in their family to attend university and noted the pride that they and their families felt because of this accomplishment. And even though they did not associate with the term 'first-generation,' most participants did tell others about their parents' education backgrounds and offer advice to other first-generation students.

### **Informing others of their first-generation status.**

As mentioned, the participants spoke of not knowing or identifying with their first-generation status, yet they were informed about this study by a friend or roommate. Therefore, at one point they disclosed their parents' level of education to another person on campus.

Genevieve said that her friend handed her the poster advertising the study and told her she should participate. When asked how her friend knew that Genevieve's parents had not attended higher education, she responded: "Oh, it just, it doesn't really come up in conversation that much but one time it did awhile ago and she remembered." Later she described the context of the discussion: "It's kind of a weird story. But we were going on a dog sledding trip and we were all driving up and then we were in one car and we started talking about where our parents went to university and stuff." According to Genevieve, there were six people in the car and she believed that she was the only one whose parents did not attain a post-secondary degree. When asked how she felt about that, she responded:

Oh like it's kind of weird, I guess. I didn't really think anything of it really, but I don't know, I didn't want to be, like I love my parents, like that's fine. Maybe a little bit shy cause everyone else was like 'oh ya, my mom went here' and I was like 'oh, my mom dropped out.'

In two cases, participants were encouraged to participate by women who had already been accepted into the study. Heather was one; she learned about the study from Carly. According to Heather, her parents' level of education came up in conversation. Veronica also heard about the study from another person also involved in the study. Heather and Carly both indicated that they knew other first-generation students. Bev, however, indicated that she was the only student in her peer group who could be

considered first-generation, with the exception of her siblings. Furthermore, it was a friend who informed her of the study: “My best friend found it in the gym and she’s like ‘here.’” When asked how her friend knew, she responded: “I think it was just in passing ‘cause both her parents went to school in Guelph and so I guess that’s how it came up, like ‘my parents didn’t go to school.’”

One participant was curious about the research itself; specifically why a study of first-generation students was needed. Elizabeth stated many times throughout the interview that being a first-generation student did not affect her ability or motivation to attend school. She felt that it was her friends who had the most influence on her decisions, and that there were no differences between herself and her friends who had parents with a post-secondary experience:

When you say first-generation student I don’t think there’s, I don’t think that plays a very big role. I wouldn’t consider myself very different from my friends or my roommates who have parents who have gone to university kind of thing. I think it’s just the same experience overall whether or not you’ve had a parent that’s attended a post-secondary.

When asked why she thought there were not any major differences among her friends whose parents have university degrees, Elizabeth responded:

I think there might be slight differences; like for example, if people’s parents have gone to a post-secondary then they would be able to help out more financially, little things like that, but I feel like overall it’s more like your personal choices that determine your outcomes in university as opposed to say what your parents have done or the expectations they hold. I think it would be pretty similar.

Elizabeth defined ‘personal choices’ as:

...just people’s goals in life, whether or not they really do want to seek a post-secondary education as opposed to, say, joining the work force right away. Or if they’d recognize that working hard now will ultimately lead to more success in the future. Just like a conscious decision that you want to be successful in university I feel would have a lot stronger outcome than just say the decisions your parents made when you were that age kind of thing.

Elizabeth felt that it was the social environment, most notably her friends that influenced her most:

I always think that it's more, you learn a lot more from your friends in high school than you do with your parents sort of thing so. Well, at least where I came from it was a pretty well-off high school where the teachers were all like, 'each and every one of you are going to university preferably on scholarship, you are all going to do amazing' kind of thing.

Elizabeth, whose mother works in the school system, said she came from an affluent school where the majority of students went on to attend a post-secondary institution. Furthermore, all the teachers in the high school expected the students to get a higher education, and that going to college was "looked down" upon in her school and peer group.

#### **Advice for first-generation students.**

Although the women in this study lacked a strong first-generation identity, they did have some advice to share with other students in the same situation. Specifically, there were three common recommendations for other first-generation students. First, participants recommended that first-generation students get prepared and learn about university in general and the University of Guelph specifically before arriving on campus. Second, they insisted that to succeed in higher education, first-generation students must keep up with the school work and not fall behind. Finally, they stressed getting involved in activities and meeting new people, which contravenes their own behaviours as discussed earlier.

Several participants recommended that first-generation students get prepared, know what they want to do, and learn about things before they arrive at school. For

example, Bev cited how important it was to get information about higher education to help reduce fears. Carly recommended that first-generation students have clear goals and be informed:

Know what you really want to do, like the program you want to be in, 'cause you need the motivation. If you don't like what you are doing, you won't do well in it or try as hard as you need to be to successfully complete it. Perhaps research some of the courses and then maybe, on the web, search for information about it. Learn some things ahead of time so it won't come to you like a new thing. And just, feel prepared, pepped up for it.

In addition to getting prepared, participants highlighted the importance of social involvement. Dee explained:

Try to make as many friends as you can, try to get out there, at least join one maybe committee/club 'cause you'll meet people that way. Keep up with the readings and you will succeed. I would also advise them to go to the SLG's 'cause those are actually helping a lot. So, I don't know. Just don't slack off for a week and then think you can pick it up from there. Like, it's not going happened.

Felicity also recommended that first-generation students get involved:

You *have* to put yourself out there and not be shy or else you are going to sit in your room every night 'cause I know people that just didn't really put any effort into it and like they just don't do anything. So I mean you just kind of have to put yourself out there. Well you can't necessarily just be shy, like you have to ask questions if you want to know anything and like I started joining things and I thought that made it a bit easier too like with the clubs, like you get to meet more people and you find out more about, just like Guelph itself. So, I thought that was good.

