

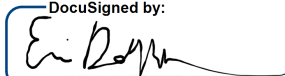
Navigating Higher Education: Did it Have To Take A Whole Pandemic To Prioritize The Support and Well-being of First-Generation Students?

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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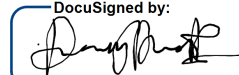

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Abstract

This praxis project examines the need to bring awareness to the importance of providing a support network for students of color entering college. As a student of color who has had difficulties finding a support network to help me navigate through a predominantly white institution, I developed a project, along with another collaborator, designed to prioritize the needs of minority students in higher educational institutions consisting of group sessions in which our students felt they needed more support. The purpose of this project is to show how a support system can come to be a sanctuary of success and how it feeds into the student's social capital, which is also associated with the mental health and well-being of the student. Given that this project took place during a pandemic, students undergo a massive amount of stress and a time where schools encourage students to seek help if needed. This study revealed the critical importance of developing these systems of support for first-generation students that would help them build their social capital and their well-being.

Introduction

I didn't think my freshmen year was going to turn my life upside down, a complete 180 to what I was hoping for. It was on the 31st of August, I was at the cafeteria with a couple of friends eating an egg salad sandwich, a couple bites in and I knew it was not going to sit well. I threw it out and headed back to my dorm. That same Thursday night I began to have a really bad stomach ache and I had believed it was the sandwich, I couldn't bear the pain and decided to call Clark University Rapid Response, CURR. I was in tears of pain, and it was just my luck that my roommate had gone back home for the weekend, so I had to go to the hospital alone. CURR called the ambulance, and I was taken to the UMass Memorial Hospital. My parents remained unaware that I was being admitted to the hospital; I did not want to bother them or anyone else given that my family lives so far away. I did not tell anyone where I was at and so I stayed in the hospital waiting alone until the doctors came in to drop the news that I needed surgery. I was there all night, and it wasn't until 5:30 am when I called my parents to let them know that I needed surgery over the phone. It was not a major surgery, my appendix had to be taken out because it was extremely swollen.

My parents were still in shock and terrified that I needed surgery and that they were miles away. They tried to tell the doctor to hold the surgery till they were in Massachusetts, but the doctors could not wait any longer. The school knew that I was admitted into the hospital but not the fact that I needed surgery, I was only one week into my freshman year, and I couldn't go back until I recovered from surgery. I woke up in the ICU alone hoping that my family would magically appear in the room instead of waiting alone. A couple of hours later, they came and were speaking to the surgeons on what happened and further instructions to make a speedy recovery. I traveled by car back home to New York since I couldn't move, and I had just gotten

out of surgery. I notified the school and my professors that I had to have an emergency surgery and I needed at least 2 weeks to recover. My professors and school granted me the two weeks on leave, but little did I know that a week after my appendix surgery I was going to need yet another surgery.

A week after my first surgery I began to have this intense pain in my pelvis area. I tried my best to suck up the pain to avoid going to the hospital and having them give me bad news, and further push back my school return date. Nevertheless, the pain became too much to bear, and I had to be rushed to the hospital once again. I was crying and screaming at the doctors to attend to me and give me a sedative to stop the piercing pain. I had to wait a long time to be seen by a nurse and my family became very angry. It took nearly three hours for a nurse to admit me and check my vitals, my family was in a state of panic not knowing what to do to help to relieve the pain I was going through. My mother was in tears praying that everything was okay, praying to God to give her some idea of what she could do to help her daughter. I was given a disgusting liquid to drink, had my blood drawn and received other medical exams for them to figure out what was wrong. I was still in pain even after the pain medication they gave me, and my family grew even more worried when doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Given this physical, emotional and mental toll I was in, I was not thinking about school or my grades at all—I just wanted the pain to stop. Lying in a puddle of tears, the doctors finally shared with my family their inconclusive test results and recommended the next step was another surgery to try to diagnose what was wrong internally.

My mom broke down in even more tears finding out that I needed to go under the knife again. Surgery for my mother is a very sensitive thing since my father died after his second consecutive surgery. This was my second consecutive surgery. I consented and signed all the

legal papers to go through with the surgery without really thinking about it—I just wanted something to be done to address the pain. It took them nearly an hour in a half for them to get me prepared for surgery. By the time I was laying down in the emergency room, I was yelling, “Cut me open! Cut me open now!” with tears running down the sides of my face.

