Deficit-Oriented Language Use: Understanding the Effects of Deficit-Oriented Labeling on First-Generation Students

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on First-Generation Students

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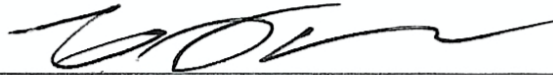
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ABSTRACT

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Purpose: The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

Methodology: A sequential mixed methods research design was chosen to address the research questions for this study. Using a convenience sampling approach, the survey was disseminated to all first-year students in a specific program at a single university. Once the quantitative survey data were analyzed, a subset of these respondents was then chosen for virtual semistructured open-ended interviews. This sequential approach of mixed methods ensured an in-depth exploration, juxtaposing both quantitative findings and qualitative insights.

Findings: This study revealed nuanced perceptions of deficit-oriented language among first-generation college students, with a slight but not statistically significant correlation to feelings of academic questioning. Notably, strategies to counteract such language's effects were diverse, ranging from seeking peer support to engaging in self-advocacy, highlighting the complexity of navigating educational environments.

Conclusions: Findings in this study underscore the importance of language in educational settings, and deficit-oriented language has a discernible though varied,

impact on first-generation students' academic self-concept. The resilience and strategic

responses of these students indicate potential areas for support and intervention by

educators and institutions.

Recommendations: This study advocates for the development of balanced feedback

strategies, comprehensive educator training on the nuances of language, and the

incorporation of findings into educator-preparation programs. Further research is

encouraged to expand on these findings, particularly through longitudinal and

comparative studies among different educational contexts.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Higher education today is often perceived as the great equalizer, an opportunity to access the middle class and thus a better standard of living. Despite this commonly held belief, access to higher education is anything but equal (Achinstein et al., 2015; Yeh, 2014). Constructed originally as institutions to service the elite, universities did not shift from the sole domain of the privileged to an access point for the middle class until the first part of the 20th century. Currently, only 3% of the student population from elite universities come from low-income families in comparison to 74% from the highest earning families (Hurst, 2012).

Currently, more than one third of college students in the United States are first-generation college students (Knotek et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2009). Although definitions vary among institutions for who qualifies as first-generation, these are typically students whose parents received little to no postsecondary education (Rood, 2009) and disproportionately come from families from the lowest tax brackets (Perez, 2019). Along with financial disadvantages, it is clear from the literature that first-generation college students persist and ultimately graduate in fewer numbers than students whose parents received a bachelor's degree (Pehrson, 2021). The reasons for this imbalance can be attributed to isolation and alienation (Berg, 2020), the need to balance work at the same time as study (Herron, 2015), mismatch of home and institutional cultural values (Knotek et al., 2019), and lack of academic and collegial preparation (Rood, 2009).

It is also clearly understood that targeted interventions such as first-year programming and Student Support Services, a federal program supporting first-

generation college students, can do much to increase academic success rates for first-generation college students (Hurst, 2012). Another targeted intervention, the implementation of strong learning communities, has been shown to improve retention and success at large through social connection, mentorship, and peer academic support (Herron, 2015). Alongside a relatively recent push to increase supports for university students, a national focus on increasing college enrollment as a way to bolster the middle class has been in place since the Reagan-era report *A Nation at Risk* was released and President Obama's Race to the Top initiative began(Achinstein et al., 2015). Despite an increase in enrollment from these initiatives and improved funding for student supports, college completion rates since this time have not progressed, indicating that a critical piece is missing (Yeh, 2014).

Garriott et al. (2015) argued that more research is needed to understand this problem, particularly focused on the first year of study, a determinative year when many students make the decision to persist or not. It is also clear that (a) much of the research focused on first-generation college students centers on a deficit-perspective (Rood, 2009), (b) first-generation and minoritized groups experience more identity and stereotype threats than nonminoritized groups (Gray et al., 2018), and (c) the use of deficit-oriented labeling in higher education has not received substantial attention in the field of educational research (Perez, 2019). These factors show a clear need to understand how deficit labeling may be hindering college completion rates for first-generation college students.