Sarah agreed, saying: "I would tell them to get involved. Because after getting involved in intramurals this semester I've met a lot of new people through that and that is what you should do." She also stressed the importance of keeping up with school work and to "actually pay attention, not to be the person that's going to study the night before the test and actually learn your stuff cause it carries on."

Genevieve also had some advice about school work: “IT WILL BE HARD!”

When asked what was hard, Genevieve responded that students must keep up with school:

Just that transition pretty much. So, like the work load and the responsibility and stuff, like to do work. There’s no one telling you to do work. It’s all you, you know, so if you didn’t study for a quiz then that’s too bad, you fail. Probably don’t procrastinate and make schedules I guess. And make sure you have enough time to study for bigger things like exams. So just manage your time well. Just making sure you have allotted times for studying for certain things and getting assignments done early enough so that you have time for studying and stuff.

Heather also cautioned future first-generation students about not getting behind in their school work: “Work hard for everything and be sure that you know what you want to go into and just work your way through it ‘cause it’s a lot of work. Just ask for help whenever they need to and just don’t fall behind. Try to stay on top.”

## Chapter V: Discussion

As noted, phenomenology is not a positivist approach that can demonstrate cause and effect relationships. Its purpose is to speak to the nature of a particular phenomenon and describe how it is experienced by a subject: in this case, the phenomenon experienced by a first-generation female student in her first year in higher education. The goal of this study was to capture and describe the lived experience of the participants. It was not to prove or disprove theories about first-generation students. However, several of the research findings in this study were consistent with previous research. Even though I am unable to make any concrete generalizations with such a small, self-selected sample, the majority of experiences expressed by the participants were on par with other research regarding first-generation students.

As previously mentioned in the literature review, a number of researchers have theorized that first-generation students lacked the ‘college knowledge’ needed to successfully transition into higher education because their parents could not share any experiential knowledge or give instrumental support to help their children succeed in higher education. As a result, it was believed that first-generation students were less prepared for post-secondary education and had more difficulties transitioning academically and socially compared to non-first-generation students. (Engle et al., 2006; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lee et al., 2004; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Nunez, 1998; O’Connor, 2002; Oldfield, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Vargas, 2004). Although the participants in this study did not directly reference the term ‘college knowledge,’ they did

speak at length about their parents' inability to help them with their homework. As well, participants talked about their parents' inability to help them to learn about and apply to university.

The majority of participants reported that their parents were unable to help them with their homework, especially once they reached the upper-level grades in high school, and that they managed activities like course selection and homework without direct parental support. A common theme was that students performed these processes independently. One participant recalled: "Basically I was on my own." Although I did not find research directly relating to homework in secondary school and parental involvement, Horn and Nunez (2000) did discover that parents of first-generation students were less likely to be involved in high school course selection. Furthermore, doing things on their own and valuing their independence in decision-making was a theme noted by the participants in this study, and was also referenced in the literature. Both Byrd & Macdonald (2005) and Speirs Neumeister & Rinker (2006) found first-generation students prided themselves on their independent decision-making. In this research participants were clear that their parents were not involved in the decision-making process about which university to attend or even which program to take. One participant noted that her parents were "*really* not involved in my academic life." But in cases where parents disagreed with their choices (e.g., attending a university that was not located in or near their hometowns), the participants in this study said they had the final decision-making power. For the majority of participants, their parents were not involved in their plans regarding education, period.

In addition to getting little instrumental support in high school, participants expressed that they were unable to get information from their parents to help them to prepare for university. Byrd and Macdonald (2005), Choy (2001), Dennis et al. (2005), Gibson (2004), and Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) also found first-generation students received limited resources from their families to help them prepare for higher education. Horn and Nunez (2002) concluded that first-generation students often consulted people other than their parents, most often relatives and friends, about their education plans. This study also supported this finding. Participants reported that they turned to friends and family members other than their parents who had experience with higher education in order to gain an understanding of what life would be like for them when they entered post-secondary education.

The majority of parents did not help with the university application process. Rather, participants said they often consulted and looked for guidance from close relatives and/or friends, high school counsellors, and teachers about their education plans. Many participants also spoke of the roles high school teachers and counsellors played as supporters and mentors because their parents were unable to assist in the university application process. These research findings support O'Connor (2002) who interviewed first-generation women and found that their immediate families were unable to help them to navigate the application process. The findings are also consistent with Reid and Moore III (2008) who reported that it was not parents, but high school teachers, counsellors, administrators, and coaches that first-generation students said helped them to prepare for and get to higher education. Similarly, Hahs-Vaughn (2004) found that first generation

students had a higher reliance on people other than their parents to support them in higher education.

You will also recall from the research findings that the majority of participants reported that their parents did not understand what it was like for them in higher education, and in some cases this affected their ability to speak openly with their parents about their experiences. One participant shared: “It’s hard to communicate with them seeing that they never went to university. They don’t know how the process works or anything involved with university.” This was congruent with what London (1989) had to say about this. London (1989) found that several participants were unable to discuss their experiences with their family or friends from home because they did not understand what life was not like for them in higher education. Carachure (2002) also stated that family members were unable to understand the pressures first-generation students experienced at school.