They took me in to perform an exploratory laparotomy in my abdomen to try to understand the root of the pain. The doctors came out nearly an hour into surgery and told my sister, “You and your family have to prepare yourself.” My chances of getting through this surgery did not look promising. The doctors had little hope that I was going to make it out and my family believed that I was going to die on the table. It turns out my intestines were swollen, close to bursting, and knotted up with each other. The doctors claimed that it was a miracle that I made it on time to the hospital since I should have bled out on my way there.

I was in recovery for a week in the hospital with a feeding tube down my throat. I tried to let Clark know that I had needed a second surgery. I tried to explain to them and my professors that I needed more time to recover, and I needed my professors to excuse me from exams and projects. I missed the first full month of my first semester of college, falling behind in all my classes. After recovery and finally, when I was able to move and carry some weight, I returned to college and tried my best to reach out to my professors letting them know that I would need time to catch up. They gave me some time, but they didn’t accommodate the fact that I was far behind in all my classes. I became extremely stressed and worried, my mental health deteriorated, I lost 30 pounds trying to catch up and trying to be careful with my incision wounds. A couple of weeks later I was slapped in the face with a \$35,000 hospital bill from UMass and I panicked. I was trying to reach out to the school, but they said they couldn’t do anything, my family and I tried to call the hospital letting them know that I have insurance and it should be able to cover it,

but they kept denying me. I was in a constant battle between schoolwork trying not to fall behind, my mental and physical health, and bills. I did not know who to ask for help. My health was in jeopardy and my grades as well; I did not know which one to prioritize more. Although I felt alone with everything, somehow, I managed to pass all my classes my first semester. I should not have had to handle everything and the stress that came with it all on my own, but I did. I did not want to bring disappointment to my family.

A year later, in my sophomore year, I had a moment where I was not sure if I wanted to continue my college career at Clark, I was ready to withdraw and quit school. My mental health was not in the right place, and I had an impulsive thought of committing suicide. I was in a state of mind where I couldn't take it anymore and I did not want to be a bother to anyone. I confided in an advisor and told her how I had been feeling with the problems going on in my life and how school was just another burden that was pushing me to my limits. Little did I know that expressing how I was feeling was going to cause me to be forcibly admitted into a psychiatric facility. I refused to go and did not want to take the ambulance since the hospital was going to charge me two thousand dollars for the ride.

I requested the University police to take me, and they refused. I refused to take the ambulance but the counselor on call that day forced me to go in. I was admitted and the hospital called my parents telling them, inaccurately, that I had attempted suicide. I was in tears with the social worker because she was trying to convince me that I wanted to take away my own life, which was not true. The hospital staff person said that my mother spoke to them directly to admit me in the hospital. I realized they were lying to me and responded with tears in my eyes, "My mother does not know any English. Why are you lying?" The social worker responded with a

startled face and walked back to her office trying to think of her response. I had to stay in the hospital for about two weeks. I tried to tell the hospital to inform my school where I was and to notify my job, since I did not have access to my phone while I was there. Being there against my will and surrounded by other more psychologically dysfunctional patients was frightening and traumatized me even more. I did not know that confiding in a Clark professor would disrupt my life and further undermine my mental health. I swore to never confide in another faculty member at Clark again. Two weeks later I received a bill from the hospital for taking the ambulance; it was for more than two thousand dollars and my family, and I do not have the money to pay for it. Two and half years later, my family and I are still fighting with our insurance to pay for it because Clark continues to refuse to pay for it.

While these two experiences were different, they share the same reality of me not knowing who to reach out to or who to trust. I did not know the services that were available for me, and I had to find my way through both challenges with no real help. For instance, Clark had very little consideration when it came down to money, failing to understand why I couldn't take the ambulance. This praxis project's purpose is to help future first-generation students who head to college come in with some support systems and learn about the services available for them. No student must be split down the middle trying to figure out whether they should prioritize their mental health or their schoolwork.

Essentially through the course, Navigating Higher Education, we hope to help guide high school seniors with their transition into college along with creating a bond. The sessions of the course consisted in support of scholarships, choosing a major, and finding the right school for what they want to pursue. The questions that we had for our project in hopes that this project would answer were:

1. What do First Generation students identify as the support most needed when thinking about college?
2. What is the experience of First-Generation students as they start to transition to college?
3. How does the support network for high school seniors affect how they think about higher education and sense of belonging on a college campus?
4. Do high school seniors have support systems in place to follow them when they transition to high school? If so, what do these support systems look like?