Background

There has been broad consensus in the literature that students who have a parent with a college degree enjoy a higher likelihood of success in obtaining a college degree than students whose parent did not complete this same level of study (Ishitani, 2006; T.-H. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Known as continuing generation students, these students are typically more academically prepared, come from higher socioeconomic statuses, and have access to information about college that their first-generation counterparts do not (Rood, 2009). In contrast, first-generation college students, students without a parent who has obtained a bachelor's degree, struggle at higher levels to navigate the complex higher education system, must often cope with feelings of guilt and confusion at surpassing their family's level of education, and regularly face a cultural misalignment in their home and school lives (Garriott et al., 2015); this is on top of a transition from high school to college already rife with challenges and barriers.

Despite aiming to solve this problem, most of the literature on this topic has taken a deficit approach (Rood, 2009); this approach labels first-generation students as inherently lacking instead of implicating the system that fails to support them. Because the attrition and noncompletion rates for first-generation college students have largely remained unchanged in the face of significant investment in student supports for the last 4 decades (Achinstein et al., 2015), a potential connection exists between deficit-approaches and systemic failure to support this group.

Theoretical Foundations

Language framing, especially deficit-oriented language, significantly impacts students' academic journeys. Such language, which emphasizes perceived inadequacies

among marginalized student populations, tends to overshadow the rich cultural capital they contribute to academic settings (Yosso, 2005). For first-generation college students, the pervasive influence of deficit-oriented thinking can compromise their perceptions of self-worth and academic capability (Valencia, 2010). This dichotomy between empowerment and deficit-oriented framing is pivotal for deciphering the challenges marginalized student groups face in persistence and completion, elements that remain critical in modern education. Institutions that promote empowering language recognize the resilience, potential, and unique experiences students offer, aligning with an inclusive understanding of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). In contrast, institutions rooted in deficit-based perspectives may unintentionally reinforce barriers, adversely affecting both the retention rates and the overall success of their students (Stephens et al., 2012).

This foundational understanding of language framing forms the bedrock of this study's conceptual framework. The emphasis on the language of empowerment versus deficit-based thinking illuminates the spectrum of experiences first-generation students navigate; by examining how these students perceive and react to the various narratives they encounter, their unique challenges and strengths can be better understood. Research has underscored that first-generation college students' experiences are markedly distinct from their peers, emphasizing the need for a specialized understanding and approach (Terenzini et al., 1996).

This conceptual framework's backbone rests on understanding how cognitive constructs like language framing shape students' behaviors and perceptions in academic environments. The discrepancies in persistence and completion rates among first-

generation and continuing-generation students emphasize the importance of this study. By positioning deficit-oriented language as an external influence, this conceptual framework suggests that it triggers specific internal student responses. Thus, connecting language to its consequent reactions is crucial for a holistic grasp of student experiences. The subsequent sections delve deeper into these foundational theories, each directly contributing to the comprehension of the academic experiences, challenges, and outcomes faced by first-generation college students.

Behaviorism

Behaviorism, a foundational theoretical perspective in the field of psychology, underscores the significance of observable behaviors over internal cognitive processes to understand human actions (Watson, 1913). This paradigmatic stance, most prominently associated with the works of Watson (1913) and Skinner (1965), emphasizes that all behaviors are shaped by environmental stimuli and reinforced through consequences, either positive or negative. The deterministic essence of behaviorism theorizes that with the correct understanding of the stimuli-response relationship, human behavior can be predicted and controlled. For first-generation college students, the environmental stimuli they encounter, such as deficit labeling, can shape their academic behaviors and influence their responses in the institutional environment. Understanding how these students react to such stimuli, grounded in the principles of behaviorism, may offer insights into their persistence and completion challenges.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, deeply rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1979), states that social interaction and cultural context play a primary role in shaping human cognition.