Academically, the participants in this study felt particularly unprepared for higher education. When describing their experiences in their first year of post-secondary education, participants shared that they were not prepared for the workload. Comments such as “I was not prepared at all!” and “I wasn’t prepared...first semester kind of hit me hard” were common. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed because they often fell behind in their coursework. University was not what they expected academically and, as a result, many of the students found that their marks dropped dramatically compared to their high school performance. In fact, two women in the study were on academic probation, meaning that their cumulative average was below 60% the previous semester. These findings support Byrd & Macdonald (2005), Choy (2001), Engle et al. (2006),

Inman and Mayers (1999), Khanh (2002), and Reid and Moore III (2008) who indicated that first-generation students were more likely to be unprepared for higher education, particularly relating to course work requirements and time-management skills.

Past research also indicated that first-generation students had more difficulties compared to non-first-generation students academically (Nunez, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This may be because they had difficulties integrating academically. Faculty interaction was a main measure for academic integration. For example, Nunez (1998) defined academic integration as the number of times participants met with a faculty advisor regarding academic plans and academic matters, or how often they participated in study groups or lectures related to careers. Pike and Kuh (2005) also cited interactions with faculty as measures of academic integration, along with library use, active and collaborative learning, and writing experiences. From the participant responses in this study, it is clear the levels of faculty interaction were almost non-existent, which, according to the aforementioned studies, would affect students' academic integration. However, many of the participants did mention their involvement in the study groups called Student Learning Groups (SLG's) which would have increased their levels of academic engagement, as defined by Nunez (1998).

Another theme in the research findings that was in keeping with past research pertains to first-generation identity. The study's participants reported being unaware of the label 'first-generation' and not having it as part of their identity. Although it appears that the participants did discuss their parents' educational backgrounds with others, they did not appear to identify with the term 'first-generation.' This was supported by Orbe (2004) who indicated that the majority of students were not aware of the term. However,

Orbe (2004) noted that non-traditional female students and students of colour often identified with the label. As the majority of students in this study were considered traditional students (under age 25 and entering university directly from high school), and Caucasian, it could be hypothesized that non-traditional female students may have more of an affinity and awareness toward the term 'first-generation.'

Although many of the research findings in this study were congruent with past studies, I did find contrasts with respect to the social aspects of this group of first-generation students. For example, the majority of research found that first-generation students have difficulty socially navigating higher education. For example, Pascarella et al. (2004) reported that first-generation students are less socially adjusted to higher education and Schultz (2004) found that first-generation students were unaware that they needed to develop new relationships. Although some women did express having some difficulties making new friends, not fitting in or feeling isolated were not dominant experiences of the participants in this study. In general, participants who resided in a Living Learning Centre or had friends from home living with them did not report having significant social difficulties. They were also of traditional age, full-time students, and the majority of participants were non-minority students and lived on campus. The results may have been different had the women in the study been members of visible minorities, part-time, off campus students, and/or older than average. Most of the participants did report that they relied on their hometown friends most often for socio-emotional support. This may be because they had only been in higher education for one and a half semesters (approximately 6 months) and had not had the time to develop the intimacy needed with their new friends to share more personal information.

On the other hand, participants spoke of the need to make new relationships, especially for the purpose of securing academic support and guidance. This contrasts previous research that found first-generation students were unaware that they needed to increase and expand their social networks to succeed in university. The women often mentioned that they consciously sought out friendships for academic support: “Make friends in classes so they can help you.” One participant even referred to friends as “resources” for academic help. Peer support and academic success were also demonstrated by Dennis et al. (2005) who found that the peer support was a stronger predictor for grades and adjustment than parental support for first generation students.

Previous studies found the first-generation students were not aware of the importance of engagement or even understood how to become engaged in university activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Conversely, the participants in this study repeatedly spoke of the need to be engaged (e.g., join clubs and meet new people). It is worth noting that even though the participants understood the importance of engagement, they were not very active in extracurricular activities during their first year of school. This supports the study by Pascarella et al. (2004) which also found that first-generation students were less likely to be engaged in higher education. Moreover, the changes in engagement levels were dramatic for most women in the study because most reported being actively engaged high-school students. Participants most often cited that they needed to learn about their new environments and manage the academic rigor of university before they got involved in new activities. The participants were also adamant that they would be more involved during their second year of school. Most felt they would be more knowledgeable about their new environments and more open to trying new experiences in

their second year of university. One participant shared that once she got more comfortable in her new surroundings she would “poke” her head out further and get more involved in extracurricular activities.

Recall that this research specifically focused on women in an effort to determine if the construct of gender affected the experiences of first-generation students (Orbe, 2004; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Previous research has suggested that gender role expectations affect the experiences of first-generation female students. In this study, there were no discernable themes that were common across cases relating to gender conflicts and/or identities. The only commonality regarding gender was that the majority of participants referenced their mothers as the parent who was most engaged in their education, especially the two participants whose mothers worked in educational institutions. On a micro-level, there was one participant who spoke at length about her love of hockey and said her mother refused to allow her to play hockey as a youth because it was a “boy’s sport.” This participant signed up for intramural hockey in her first year at university and was thoroughly enjoying her new identity as a female hockey player. Other than that, there was no evidence of the construct of gender and whether gender identity permeated the experiences of the participants in this study. The absence of the theme of gender may have resulted from three variables. First, the participants were of traditional age, single, in school full-time, and childless. Also, the majority were Caucasian. Currently, much of the literature that speaks to the issue of gender examines non-traditional aged (over 25 years of age) and minority women. Gender difficulties may not be experienced by traditional-aged, non-minority, first-generation students. Second, the participants attended a university with a very high female population (almost 70%)

which could affect any studies looking to analyze the impact of gender. Finally, it may be suggested that in this context, the participants did not experience inequality issues related to gender in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