We decided to start this project with the intention of raising awareness of how the system of high education institutions fails to effectively support their students. In hopes that at the end of this project it will encourage high education institutions to have support networks and accessible resources for first-generation students.

Literature Review

According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NAPSA) in the 2015-2016 academic year First Generation Students (FGS) made up an average of 54% of students at four-year universities. That being said, Latinx students make up 27% of all FGS. (Pinxten, W., & Lievens, J. 2014). Latinx FGS – like other minority FGS – “related to academic functioning, adjustment to college life, and family-of-origin issues.” (Stebbleton et al., 2014, p.8.) Their unique counseling needs arise out of their intersecting identities as minorities, FGS, and other potential characteristics such as immigrants, non-native English speakers, and people of color.

The transition to college is crucial for many – if not all – FGS. These are students who have little to no knowledge about how to navigate higher educational institutions and are suddenly expected to know how to access university faculty and resources. The first year is critical for FGS. In the first year alone, FGS are four times more likely to drop out than non-first-generation students. Six years after matriculation, 43% of FGS had dropped out, of which 60% dropped out during their first year. (Stebbleton et al., 2014.) This emphasizes the importance of higher institutions implementing policies and practices that assist FGS in their first year of college. If social capital is linked to having more networks and support, then higher education institutions should facilitate support systems and networks so that they best support one of their most vulnerable groups.

Garriott et al. (2017) addressed the importance of the unique mental health needs for first-generation college students. It studied the association between environmental supports, personal stigma, and self-stigma with the intention of seeking counseling in first-generation students. It was discovered that “To decrease personal stigma around seeking counseling and instill hope, academic affairs professionals could share information on how the majority of

college students seeking counseling are not severely distressed (Smith et al., 2007) and that of those asked how their counseling experience helped them, 59% reported it helped them stay in school and 60% reported it improved their academic performance.” (p. 441) Counseling centers can serve as a sanctuary of success given that it is a safe space for college students and not only did it help students with feeling less distressed, but also improved their academic performance.

Conceptual Frameworks

When framing our conceptual framework, the concepts that become the most salient for us in investigating the research are Bourdieu’s concept of capital - specifically social capital - and Brooks’ (2012) concept of sanctuaries for success. The concept of capital: social, cultural, and economic was first introduced by Bourdieu in the 1980s. Bourdieu argues that individuals have different positions in society based on three forms of capital: social, cultural, and economic capital. What this means is that the more of each capital an individual has, the greater standing they have in society. For the purpose of this praxis project, I focused specifically on social capital, and how having social capital is effective for First Generation Students (FGS) regarding how important it is to have a support network for when one needs to “let go” to take care of their well-being. Bourdieu defines social capital as a network-based resource.

Brooks’ (2012) research takes an approach at addressing the problem for African American Students at a Predominantly White University. Brooks focused on a high achieving population and found that – as a collective – they emphasized a need to “create ‘sanctuaries for success’ for students of color that help them feel a sense of belonging and acceptance that counteracts the alienation they may experience on predominantly white campuses” (p. 132). This demonstrates that what minority students need the most in their transition to college is a

support system of their peers to cope with all that comes with transitioning to college and being a minority at predominantly white institutions.

McKneena et al. (2020) examines how group interventions on seeking help and network intervention could be a way to improve their transition into higher education along with the importance of social support and social capital. They state, “Research shows that first-generation college students are less likely to seek out help and show lower use of on-campus support services” (p.2). This would allow higher education institutions to have a support network and encourage students to seek help when needed.

Hurd et al. (2018) focused on the experiences of underrepresented students transitioning into higher education and how having pre-existing social networks can reduce possible symptoms of depression and anxiety. The issue with mental health and trying to help prevent symptoms of mental illness, is the fact that it is not visible. It is an illness that starts off by being invisible and when it starts to be visible, that's the time where the illness could have taken control of the mind and body. Having social networks would be a safe space for students to seek help and not only decrease psychological distress but also increase self-worth and a sense of belonging in predominantly white institutions.