This theory argues that cognitive development is deeply intertwined with social experience, and knowledge is coconstructed through interactional processes. Central to Vygotsky's perspective is the notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which outlines the distance between what an individual can achieve independently and what that individual can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. For first-generation college students, navigating the nuances of academic environments is intrinsically tied to their social interactions and cultural contexts. Sociocultural theory argues that their cognitive development and academic success may hinge on their ability to navigate and negotiate the ZPD, particularly when faced with deficit-oriented language throughout their educational experience.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction, a perspective based in social psychology that argues that humans act on the meaning things have (Benzies & Allen, 2001), may provide some insight into why first-generation college students are not completing college at the same rates as continuing-generation students despite decades of increased support. Symbolic interactionism, rooted in the work of Mead (1934), suggests that individuals construct meanings and understandings of the world around them via social interactions (Blumer, 1986). Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and society, suggesting that people's behaviors, decisions, and perceptions are continuously shaped and reshaped by the meanings they derive through their interactions with others. Central to this theory is the notion that individuals are active participants in their social realities rather than passive recipients of societal influence (Charon, 1979). Through "meaning-making" processes, individuals interpret, act, and react based on

symbols, gestures, and words in their environment (Stryker, 2008). Navigating the academic landscape, first-generation college students frequently grapple with the complexities of symbolic interactionism. Their experiences are often influenced by external labels and societal perceptions, necessitating an ongoing process of interpretation and redefinition. The way they process these meaning-making mechanisms amid deficit-oriented language can deeply influence their academic persistence and outcomes.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory, a theory that originates from the symbolic interactionist school of thought, was first used as a way to target support to students with disabilities. Labeling in schools was applied as a way to provide individualized education to students who needed additional help in the classroom, leading ultimately to the creation of special education (Gold & Richards, 2012). Despite the widespread proliferation of special education programs in the United States, pushback to this approach began almost immediately after its inception because of its propensity to brand students negatively. When applied to first-generation college students, the implications of labeling theory are potentially profound. First-generation students, when subjected to deficit-oriented labeling, may internalize these perceptions, thus influencing their self-efficacy and sense of belonging in higher educational contexts. The unintentional consequences of such labeling can inadvertently hinder their academic progression and engagement.

Identity Threat

Undergraduate students in the United States face numerous challenges in their first year of study, one of which can be identity threat. Identity threat arises when

individuals perceive their identity—racial, gendered, socioeconomic status, generational status etc.—is devalued or at risk in a particular context (Steele, 1997). It is an issue particularly significant for first-generation students who often grapple with how their unique identities fit in the often unfamiliar and culturally mismatched terrain of academia (Garriott et al., 2015). Identity threat can induce a heightened state of vigilance, potentially hampering cognitive performance and reducing feelings of belonging (Schmader et al., 2004). When deficit-oriented labeling is applied to first-generation college students, it may intensify their experience of identity threat, further undermining their sense of belonging and value in the academic environment. This amplified vulnerability can, in turn, affect their academic persistence and overall well-being in higher education settings.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat, a concept rooted in social psychology, refers to the cognitive and emotional distress individuals experience when they are in situations where they might inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This phenomenon is not based on the individual's belief in the stereotype but stems from the fear of reinforcing societal expectations, leading to performance anxiety (Perez, 2019). In the context of higher education, stereotype threat may influence first-generation students' experiences. The academic setting, with its evaluative nature, can amplify these stereotype-related anxieties, potentially hindering students from fully engaging or seeking help while they navigate not just their academic journey but also societal narratives and preconceived notions about their capabilities (Schmader et al., 2004).

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome, a term first coined by Clance and Imes (1978), describes the phenomenon in which individuals, irrespective of their achievements and competencies, possess persistent internalized fears of being exposed as a fraud. Such fears are not rooted in a lack of achievements or competencies but instead in an internal belief system that discounts any objective evidence of competence. Clance and Imes's seminal work suggested that individuals with imposter syndrome attribute their successes to external factors, such as luck or strategic manipulation of others' perceptions, rather than their own ability or effort. Furthermore, research has indicated that this syndrome may disproportionately affect individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups in certain professional and academic settings (Cokley et al., 2013). First-generation college students, when faced with deficit-oriented labels, may find their experiences with imposter syndrome are intensified. Such labels can further undermine their confidence, making it more challenging for them to reconcile achievements with internal self-perception. Recognizing this potential amplification is pivotal in addressing the unique challenges these students face in academia.