People working in higher education must be vigilant about learning and understanding the needs of their diverse student populations. Because “our student populations and the developmental issues they confront are more diverse and complex than ever” (Evans, 1990, p. xi) and “the academy continues an uneven commitment to access - admitting large numbers of students for whom higher education was never historically inclusive...but often failing to provide the kinds of environments needed for success” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 5), it is important to continue to ask questions about the student experience and learn about those experiences from the perspectives and standpoints of the people living them. As there is minimal qualitative research about first-generation students’ lived experience as they enter higher education, there has been a call from researchers that the subject of first-generation students be approached from a qualitative methodological perspective (Nunez, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Thomas, 2002). My hope was that this research would meet that call and help to fill that gap in qualitative research, thereby allowing future researchers to construct a more accurate picture of the lived experience of first-generation female students.

In general, the findings from this study confirm those found in existing literature. But in the past, many of the areas studied regarding first-generation students were

approached from the perspectives of the researcher, not the first-generation student. Specifically, areas of interest most often focused on academic success, (e.g., persistence rates, grade point averages, advanced degree attainment etc.) and demographics (e.g., visible minorities, sex, age, socioeconomic backgrounds etc.). This study broke away from approaching the research from the perspective of what is deemed important to know and allowed the participants to share what was important to them.

Indeed, these participants shared many things that I had not encountered in previous literature regarding first-generation students. I heard that even though parents were unable to provide instrumental support, participants felt that their parents were strong supporters and motivators as they trudged down the path of academia. Furthermore, I heard how important siblings were to these first-generation students. Older siblings who were successful in higher education acted as coaches, and in some cases, financiers of their younger siblings' education. Older siblings who were not successful acted as motivators and taught participants valuable lessons on how to succeed in university. Moreover, participants adopted the role of mentor to their younger siblings, and were engaged in helping to motivate and support their siblings so that they too could attend university.

I also heard how valuable social networking was for first-generation female students, and how intentional they were about gathering information from friends and family members who had experienced university in some capacity. Even at university, participants knew that they had to further develop those networks and meet new people who could help them succeed academically. In addition, I heard that even though participants knew they should get involved in extracurricular activities and meet new

people, they were unable to accomplish this in their first-year of university. For the majority, this was a dramatic change, as they were very engaged youth in their high schools. What was also very apparent was that the high school and university experiences of these students were dramatically different, and for the most part, participants had to ‘learn’ how to learn in university.

Again, this is just the beginning. Further qualitative research will continue to allow us to hear what is important for us to know. Not from our perspective, but from the perspective of the first-generation student. From there, we will be able to truly meet the needs of this specialized cohort of students.

### **Support Program Recommendations**

This study is exploratory and phenomenological with a small, self-selected sample, so it is not appropriate to make generalized recommendations regarding programs and services for first-generation female students. However, I can apply the research findings to support the recommendations of others. You will note from the literature review that many researchers made recommendations regarding developing strategic programs and services for first-generation students. These recommendations include making the environment more welcoming, developing first-generation living and learning communities, offering summer bridge programs, creating intentional faculty-student interactions, and increasing scholarship and bursary programs. The experiences of this study’s participants support the majority of these recommendations, most notably developing peer communities, offering summer bridge programs, creating intentional

faculty-student interactions, and providing substantial scholarship and bursary opportunities.

It was very evident that the participants in this study garner most of their academic support from the peers, friends and roommates - not professors. In fact, participants often talked about intentionally seeking out other students in their programs so that they could get academic support rather than going to professors. Dennis et al. (2005) found that minority first-generation students living in academic clusters performed better academically. The participants in this study may have benefited greatly by living in communities with other first-generation students.

It was also clear that participants did not interact with faculty. In fact, the majority of women expressed that they found faculty very intimidating and that they were afraid to approach faculty for help. Research has indicated that higher faculty-student interactions resulted in more development gains for first-generation and low-income students (Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Giancola et al., 2008; Orbe, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996), so how to reduce this experience of intimidation and increase interaction with faculty could be another area of focus for support programs for first-generation students.

In addition, offering summer bridge programs was a recommendation from researchers examining first-generation students (Colorado Commission, 2007; Schultz, 2004; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). The research findings from this study also support this recommendation. The majority of participants said that they felt extremely unprepared for higher education, and how different their experiences were compared with their expectations. Thus, a summer bridge program may have allowed these participants some time to adjust to the changes that they would be experiencing prior to their first day

at school. This would be particularly useful for participants who had never been to campus before the first day of school.

There was also a call by researchers for increased scholarship and bursary programs, a recommendation also supported by the findings of this research. Many of the participants were able to finance their first year with entering scholarships, bursaries and financial aid. However, many of the participants said that they were unsure of how they would pay for subsequent years. Increased scholarship opportunities post-entering year, as well as increased education on bursary and loan options, would benefit the women in this study. Their experiences are supported by Byrd & Macdonald (2005) who also noted that first-generation students are more likely to have financial concerns and are unaware of the financial options available to them.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research is only a starting point; a first step in gathering information to understand the phenomena: “In the early part of qualitative fieldwork the evaluator is exploring and gathering data and watching for patterns to emerge. Over time, the exploratory process gives way to confirmatory fieldwork” (Patton, 2002, p. 239). As such, it would be prudent to do a phenomenological exploratory study on male first-generation students as well as older-than-average female first-generation students to see whether there are differences across cases according to gender (with respect to gender identity) and the age of participants, respectively. As well, I would recommend a study using mixed-methods. By combining in-depth interviews with surveys administered to a much larger randomly selected sample, I would be able to make generalizations about

female first-generation students as the participants would be representative of the total population.