Reynold's research examines how the issue of friendships develop with young people while being of the same ethnic background. How in general having a friendship network is important to a person's well-being and having close friendships can potentially prevent social disorders and other illnesses. “The concept of social capital is useful in capturing the essence of friendship networks... Friendships generate wider social contacts and networks, which may also benefit individuals. (Reynolds, 2007, p. 385) This illustrates how having friendships and a close

social network can be beneficial to an individual's mental health in school and during their transition to higher education along with their academic performance.

A collective takeaway from the literature is that social capital – in the form of support systems – has the ability to provide FGS with the emotional support they need in their transition to college. By providing these supports, FGS are more likely to feel like they belong on campus, and thus, be less likely to drop out. This demonstrates the importance of creating support systems for First Generation Students.

Frequently, Latinx FGS have little to no networks and resources when they arrive at college. This lack of resources - as Stebleton et al. (2012) discuss - leads FGS to feel like they do not belong on college campuses and leads them to exit higher education institutions. In order to address this, we draw on Brooks' concept of sanctuaries for success. Brooks defines sanctuaries for success as places where students of color can create a sense of belonging and acceptance with other students. These spaces become sanctuaries because in attending predominantly white institutions, it is an inherent result that students of color feel alienated and underrepresented.

We draw on these two concepts to create our course: Navigating Higher Education for high school seniors. Our support network aims to create a type of sanctuary for these students that allows them to create the social capital they need to be successful in college that also feeds into their well-being

Methods

Methodology

The research approach we took in conducting our research is Participatory Action Research (PAR) We decided on PAR because it allowed us to take a collaborative approach (McIntyre, 2007). We allowed our participants to lead the discussion as they saw fit and brought up/addressed issues that were salient to them. In doing PAR, we also took a qualitative approach and conducted interviews, collected field notes, and had weekly sessions that were recorded. Our weekly sessions addressed the needs of our participants, and they had the final say on how they want each session to look. Interview questions were determined by us - Michelle and Deisy - and aimed to understand more about our students. However, as I was reviewing my collected data, I based my findings and data analysis on a qualitative data approach to focus more on the mental health aspect of it.

Our rationale for doing a Participatory Action Project was that the needs of students change, and it is not up to us - as researchers - to determine what our participants need. Further, by allowing them to decide, we did not generalize about what they needed. Our field notes, audio recorded sessions, and interviews helped us interpret what they said and did. With the field notes, audio recordings, and interviews, allowed us to understand what the students needed most. This allowed for less gaps in the research and less misinterpretation.

Site

As Latinx First Generation College Students we felt strongly about Latinx success and mobility. As we reached the end of our undergraduate degree, we felt it is necessary to address the issues so many Latinx FGS face at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI.) Due to COVID, we compromised and followed with a seven-week course to be offered during intersession called

Navigating Higher Education. Clark University has a program called ‘Student Support Network’ (SSN) through its office of Counseling and Personal Growth. The program is intended to teach students how to be support systems for their peers. However, this program has no follow up for students to use what they learned and help others. Our hope was to take the skills we learned throughout the SSN and through our college experience to help guide high school seniors with their transition to college. Although we had access to a pre-orientation program, we did not feel this intervention was enough. We believed that the intervention must be more extensive, which was why our program ran for six-weeks. Further, as we spent more time in college we had more questions, which is why we decided to make our project Participatory Action Research. Not having a set curriculum allowed for our participants to express their needs as they see fit and get the most out of our support network. Clark’s Intersession ran from January 4th – February 12th and for our course we extended it for another week, equaling a total of eight-weeks; the time we had scheduled down for the course were on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM.

Positionality

As seniors, our relationship with the participants varied from insiders to outsiders. Our intersecting identities as FGS and Latinas allowed us to connect with them, but our age, year, and status as researchers made us outsiders. We did not see each other daily like they likely will see other participants. Our relationship was also as both co-designers and co-researchers. We were co-designers in the sense that we determined together what they needed help in, and we brought in the resources we saw fit.

Since our Student Support Network was for high school seniors, we acknowledged the power dynamic between the students and being college seniors. We aimed to tackle this matter by building a connection and bond with the participants when starting our program. We wanted

them to feel as comfortable as possible for them to be able to express what they feel they needed most help on and be able to ask questions on things they do not know of. That being said, our positionality as Latinx and FGS will allow us to further those bonds . Our lived experiences were helpful in guiding our participants in what they hoped for to get out of our sessions.