Relabeling

Relabeling is a transformative practice aimed at countering the negative impacts of deficit-oriented labeling, especially concerning marginalized and minoritized groups. This approach emphasizes reframing traditionally negative narratives to highlight strengths, resilience, and potential, celebrating the unique experiences and cultural wealth these groups bring to academic settings (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). In higher education, adopting relabeling practices can lead to the revision of institutional

policies, communications, and programs, creating a more inclusive environment. Recognizing the power of terminology on students' academic identities and experiences, a shift from deficit-oriented to asset-based language can bolster academic engagement, persistence, and success, positioning first-generation students as integral members of their academic communities (Terenzini et al., 1996; Valencia, 2010).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, introduced by Bourdieu in the 1970s, refers to the nonfinancial assets such as knowledge, behaviors, and skills that individuals possess, which can promote social mobility and confer power in specific social contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In academic environments, cultural capital has the potential to influence student experiences and outcomes. Students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds often enter universities with cultural resources that predispose them to success, and those who lack such capital, including many first-generation college students, may grapple with unfamiliar academic landscapes, perpetuating educational inequalities (Lareau, 1987; Stuber, 2011). For more inclusive academic environments, it is important to value diverse forms of cultural capital, acknowledging the unique assets every student brings, and addressing structures that sustain disparities in the benefits derived from such capital (Yosso, 2005).

Growth Mindset

Students' beliefs about their intellectual capacities can profoundly shape their academic trajectories and resilience in the face of challenges. A central construct in this domain is growth mindset, a term conceptualized by Dweck (2006) to describe the belief that one's abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication and hard work.

For first-generation college students, embracing a growth mindset has the potential to act as a buffer against academic adversities, offering a lens through which failures can be viewed as opportunities for growth rather than as defining limitations (Paunesku et al., 2015). Additionally, possessing a growth mindset can bolster motivation, increase effort in challenging tasks, and improve overall academic achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). When first-generation students are subjected to deficit-oriented labeling, however, this may create conflict with their growth mindset beliefs, leading to potential discordance in their self-perceptions and aspirations. Addressing such mismatches and fostering a consistent growth-oriented environment may be valuable to support first-generation students' successful navigation of, and persistence in, higher education landscapes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study, which can be seen in a visualization in Figure 1, addresses the interactions between first-generation college students and various academic stimuli, primarily focusing on the influences of deficit-oriented language and stereotype threat, explained in more detail in the next sections. Central to the framework are first-generation college students, whose experiences in academic environments form the core of this exploration. Notably, there exists a theoretical gap in the literature concerning first-generation college students. The aim of this research was to contribute to closing that gap by introducing this new conceptual framework.

Interacting with this is the concept of stereotype threat by which students may perceive potential reinforcement of negative stereotypes related to their demographic group; this perception can have implications for their academic performance and sense of

belonging. Countering these dynamics is the strategy of relabeling, which refocuses discourse by shifting from perceived deficits to instead emphasizing strengths and potential has the potential to increase resilience.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
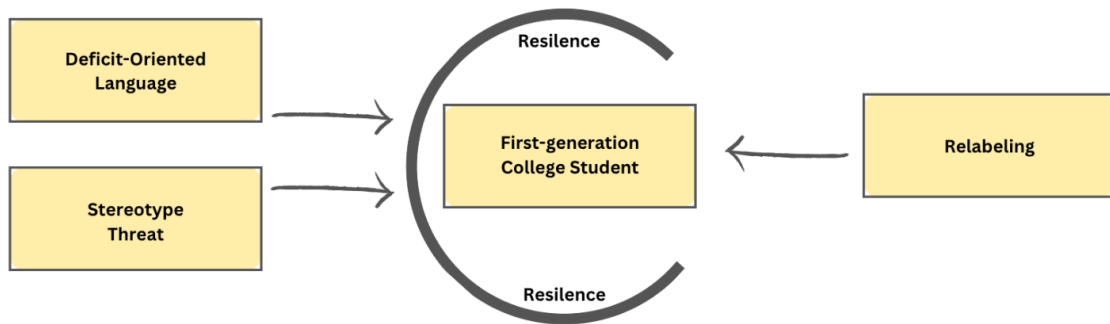
Deficit-oriented language, prevalent in research and academic environments, emphasizes perceived inadequacies rather than strengths. Exposure to this language has the potential to influence the self-perceptions and academic self-efficacy of first-generation students.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation students, students whose parents or guardians have not completed a 4-year college degree at the time of their enrollment in higher education (Garriott et al., 2015), often encounter diverse obstacles, including feelings of impostor syndrome, stereotype threat, and limited access to support networks (Cantú, 2019; Herron, 2015; Perez, 2019). By examining how deficit-oriented language impacts this group, the opportunity exists to shed light on the potential barriers they face in higher education and better understand the factors influencing their continuation and completion rates. Based

on prior research, it was hypothesized that first-generation students may be more susceptible than continuing-generation students to the negative effects of deficit-oriented language because of additional challenges they face.