It would also be important to have a sample of first-generation female students who are visible minorities to determine if their experiences are different from the participants in this study, as the majority were Caucasian. Similarly, two participants came from immigrant families (one was an immigrant herself) and there was some indication that they had unique experiences that were not shared by the other participants in the group. For example, they were the only two participants who lived off campus. Furthermore, the student who emigrated from China regularly spoke of the pressure she felt to succeed in school and to take mathematics and science courses. This pressure was not expressed by the other participants. The other participant shared that her immigrant parents brought her pre-made meals so that she would not have to cook for herself and could focus more on her studies. More research is needed to explore the lived experience of first-generation students in Canada who are immigrants or who come from immigrant families.

It would be interesting to study the parents of female first-generation students to learn about their experiences, as it is clear from this research that parents are a strong factor in the female first-generation student experience. For example, even though the participants spoke of their parents' inability to help them navigate higher education, and said that their parents were "laid back" and "lax" about school, they often spoke of how supportive their parents were in helping them achieve their academic goals. It would be of interest to examine what motivates these women to achieve academically since their

parents did not appear to place a high value on their academic success. Furthermore, how parents find ways to supplement their lack of college knowledge to help support, encourage, and motivate their children would be of interest. Along those lines, I would also recommend examining the role of siblings, both younger and older, to the female first-generation experience. It was surprising to me how often siblings were talked about during the interviews and the strong influence that they had on the participants. I would predict that post-secondary institutions may want to extend their support programs for first-generation students to include a parent/sibling component.

Another area of research I would recommend is in regards to the differences between the high school and university experiences as expressed by first-generation female students. When asked what it was like going to classes and doing schoolwork, most women spoke of how dramatically different high school was compared to university. Examining those differences and working to make them less remarkable may help not only first-generation female students, but all students, so they may have an easier transition from high school to post-secondary school. As previously mentioned, more research is also needed to understand how to increase and foster faculty-student interactions with first-generation students. Even though time and expense may be a barrier, I would also recommend that a long-term, exploratory phenomenological study be conducted for a four- to five -year period that follows a group of first-generation participants from entry to exit. This would provide further insight on how first-generation students experience higher education and how things change over time, especially when the participants are able to reflect on their experiences.

Examining the use of social networks and how first-generation female students' use social networking to learn about higher education was an area that I had not uncovered in previous studies. The participants were quite cognizant of their need to gather information and were not afraid to ask others for information about higher education. They did not cite their primary sources of information as high school guidance counsellors or university admissions; rather it was friends and family members who had experience with higher education that were their main sources of information. This has substantial implications for recruitment and admissions programs that are actively working to inform students about higher education.

Finally, I would recommend an exploration of how adult transition theory relates to the experiences of first-generation students. Transition is broadly defined as: "Any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). According to the research findings, it is evident that the participants experienced transition as defined by Goodman et al. (2006). In their first year in higher education, the participants experienced changes to their relationships with family and friends, to their day-to-day activities and routines, and to their assumptions about higher education, as well as to their roles as children, friends, and students. For example, the participants in this study frequently spoke of their relationships with parents, siblings, and friends and the impact that higher education had on those relationships. The change of routine was another example of the how transition was experienced by participants in this study. Their routines of attending class and completing homework in high school were dramatically different from their routines in higher education. Another example of changes to routines was their involvement in

extracurricular activities. For example, extracurricular activities, including club and volunteer activities, were a large part of their high-school routines and, for the most part, were virtually non-existent in their first year of higher education. As well, the majority of participants shared how their assumptions about higher education were completely incongruent with their experiences during their first year in post-secondary education. Finally, as part of their transition, the women spoke of their changing roles as daughters, friends, and students. They were more independent from their parents, developed new relationships with others, and adapted to the changes to their relationships with friends from home.

Adult transition theory is applicable to this research in that the participants in this study experienced dramatic changes in all aspects of their lives. According to adult transition theory, as the changes are more pronounced and have a greater impact on an individual, it will take longer for the individual to adapt to their new surroundings and will require more resources to help the individual cope with the changes:

For an individual undergoing a transition, it is not the event or non-event that is most important but its impact, that is, the degree to which the transition alters one's daily life...we need to look not only at the type and context but also at the impact of the event on the individual's relationships, routines, assumptions about self and the world, and roles. We may assume the more the transition alters the individual's life, the more coping resources it requires, and the longer it will take for assimilation or adaptation. (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 37)

Based on previous research, one could theorize that the transition for first-generation students is life-changing, as their previous environments are dramatically different from the culture of academia. This was evidenced in the research and in this study, as the majority of participants spoke about being extremely unprepared for university. For

most, their expectations did not meet their experiences. According to adult transition theory, these students will require more resources to help support them during their transition, and it will take them longer to adapt compared to non-first-generation students. Therefore, research that applies adult transition theory to the experiences of first-generation students may help us further understand the higher education experiences of this cohort, and to develop more applicable and strategic support programs and services.