Participants

As mentioned prior, our praxis project was a Student Support Network for high school senior students from Claremont transitioning to college. Some demographics that are important for this project are:

- Our participants were immigrants/refugees/ US citizens.
- Our participants were non-native English speakers.
- Race and Ethnicity
- First-Generation students/ Non-First-Generation students
- Our participants were people of color.
- Age: All of our participants were high school seniors (17-18)

Our participants included the 6 high school seniors that wanted to participate in our project, however only one of the high school students stayed throughout the entire intersession course.

Data Collection

The data that we collected were broken down in different sections: surveys, field notes, interviews, and audio recording. There was a google form survey that was sent out to students who were interested in our course that asked:

5. Are you first gen? (First in their family to go to college)
6. Which racial/ethnic group do you identify with?
7. What do you need the most help with right now?
8. What is something you want to learn from this class? Can be anything related to college. (e.g., personal statements, choosing a major, applying for scholarships, etc.)
9. Do you want to meet once a week for 2 hours, or twice a week for 1 hour?
10. Can you meet during the scheduled times? If you can't meet during the scheduled time, when are you available?

The responses that the students gave, gave us an idea of what to plan out for our weekly sessions. After receiving the surveys, the sessions were audio recorded for data collection. We recorded most of the sessions with voice memos while also taking field notes. At the end of each session my colleague and I would stay to wrap up everything that we spoke about and worked on; took more notes on things that one of us may have not noticed or written it down. The interviews that we gave our participant were in connection with her thoughts and hopes in transitioning to college and her feedback on our course. The last interview which was the last session we had with our participant was audio recorded as well.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings and voice memos helped differentiate the themes that were highlighted. The data collected showed the themes of stress, struggles, and comfortability. From these themes it showed how our participant was comfortable enough to share their stress and how having a support network for high school students can be a safe space for them to release that stress and not be mentally drained.

Looking through my field notes, audio recording, and interviews; I noticed markers like stress and the pressure of having to be this “perfect student”. Although the project was not entirely dedicated to the topic of well-being, I wanted to focus on how the participants' significant involvement in the community could have some sort of effect on their well-being and mental health. The involvement that the participant had in their community showed how they had different relationships with their community, organizations, and had social ties. Which brings me to the markers that I want to focus on: how having a support network can not only give them the opportunity to have social capital, but also use it to relieve the stress and pressure of being the ideal “perfect student”.

Findings

The findings section is categorized into three subsections 1. Surviving exhaustion through COVID, 2. Perfect Student vs Well-being and 3. Comfortability with the struggle. The first subsection discusses the obstacles and challenges we faced when setting our course, recruitment, and our journey dealing with COVID starting our sessions. The second subsection explains the stress high school students have when having to prioritize your high school career at a possible cost. The last subsection focused on how there was a bond and connection that was made through sharing a variety of struggles we had to overcome .

I focused on the importance of how sanctuaries of success feed into a student's social capital and how that plays a role into the student's mental health and well-being. From the data I collected and focused on, I noticed the relation between how our participants' social capital raised possible concerns with their well-being, in which I unpacked, and how sanctuaries of success, social capital, and mental health all play a role together.

Surviving exhaustion through COVID

COVID-19 definitely made us change our initial plans for our support network. Our initial plan was to have First-Generation Latinx college freshmen from Clark as our participants to help them with their transition into higher education. Given the circumstances, recruitment was difficult since we were still unsure about the decisions that Clark was going to make regarding having students on campus. What also set us back were the delays of our IRB; we couldn't start recruitment until we were approved which set our timeline back. As a result of all these circumstances, we made the decision to shift our support network into a course during intersession between January till February. Since we struggled to recruit students, we decided to open the course to high school senior students in Worcester, Massachusetts. We redesigned the program to help students receive credit for the course and provide support for when transitioning to college. We were able to hear back from six students wanting to participate in our support network. We were able to set a time and date for students that we were able to work around their time schedules.