Deficit-Oriented Language

Although student persistence and achievement in higher education are influenced by myriad factors, the role of deficit-oriented language, a communicative approach that emphasizes what individuals or groups lack rather than their strengths or potential (Valencia, 2010), is a compelling research topic. There is evidence to suggest that the emphasis that deficit-oriented language places on perceived shortcomings can undermine student self-efficacy, perpetuating self-doubt and reducing motivation (Yosso, 2005). This can lead to decreased academic engagement, lower performance metrics, and even attrition, especially among already marginalized student populations (Tinto, 2012). Deficit-oriented language has the potential to shape students' self-perception and drive, aligning them with externally imposed limitations rather than their intrinsic capabilities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Such language does not just reflect views about students but can actively shape their academic trajectories and overall sense of belonging in educational institutions.

Stereotype Threat

Although academic underperformance and disparities in achievement can be connected to a multitude of factors, the concept of stereotype threat, a cognitive and emotional response that occurs when an individual is in a situation where they may potentially confirm a negative stereotype about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995), offers a potential lens to understand these phenomena. In the field of social

psychology, stereotype threat means that when individuals are aware of a negative stereotype associated with their identity group, the fear of confirming that stereotype can hinder their actual performance even if they personally reject the stereotype (Steele, 1997). This self-reinforcing cycle can perpetuate negative outcomes, from test scores to job interviews, and can be particularly pronounced among minoritized groups in predominantly homogenous environments. The potency of stereotype threat lies not in the potential accuracy of the stereotype but in the internalization of societal expectations and the subsequent performance anxiety resulting from this (Perez, 2019).

Relabeling

Relabeling is a practice that serves as an active response to counteract the detrimental effects of deficit-oriented labeling, particularly as it pertains to marginalized groups. The foundation of relabeling hinges on reframing traditionally negative narratives and shifting the discourse to emphasize strengths, resilience, and potential (Yosso, 2005). Instead of viewing marginalized groups through a lens of perceived inadequacy or lacking, relabeling accentuates the unique experiences, cultural wealth, and diverse perspectives they bring to academic institutions (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Resilience

Resilience represents the process and outcome of individuals effectively adapting in the face of adversity, challenges, trauma, or significant sources of stress (Masten, 2014).This capacity to bounce back from difficult experiences is especially vital for first-generation college students who often face unique challenges related to their academic and personal backgrounds. In the academic context, resilience can be understood as the capability to persevere through academic setbacks, harnessing personal and community

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resources, and drawing from one's experiences to foster growth and success. By integrating the concept of resilience into this framework, this research emphasizes not only the challenges faced by first-generation students but also their inherent strengths and the strategies they employ to navigate the academic landscape successfully.

Deficit Thinking in Education

Educational deficit-thinking, historically rooted in an effort to explain disparities in student achievement and attainment, has undergone several transformations (Castro, 2014; Pearl, 2012). Valencia (1997) argued that despite changes throughout history, this phenomenon places the onus of academic underachievement predominantly on Black and Hispanic students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Educational deficit-thinking attributes student struggles to perceived internal limitations spanning intellectual, linguistic, motivational, and behavioral spheres. Throughout history, the origins of these supposed deficits have been tied variably to genetic, cultural, or socioeconomic dynamics (Valencia, 1997, 2010).

Before the Civil Rights Movement, the deficit model used genetic inferiority theories such as eugenics, rationalizing educational disparities as stemming from innate racial differences (Pearl, 2012). Black and Mexican American students were labeled as inherently less intellectual than their White counterparts. These misconceptions directly influenced laws like segregation, affecting educational policies for over a century (Perez, 2019). As racial segregation in schools was challenged, notably through Brown v. The Board of Education, the eugenic basis for deficit ideology started losing support (Valencia, 2010).