## References

- Ayala, C., & Striplen, A. (2002). *A career introduction model for first generation college freshmen students*. Paper presented at the International Career Development Conference, California State University, Sacramento. Retrieved from [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/1a/83/98.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/83/98.pdf)
- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American psychological association, sixth edition*. Washington DC: author.
- Bergerson, A. A. (2007). Exploring the impact of social class on adjustment to college: Anna's story. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2(1), 99-119.
- Brown, H. E., & Burkhardt, R. L. (1999, 06). *Predicating student success: The relative impact of ethnicity, income, and parental education*. Paper presented at the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Seattle, Washington.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* (R. Nice Trans.). London and Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications.
- Byrd, K. L., & Macdonald, G. (2005). Defining college readiness from the inside out: First-generation college student perspectives. *Community College Review*, 33(1), 22-37.
- Caplan, P. J. & Caplan, J. B. (1994). *Thinking critically about research on sex and gender*. University of Toronto: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Carachure, J. (2002, Summer). Making the college grade. *La Verve Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.ulv.edu/comms/lvm/sum02/1stgen.htm>
- Challenges of a first-generation student: Settling in at college a difficult adjustment. (2003, November). *CNN.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/11/10/first.to.college.ap/>
- Chen, X. (2005). *First-generation students in postsecondary education: A look at their college transcripts* (NCES 2005-17). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005171>
- Choy, S. P. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment* (NCES 2001-126). Washington DC: U.S.

Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>

- Colorado Commission on Higher Education. (2007, April). *Programs to improve the retention and success of underserved students at Colorado public institutions*. Division of Academic Affairs, Denver, Colorado. Retrieved from [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/3d/07/78.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/3d/07/78.pdf)
- Cushman, K. (2006). *First in the family: Advice about college from first-generation students*. Next Generation Press: Providence RI.
- Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, I. L. (2005). The role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of ethnic minority first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3), 223-236.
- Engle, J., Bermeo, A., & O'Brien, C. (2006, December). *Straight from the source: What works for first-generation college students*. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Washington, DC.
- Evans, N. J., Forrey, D.S, & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1990). *Student development in college: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Filkins, J. W., & Doyle, S. K. (2002). *First generation and low income students: Using the NSSE data to study effective educational practices and students' self-reported gains*. Paper presented at the 2002 Association for Institution Research Annual Conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Giancola, J. K., Munz, D. C., & Trares, S. (2008). First-versus continuing-generation adult students on college perceptions: Are differences actually because of demographic variance? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(3), 214-228.
- Gibbons, M., & Shoffner, M. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counselling*, 8(1), 91-97.
- Giorgi, Amedeo. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2): 235-261.
- Gonzalez, K. P. (2001). Inquiry as a process of learning about the other and the self. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 543-562.

- Goodman, N. K., Schlossberg, M., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counselling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Springer Publishing Company: New York.
- Grayson, P. J. (1997). Academic achievement of first-generation students in a Canadian university. *Research in Higher Education*, 38(6), 659-676.
- Hahs-Vaughn, D. (2004). The impact of parents' education level on college students: An analysis using the beginning post-secondary students longitudinal Study 1990-92/94. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(5), 483-500.
- Hertel, J. B. (2002). College student generational status: Similarities, differences, and factors in college adjustment. *The Psychological Record*, 52(1), 3-18.
- Hoover, E. (2008, January). Surveys of students' views complicate spin on 'helicopter parents'. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/01/1355n.htm>
- Horn, L., & Nunez, A. (2000). *Mapping the road to college: First generation students' math track, planning strategies, and context support(NCES 2000-153)*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000153.pdf>
- Hsiao, K. P. (1992). First-generation college students (ED351029). *ERIC Digest*. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/1992-1/first.htm>
- Inman, E. W., & Mayes, L. (1999). The importance of being first: Unique characteristics of first generation community college students. *Community College Review*, 26(4), 3-22.
- Ishitani, T.T. (2005). *Studying educational attainment among first-generation students in the United States*. Paper presented at the 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, San Diego, California. Retrieved from [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/1b/c5/e1.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1b/c5/e1.pdf)
- Lederman, D.. (2008, June). Double whammy of disadvantage. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/06/16/first>
- Lee, J. J., Sax, L. J., Kim, K. A., & Hagedorn, L.S. (2004). Understanding students' parental education beyond first-generation status. *Community College Review*, 32(1), 1-20. doi 10.1177/009155210403200101
- Lipka, S. (2007, November). Helicopter parents help students, survey finds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i11/11a00104.htm>