Unfortunately, we were only able to work with one student which was a drop in numbers from how we were expecting to start with. We tried to reach out to students that agreed to participate but didn't show up. There were some responses that we did receive, some of the students said that the time didn't work out for them anymore, which can be understandable given

how schools were dealing with the pandemic. One student said they were in another program that was extended and is receiving help through that program. While the student that is receiving help through another program is great, the other students that were not able to make our program due to the schedule poses the question if they're not receiving that help in school and aren't able to get similar assistance, where would they get it from? There was one additional student that came to our first session but later informed us that they were not able to continue participating in our sessions due to their work schedule.

During this time, it was evident how crucial money is and the need for high school seniors to find a way to gather as much money as possible to be able to pay for college and avoid taking out too many loans. Our first session, two students, Samantha and Jayson¹, shared their interest on what they wanted to major in when in college. Samantha expressed wanting to major in nursing and shared they would be the first in their family to go to college. Jayson expressed the interest of wanting to go to technical school leaning towards engineering. Jayson shared that they would not be the first to go to college. In our first session, my colleague and I introduced ourselves and made it clear that the sessions were going to be essentially guided by whatever they felt they needed or wanted the most help on. They expressed wanting help with looking and applying for scholarships. At the end we came with the plan to set up a list of scholarships that are open to high school seniors and help guide them with the process of applying to them.

In Brooks' research they emphasized the need to "create sanctuaries for success" for students of color that would help them feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in predominantly white institutions. Their research shows how minority students need a support

network to provide students with the emotional support they need in their transition to college. Although our participants did change, the objective of them having any support they felt they needed did not.

Perfect Student vs Well-being

Deisy and I made a list of the scholarships being offered to high school students in Worcester and we decided The Greater Worcester Foundation scholarship was the one to open up and help them through the process. When Samantha expressed wanting help around scholarships and finding the right one's it was no surprise that they have already started on other scholarship applications. Every high school senior is encouraged to apply to as many scholarships as possible and encouraged to have extracurriculars on their resumes to show commitment and how well-rounded of a student they are.

Yet school faculty fail to realize just how draining it is to be in a school for eight hours and still be expected to be involved in their community, excel in academics, be mindful of their health and handle home responsibilities. All this can be mentally draining and cause mental distress at a young age juggling so many responsibilities and expectations. There was a session where we reviewed Samantha's resume and we were all in shock at how involved she was with her community, in school activities and sports, along with starting their own program for Worcester students. It raised for me questions about where the time was to eat, sleep, and to check in with yourself to make sure that you are not stretching yourself too thin. First-generation students see college to better our future along with helping our families. McKenna et al., (2020) emphasizes how "First-generation college students have already overcome challenges to accessing college and face different barriers than continuing-generation students, it is essential that universities offer FGCS attention and support to help them succeed in college". It is

important to point out how first-generation families view college as the only path to achieve this American dream and this better future through attending college. Garriott et al. (2017) mentions “First-generation college students report self-imposed pressure to succeed in college to make their families and communities of origin proud, and that this sense of pressure may at times restrict their intentions to disclose personal problems to others (p.433) FGS feel the need to take advantage of this opportunity because their parents didn’t. It is concerning because not a lot of thought goes into the process of actually committing to a school when you have to take out the loans.

This raises a concern to her well-being and if she has time to take care of herself. Although there has not been enough research to make this claim, Stebleton et al. (2014) mentions how “men and people of color underutilize mental health services. Because first-generation students are disproportionately students of color, on the basis of prior research, we may expect that first-generation students also underutilize mental health counseling services on college campuses” (p. 11). Samantha taking on so many responsibilities shows how resilient she is and how much she has overcome with her grandmother battling cancer, being raised by a single mom, and excelling in school. What is the likelihood that she received any mental health services or would reach out for them upon entering college? As Stebleton et al. (2014) notes, “We found that first-generation students were less likely than their non-first-generation peers to seek out campus mental health services even though they were aware that they needed to use the services” (p. 15) Our support network did not entirely focus on mental health, but I did mention the importance of mental health as much as I could. This ties to how FGS do need these resources of having a support system to better their well-being and their success in college.