Following the diminished support for genetic explanations, psychological interpretations began to center on cultural deprivation models (Pearl, 2012; Valencia, 1997). In this altered version of the deficit-thinking phenomenon, student underachievement was linked to factors inherent to their sociocultural milieu, often critiquing parenting styles and levels of assimilation into American culture (Marger, 2014; Perez, 2019). Influential voices from this period portrayed certain ethnicities as culturally indifferent to education, a perspective believed to explain the academic difficulties faced by students such as Mexican Americans (Sowell, 1981). This argument was particularly dominant between the 1950s and 1980s, leading to the creation of remedial educational programs designed to equip Black and Hispanic students with the developmental skills they were thought to be missing (Pearl, 2012).

In contemporary educational landscapes, deficit-thinking persists albeit more subtly since the Civil Rights Movement (Castro, 2014; Yosso, 2005). Various theories have emerged over time to address achievement disparities. None of these, however, have permeated and influenced educational policies as extensively as the deficit model (Valencia, 1997). Current day deficit-thinking centers on the concept of a culture of poverty to account for persisting imbalances in income and education (Valencia, 2010). This concept argues that certain groups and individuals tend to persist in a state of poverty because of values and behaviors ingrained in their culture rather than solely as a result of structural or external economic factors; it implies that these cultural attributes are self-perpetuating throughout generations (Lewis, 1998). By situating achievement gaps as stemming from this culture of poverty, contemporary deficit-thinking sidesteps direct correlations between race or ethnic background and academic performance. Many

systemic reform attempts, however, remain insufficient, perpetuating practices that adversely impact low-income Black and Hispanic students, thereby cementing existing structural inequality (Castro, 2014).

Labeling of First-Generation College Students in Higher Education in the United States

Achinstein et al. (2015) found that even programming that aims to solve inequities in their institution may in fact reduce a sense of belonging for their students through the negative associations inherent in deficit-oriented labels. Perez (2019), in their study on the effects of the at-risk label, showed that first-generation students are much more likely than continuing-generation students to report being labeled with a deficit-oriented classification. Dix et al. (2020) further found that the effects that this sort of labeling can have on a student range from minimal to developmentally crippling. These studies together show a clear potential link between the labeling of minoritized groups and the lower success rates of first-generation college students.

Although these data paint a difficult picture, especially for programming that intentionally aims to improve conditions for this group of students, there is something to be learned from the data. Recent research considering the effects of labeling on minoritized groups has shown that relabeling, intentional efforts to reframe deficit-oriented language and thought processes, may be used as a way to offset the negative effects that deficit-oriented labeling has done (Dix et al., 2020). Teaching and practicing growth mindset, the belief that intelligence and academic capability are able to grow and improve, may also have the potential to offset the harm of academic stigmatization (Perez, 2019). Although research into these counter efforts is nascent, there is hope that

with more data from implementation of relabeling efforts and growth-mindset education, these strategies can be used to improve success rates for first-generation college students at a more macro level.

The Historical Foundations of Higher Education in the United States

Higher education is an inextricable part of American culture. Between 1960 and 2004, the desire for a postsecondary degree jumped 26%(Knotek et al., 2019). More recently, data from Gallup in 2014 showed that obtaining a college degree is foundational for economic, job, and life satisfaction (Garriott et al., 2015). Conversely, Ishitani (2006) showed that future lower income is associated with the decision to drop out of college and T. Nguyen (2015) showed that the lifetime earning gap between those who have a bachelor's degree and those who do not is continuing to grow. These data show a very clear connection between future economic stability in the United States and degree achievement.

Universities understand this ever-increasing desire for a 4-year degree and have increased both enrollments and academic supports to meet this demand (Knotek et al., 2019). First-year experience programs now exist that offer interventions explicitly focused on the transition from high school to college. Wrap-around supports offer students assistance both on and off campus (Garriott et al., 2015).Psychosocial interventions promote selfcare and resiliency (Knotek et al., 2019). Although enrollment has continued to rise to meet American demand, attrition has remained high at about one third of all students attending 2-year or-4-year schools. For first-generation students, this number is higher at anywhere from twice as likely (Choy, 2001) to 1.3 times more likely (Ishitani, 2006) to leave during the first year than continuing-generation students.