- Lohfink, M. M., & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first-Generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(4), 409-428.
- London, H. B. (1989). Breaking away: A study of first-generation college students and their families. *American Journal of Education 97*(2), 144-170.
- Macy, B. (2000, January). *From rusty wire fences to wrought-iron gates: How the poor succeed in getting to-and through-college*. The College Board: Washington DC.
- McCarron, G. P., & Inkelas, K. K. (2006). The gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students and the role of parental involvement. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(5): 534-549.
- McConnell, P. J. (2000). What community colleges should do to assist first-generation students. *Community College Review, 28*, 75 - 87. doi 10.1177/009155210002800305
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. California: Sage Publications Inc.
- Nomi, T. (2005). *Faces of the future: A portrait of first-generation community college students* (AACC-RB-05-2). American Association of Community Colleges: Washington, DC. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ResourceCenter/Projects\\_Partnerships/Current/FacesoftheFuture/SurveyContent/Faces\\_Brief\\_Final.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ResourceCenter/Projects_Partnerships/Current/FacesoftheFuture/SurveyContent/Faces_Brief_Final.pdf)
- Nunez, A. (1998, November). *First-generation students: A longitudinal analysis of educational and early labor market outcomes*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Higher Education, Miami, Florida. Retrieved from [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/17/57/ed.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/17/57/ed.pdf)
- Nunez, A. & Cuccaro-Alamin, S.(1998). *First-generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education* (NCES 98-082). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98082.pdf>
- O'Connor, C. (2002). Black women beating the odds from one generation to the next: How the changing dynamics of constraint and opportunity affect the process of educational resilience. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*(4), 855-903.
- Oldfield, K. (2007, January/February). Humble and hopeful: Welcoming first-generation poor and working-class students to college. *About Campus, 2*-12.

- Orbe, M. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: An analysis of first-generation college students. *Communication Education, 53*(2), 131-149. doi 10.1080/03634520410001682401.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experience outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(3), 250-284.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Thousand Oaks: International Educational and Professional Publisher.
- Penner, J. L., & McClement, S. E. (2008). Using phenomenology to examine the experiences of family caregivers of patients with advanced head and neck cancer: Reflections of a novice researcher. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 7*(2), 92-101.
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First-and second-generation students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*(3), 276-300.
- Prospero, M., & Vohra-Gupta, S. (2007). First Generation College Students: Motivation, Integration, and Academic Achievement. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 31*(12), 963-975. doi 10.1080/10668920600902051
- Reid, M. J., & Moore III, J. L. (2008). College readiness and academic preparation for postsecondary education: Oral histories of first-generation urban college students. *Urban Education, 43*(2), 240-261. doi 10.1177/0042085907312346
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rolph, A. (2008, June). First-generation students struggle to find their place in college. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Retrieved from [http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/367082\\_first14.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/367082_first14.html)
- Saunders, M., & Serna, I. (2004). Making college happen: The college experience of first-generation latino students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 3*(2), 146-163. doi 10.1177/1538192703262515
- Schultz, P. F. (2004). Upon entering college: First semester experiences of first-generation, rural students from agricultural families. *The Rural Educator, 26*(1), 48-51.

- Speirs Neumeister, K. L., & Rinker, J. (2006). An emerging professional identity: Influences on the achievement of high-ability first generation college females. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 9(3), 305-338.
- Stanage, S. M. (1987). *Adult education and phenomenological research: New directions for theory, practice, and research*. Malabar Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company.
- Terenzini, P.T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development. *Journal of Research in Higher Education*. 37(1): 1-22.
- Thayer, P. (2000, May). *Retention of students from first generation and low income backgrounds*. Washington, DC: National TRIO Clearinghouse. Retrieved from [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/16/97/5e.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/97/5e.pdf)
- Thomas, L. (2002). The Impact of First Generation Entry on Access and Success in Higher Education (ISSN 1466-6529). *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 8(3).
- University of California. (2003). *The contribution of first-generation college students to the University of California learning environment: preliminary results from the spring 2003 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES)*. Retrieved from [http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/compreview/0308\\_meeting/ucues.pdf](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/compreview/0308_meeting/ucues.pdf)
- University of Guelph. (2008). *Incoming students: trends in population from 2000 to 2008; incoming student information form results, 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008*. Guelph, ON, Canada: University of Guelph.
- Upcraft, M. L., & Gardner, J. N. & Associates. (1989). *The freshman year experience: helping students survive and succeed in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., Barefoot, B.O., & Associates. (2005). *Challenging & supporting the first-year student: A handbook for improving the first year of college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Van T. Bui, K. (2002). First-generation college students at a four year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal*, 36(1), 3-12.
- Vargas, J. H. (2004). *College knowledge: Addressing information barriers to college*. Boston, MA: The Educational Research Institute (TERI). Retrieved from <http://www.teri.org/pdf/research-studies/CollegeKnowledge.pdf>

- Warburton, E. C., Bugarin, R., & Nunez, A. (2001). *Bridging the gap: Academic preparation and postsecondary success of first-generation students* (NCES 2001-153). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001153.pdf>
- Wentworth, P.A. & Peterson, B. E. (2001). Crossing the line: Case studies of identity development in first-generation college women. *Journal of Adult Development*, 8(1), 9-21.
- Yazedijian, A., Toews, M. L., Sevin, T., & Purswell, K. E. (2008). It's a whole new world: A qualitative exploration of college students' definitions of and strategies for college success. *Journal of College Student Development*. 49(2), 141-155.

## Face-to-Face Interview:

### Opening Remarks:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin I would like to go over the consent form with you (*bring two copies- keep one, give other to participant*). During this interview I want you to talk about what it is like for you at university. I do have some broad questions for you but feel free to talk about anything that you want to about your life at school. You will note that at any time you can stop the interview. You can also refuse to answer any question and still remain in the study.

Are you comfortable if I record this interview?