Comfortability with the struggle

During the sessions I noticed how Samantha got even more comfortable with sharing about the things that her family had to do in order to make ends meet. Samantha shared how she and her mother would have to wake up at 5 am to collect cans and whatever they could to exchange it for money to have. They shared how having to learn the English language was a struggle but because their grandmother was greatly ill, they had to come to the US to take care of her. Samantha being comfortable enough to share these personal struggles shows how there was a sense of trust in our group because not only did she share a hardship that her family had to overcome, but showing vulnerability of having to learn English, which is difficult to learn. Due to the common language and ethnicity, we had with Samantha, we were able to understand exactly where she was coming from by nodding and emphasizing that we understood her experience. This is because as Latinx, we understand the hardships that families go through, our own parents had to overcome similar hardships and it is known for Latin countries to have a great deal of economic barriers through the media. She shared in Session two: “I would go to the hospital with my mom and grandmother and translate because the translator that the hospital offers isn’t the same and not everything is translated the way it is said in Spanish.” This shared experience from Samantha shows how parents could depend on their children to be able to translate information, like hospital visits and be able to adapt and learn a new language, the responsibility it carries to translate information correctly is a lot of pressure.

Samantha shares her hardships handling her grandmother's appointments, taking care of her, and having to learn a new language. Deisy and I did share some of the struggles we had, Deisy shared about having to stress about money while in school and her brother who suffered an accident. I shared about the struggles I had with my mental health, how many times I found myself prioritizing school work more than my well-being. I tried to emphasize how most times

you just must prioritize yourself before anything else, school is always going to be there whether you're here or not . With Deisy and I sharing vulnerable stories about our own hardships, it did create this space for Samantha to feel safe and build a bond with each other. This got us to understand her better as a person and not as a student, but how she faced challenges, her character, and how great of an individual she is.

Students find some sort of comfort in feeling like the person that looks like them or having the same ethnic background could not only create a friendship but also create a bond. Deisy and I both being Latinx women did help start a sense of bonding and creating this friendship. We already had so much in common with the language, having to learn English as a second language, translating and having the same ethnicity. Reynolds (2007) emphasized how “marginalized groups in society, same-ethnic friendship networks have the potential to create community and group consciousness, which may in turn encourage social and political mobilization” (p. 385). Creating a community within a support network can improve students’ social skills by developing that bond with someone. The literature we reviewed discussed how important it is to build bonds and connect them to one's social capital. “Research shows that building networks of support and bridging and bonding social capital—one's ability to build and maintain strong and weak ties—are important for underrepresented students' college success” (McKenna et al. 2020, p.2). That being said, it is commonly seen in college and universities little to no representation of faculty of color, so having support networks that are facilitated by people of color could be a step for college students to feel represented in their school setting. With having school faculty that represents students of color, it can reassure students to build their social capital when reaching out.

The transition to higher education is a struggle that every student goes through, however, specifically for underrepresented students in higher education institutions, not having accessible support networks can affect a student's mental health and sense of belonging. As Hurd et al. (2018) identifies, "In particular, underrepresented students are likely to encounter messages at the individual or institutional level that communicate derogatory messages about their social status or otherwise suggest they do not belong at the predominantly White institution" (p. 1108). Although mental health was not the focal point of this project it is important to note the mental distress that first-generation students accumulate when transitioning to college institutions. Hurd et al. continues, "Many college students may be at increased risk of developing mental illness due to developmental timing as well as transitional stress associated with leaving home and adjusting to college." (p. 1100). Many first-generation students leave their homes when continuing their education, whether it's hours away from home or in a different state. The excitement and stress it comes with having to adapt to a new setting can be difficult and can bring a lot of anxiety to a person. Wanting to make friends, finding your friend group, and just trying to find a sense of belonging in an area where you might feel like an outsider can cause symptoms of a mental illness.

Conclusion

Overall, the sessions went well despite having so many obstacles making it challenging due to the pandemic and constantly modifying our approach. Even though we did only focus on one student, I do realize how much time and attention is required for one student to make sure they are receiving the support they deserve. If we had more students like we initially had hoped, we would have been overwhelmed and maybe not have given the help and support that they would have needed. One student did take a lot of time which made me think just how much time and effort a high school college counselor must give to high school students.

On the last day of the session, we asked final questions and Samantha did mention something that we could have done better was starting earlier since high school students usually start their college applications at the start of their fall semester of their senior year. We knew that the delays of the IRB, the pandemic, and recruitment were a setback. Had we started sooner, we could have helped and guided them a lot more with personal essay prompts, more scholarship applications, and other applications that seniors must have completed to apply to colleges.