To combat this, federally and privately funded programs have formed to explicitly address the imbalance in degree completion rates between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Many of these programs use research that shows first-generation students benefitting from programming that intentionally connect in-group students together (Herron, 2015), training at the staff and faculty levels on how best to work with this group of students (Lawrence, 2020) and higher levels of financial aid that offset the need to work, a known factor that increases attrition for this group (Knotek et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2009). Additionally, in the last decade, an increase in attention on the need to incorporate families more intentionally into the student support structure has increased (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Although much of this has led to higher persistence and graduation rates in individual institutions, national rates have remained relatively steady, showing that more needs to be done.

Academic Support in Higher Education in the General Population

For the last half-century, college enrollments in the U.S. have been increasing (Knotek et al., 2019). Partly because of federal bills promoting college attendance such as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act or GI Bill of 1944 and partly because of an increase in social expectation for a university degree and subsequent stratification of higher education into 2-year and 4-year institutions—done to stave off the social unrest that came with increased access to education—demand has continued to rise (Hurst, 2012). To meet this new demand for higher education, colleges raised enrollment caps for the general population first and later for underrepresented minoritized groups (Garriott et al., 2015). Next came supports that focused on retaining these newly enrolled students.

Despite this increase in supports, attrition has remained steady at about one third of all students.

Early studies found connections between student characteristics and likelihood of attrition. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found an association between students' educational expectation and persistence. Metzner and Bean found that a student's educational goals and that student's decision to leave college were negatively related (1987). Braxton et al. (1988) found that family income was associated with the decision to persist or not.

Educational expectations, educational goals, and family income are all characteristics shared across the national college population; this means that with knowledge about the risk factors that may elevate a particular student's chances to persist or not, universities can individually support these students at the microlevel in appropriate ways. First-generation college students, however, may share all of these and possess the exacerbating factor that their parents did not receive a college degree, a feature that makes it even less likely that they will choose to persist and ultimately graduate (Ishitani, 2006). Because of this, academic supports now exist that intentionally support this student group with the environmental provisions that are known to increase their academic success such as intrusive advising, mentorship, and financial support (Garriott et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2009).

First-Generation College Students in Higher Education in the United States

More than one third of current U.S. college students are first-generation (Knotek et al., 2019). First defined by Fuji Adachi in 1979 to refer to students who do not have one or more parents who have attained a bachelor's degree, since this time the term has

been redefined by governments, organizations, and institutions to variably capture this group (T.-H. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Depending on the criteria applied, first-generation students are more likely to be female, come from homes with incomes less than $25,000, are more likely Hispanic, Black, or Native, and are more likely to be enrolled at a 2-year college.

Since the late 1970s, researchers have attempted to understand how different support systems counteract the deficits that different groups of students bring to their studies. The current challenges that first-generation students bring to their studies are well documented: first-generation students are more likely to require a job during their studies for financial reasons (Petty, 2014), more likely to drop out for financial reasons (Martinez et al., 2009), more likely to be enrolled part time (Garriott et al., 2015), and less likely to be engaged with campus activities that promote academic success (Berg, 2020) and may experience a form of survivor's guilt as they pursue an individual educational and career path unique in their family (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

At the same time, the supports that colleges and universities can provide to increase college completion rates are also well established. First-year programming that targets the transition from high school to college and federally funded programs such as Student Support Services and educational opportunity centers that provide first-generation students with specialized advising and support often induce success rates much higher than the national average (Hurst, 2012). Learning communities have been shown to improve retention and success at large through social connection, mentorship, and peer academic support (Herron, 2015). Stronger financial guidance and support were found to positively influence persistence (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

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Potential Effect of Relabeling

The variable relabeling has been used as a way to explore the potential impact this strategy can have on first-generation college students' persistence and completion through their perceptions of self and academic identity. By focusing on strengths and potential, the exploration of this variable seeks to identify whether relabeling can positively impact students' academic self-concept and overall sense of belonging in higher education.

Based on existing research and theoretical frameworks, it is hypothesized that a positive and empowering relabeling of first-generation status can positively influence students' perceptions of self and academic identity. By engaging in relabeling work, first-generation students may experience increased confidence, motivation, and a greater sense of belonging, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and higher continuation and completion rates.