### Interview Questions:

1. What level of education do your parents have?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your family and where you come from?
3. What is the atmosphere at home regarding education?
4. What kinds of things did you do to prepare yourself for university?
5. Tell me what it was like for you the first day you arrived at the University of Guelph.
6. What is it like for you going to class and doing the schoolwork?
7. Tell me about your social life?
8. What is it like for you financially?
9. Suppose I was a first generation high school female student who has decided to go to university. What would you tell me it will be like?
10. That is all of the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like to share that you didn't have a chance to speak about?
11. Before the end of the interview, I just have some background questions to ask you (only ask if not already revealed during interview):
  - a. What is your age?
  - b. What program are you in?
  - c. Do you attend school full or part time?
  - d. Where do you live while at university?
  - e. Where did you live prior to coming to university?
  - f. Where does your immediate family currently live?
  - g. Are you married?
  - h. Do you have any children?

*Appendix B*

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I currently work in the Office of the Associate Vice President, Student Affairs. Student Affairs is particularly interested in first-generation students. As such, the purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of female first-generation students in their first year at the University of Guelph. A first-generation student is a student who has parents that have not attended a post secondary institution at any time.

The goal of this study is to find out what it is like for you in your first year of university. Simply, I want you to talk about your experiences at school. If you agree to volunteer for this study, you will be asked to participate in one face-to-face interview with me that will last approximately 1 to 2 hours long. The interview will be conducted sometime between the end of January 2009 and the end of March 2009. You can determine the date, time, and location to meet so it does not conflict with your other commitments. With your permission, I will make an audio recording of the interview so I can capture all that you say. The recording will then be transcribed by me and then printed in written form. Names will not be included in the written transcript of the interview or the final paper. At the conclusion of this interview, you will receive twenty dollars.

For the second part of the research, you will be asked to meet with me one additional time to read over the transcript of your experiences. This will most likely take one hour or so. At this follow-up interview you can make changes to your 'story' so you feel that it truly captures what it is like for you at university. It will also provide you the opportunity to add any additional feedback to the research. At the conclusion of this interview, you will receive ten dollars.

As there is little research conducted in Canada regarding the experiences of first-generation female students, your participation will be very helpful. Furthermore, the data collected from this study will help universities to better support first-generation female students.

This research has met all the requirements of the Research Ethics Board. If you agree to participate, please contact me no later January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 to set up an interview. I can be reached via email at [l.gatto@exec.uoguelph.ca](mailto:l.gatto@exec.uoguelph.ca) or by phone at 519-824-4120 x53868 before 5pm. I can also be reached at home at 519-767-1218 after 5:30pm. In addition, you can contact my advisor, Professor Al Lauzon, at x53379 or [allauzon@uoguelph.ca](mailto:allauzon@uoguelph.ca).

Thank you again for your time, I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours Sincerely,

Laura Gatto  
MSc. Capacity Development and Extension Candidate  
Assistant to the Associate Vice President, Student Affairs

## *Appendix C*

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **An Exploration of the Experiences of First Generation Female Students in their First Year at the University of Guelph.**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Laura Gatto (student) and Dr. Al Lauzon (advisor), from the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph. The results of this study will contribute to a thesis for the MSc. degree in Capacity Development and Extension.

**If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact** Dr. Al Lauzon: Faculty Supervisor at 519-824-4120 ext. 53379 or by email at [allauzon@uoguelph.ca](mailto:allauzon@uoguelph.ca).

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first generation female students in their first year at the University of Guelph. A first generation student is defined as a student who has parents that have not attended a post secondary institution at any time. The research will explore the following question: "What has your experience been at the University of Guelph?"

### **PROCEDURES**

**If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:**

You will be asked to participate in one face to face interview with me some time between January 2009 and the end of March 2009. You can choose the location, date, and time for the interview so it does not conflict with your other time commitments. During the interview you will be asked questions about what it is like for you as a first year student at the University of Guelph. Interviews can range from 1 hour to 2 hours. With your permission, the interviews will be recorded by a digital recording device and then transcribed to written form. All transcripts will be confidential, meaning that your real name will not appear anywhere in the report.

For the second part of the research, you will be asked to meet with me one additional time to read over the written description of your experiences at the University of Guelph. This will provide you the opportunity to make changes so you feel it truly captures what it is like for you as a student. A final copy of the report will also be made available to you if you are interested in receiving it.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

n/a

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This research will help to gain understanding of the female first generation student experience, from the perspective of the student. As such, it will help guide the University of Guelph to meet its responsibility to support first generation female students.

This research is significant to the University as well as other post-secondary institutions in Canada as there is little research conducted in Canada regarding what it is like to be a first generation female student in higher education. As such, the data collected from this study will provide a starting point for other Canadian universities to examine their support of first generation female students.

### **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

Each participant will be offered \$20 cash for the face to face interview and the money will be given to you at the conclusion of the interview. Similarly, you will receive \$10 cash immediately after the second follow up interview.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

**Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained in connection with this study.**

To guarantee reasonable confidentiality, any documents that indicate your name will be located in a locked cabinet in the advisor's office. The interview transcripts will be coded so that your real name does not appear in the document. Electronic data will be kept on a password protected computer to which I only have access. For the final report, your real name will not be used.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

**You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may exercise the option of removing your data from the study. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.**

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

**You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:**

**Research Ethics Coordinator  
University of Guelph  
437 University Centre  
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1**

**Telephone: (519) 824-4120, ext. 56606  
E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca  
Fax: (519) 821-5236**

### **SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE**

I have read the information provided for the study *First Generation Female Students: A Phenomenological Approach to the Exploration of the Experiences of Female Students, As They Perceive Them, Where Neither Parent has Attended a Post Secondary Institution at Any Time, in Their First Year at the University of Guelph*. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **SIGNATURE OF WITNESS**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Witness (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date