Our project starting later than what we wanted only comes to show how important it is to start early and for institutions to have support networks for them in place so that they'll feel more inclined to seek support. "Yet, even with knowledge of the educational attainment disparities among first-generation and non-first-generation students," Stebleton et al., (2014) writes, "getting students through the system by providing institutional support for first-generation students continues to be a challenge" (p. 7). It continues to be a challenge for first-generation students to obtain needed support for higher education, however, having these support networks will better their academic performance and have a sense of belonging in the school they choose to commit to. Stebleton et al., (2014) continues, "If students engage in the college experience

(both academically and socially) and have positive interactions with faculty, student affairs educators, and other institutional agents, they are more likely to perceive heightened feelings of mattering and belonging on campus” (p. 9)

The literature points out how developing these support networks can help students, especially FGS build their social bonding and their sense of belonging. As McKenna et al., (2020) notes, “Such interventions change the frame through which underrepresented students interpret their experiences, so they view challenges in college as a normal part of the college experience rather than evidence that they do not belong” (p.3). Although our intervention was delayed, and only worked with one student, our project shows that it is difficult to provide the support that FGS need, but it does not mean that we shouldn’t keep trying.

First-generation Latinx students have always faced a challenge in the transition into higher education given that they will be the first in their family to attend college in hopes to pursue their bachelor's degree. There were many times where I found myself not wanting to be in college because of the lack of resources available for me or that I was aware of. In the literature we referenced, it was mentioned how 43% of FGS had dropped out, of which 60% dropped out during their first year (Stebbleton et al., 2014.). I nearly withdrew from Clark because I did not find the support that I deserved and needed. Luckily, I did not become part of the 43% with the reasons of wanting to let my family know that their sacrifices were worth it.

Institutions being active and providing these support networks in higher education will not only show that they care about their student's well-being but give them a more sense of belonging. As McKenna et al. (2020) revealed, there is a great need for “interventions that have been shown to increase underrepresented college students' academic performance by targeting feelings of belonging” (p. 3). I find myself questioning institutions in general, but specifically

Clark University, on their efforts to provide support for FGS. Clark's failure to check in with me after I was discharged from the psychiatric hospital, not following up with me when I stopped going to the Center of Counseling and Personal Growth reflect its failure to address the needs of FGS and students of color. Further, the counseling center was not effective and none of the counselors were specialized on the type of trauma that I carried, and particularly as it relates to a student from my social and racial background. If a student had a more fatal mental breakdown due to lack of support, would that have opened Clark's eyes to have more intrusive and suitable support networks for FGS to guide them academically and their well-being? This study reveals that universities need to take more seriously the provision of support for FGS, and particularly students of color.

Limitations and Theoretical Implications:

There is a great amount of research on the function of sanctuaries of success for first-generation students, however there should be more literature and research on how social capital and mental health coexist, mental health is not addressed enough to show and understand the importance of its role, in specifically towards first-generation Latinx students. Having a student's social capital limited can affect their mental health and well-being given that they do not have access to support groups and or creating strong network connections. This also works vice versa, not having enough support networks that focus solely on mental health and well-being can hinder the encouragement to seek help and their experience in higher education.

That being said, it should also be recognized how there are different groups within first-generation students. We have to break this notion of generalization that all students of color have the same experience in higher educational institutions. Not all students of color carry the same college experience within their same group; similar concept with Latinx students, not all students

that identify as Latinx encounter the same experience like other Latinx students. There are many elements that constitute the students' experience in higher education, like the resources their high school had or didn't have, their immigration status, economic barriers, and other factors that play a role throughout a student's journey through college.

The problem with generalizing research on people of color besides it being squeezed into one group, is neglecting the different identities that makeup POCs and how each experience is different. There isn't enough specific research that would tie in with the more identified people of color, like first-generation Latinx students. There should be more research and studies on how different groups within the community of people of color, have different experiences when any form of support networks that serve like a sanctuary of success, affects the students social capital and their well-being.

Given that this project took place during a pandemic where it was unsure whether in-person classes were going to take place, it was unpredictable how we were going to recruit students for our project. There were delays in our IRB on getting approved which caused a late recruitment and had to shift our audience to high school seniors. We first received six responses letting us know that they were interested in our course, but only two showed up to the sessions, and lastly, only one student was able to stay through the entire intersession course. I do realize that it is not enough data to analyze from one student.

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