Statement of Research Problem

It has been well documented in existing research that first-generation college students, students with parents who had little to no education past high school (Allan et al., 2016; Rood, 2009), face more obstacles than their continuing-education counterparts (Herron, 2015; Lawrence, 2020). The reasons for this are varied and include the following: (a) first-generation students must often balance work to support their studies (Knotek et al., 2019), (b) they are more likely to enter university at a 2-year institution with less supports available to them (Rood, 2009), (c) they often face a cultural mismatch between their home and school lives (Garriott et al., 2015), and (d) they typically feel more isolated and alienated than their peers (Berg, 2020). What is not clear, however, is

why, despite decades of intervention, first-generation student attrition is at about the same rate today as it has been historically (Yeh, 2014).

Programs that work with first-generation college students exist at many colleges and universities across the United States. Many of these programs, such as those sponsored by the federal TRIO grant, specifically target the known challenges that first-generation students face (Hurst, 2012). TRIO programs are a group of federally-funded college access programs that support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including first-generation and low-income students and students with disabilities, in their pursuit of higher education. Often these programs employ systems-level programming and resources that strategically connect these students with faculty and staff on campus (Garriott et al., 2015). Despite these important initiatives, first-generation students as a group have not made much progress in terms of persistence and completion rates.

It is clear that the perception that faculty and staff hold about a student is a key predictor of that student's success. Despite this, university efforts to eliminate the success gap between first-generation and continuing-generation college students have primarily used a deficit approach (Perez, 2019); there has been some agreement among scholars that this gap may be at least in part because of the widespread use of deficit ideology (Valencia, 1997). The reasoning for this may be the way that deficit language situates the problem as intrinsically a part of the student instead of the wider inequitable education system that prioritizes some groups over others (Perez, 2019). It may also be that the elimination of deficit-oriented language completely is not only impossible but also harmful; categorization can after all provide valuable information about a student that can

aid them in getting the supports they need. Yet it seems likely that the minimization of the deficit ideology in education may affect students positively.

As Rood (2009) explained, much of the research on first-generation college students is heavily deficit oriented, which in turn has the potential to shape how practitioners in the field interact with students (Perez, 2019); deficit orientations in programming that aims to support minoritized groups, can exacerbate the threat to identity that first-generation students face on their often multiple and sometimes competing identities (Gray et al., 2018). Because researchers and practitioners are in positions of power relative to their students, the influence they hold has the ability to impact them significantly both positively and negatively (Dennis & Martin, 2005).

There is a clear gap in the literature when it comes to understanding how deficit-oriented language affects first-generation college students. Despite widespread criticism of the use of deficit-oriented language in general, research on actual effects of this type of language on first-generation college students has largely been anecdotal or theoretical (Perez, 2019). Additionally, Rood (2009) found a gap in the literature on the effects that strength-based language can have on this group. It is clear that more work is needed to fully understand the effects of both deficit-oriented and strengths-based language on this group of students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of

this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

Research Questions

1. What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?

2. What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?

3. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?

4. How do first-generation undergraduate students react to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?

5. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

6. What strategies do first-generation undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language?

Significance of the Study

In the United States, a quarter of undergraduate students entering postsecondary institutions are first-generation college students—those for whom neither parent has a bachelor's degree (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Garriott et al., 2015). Although college campuses have become more diverse, the unique challenges faced by first-generation students persist. The Pell Institute reported that first-generation students experience a 21% 6-year graduation rate for those who also qualify as low-income and 31% for those who are first-generation but do not qualify as low-income, markedly lower than their

continuing-generation peers who also qualify as low-income at 37% and those who do not qualify as low-income or first-generation who achieve a 57% rate (Cahalan et al., 2019).

An underexplored area of concern is the pervasive use of deficit-oriented language in academic settings. Such language, which frames students by what they lack rather than their strengths, can negatively impact the self-perceptions, motivation, and overall academic performance of first-generation students (Valencia, 2010). Often, these students internalize the limiting beliefs suggested by this language, which can erode their self-efficacy and potential for academic success (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Understanding the implications of deficit-oriented language and its effects on first-generation students may be helpful in addressing the achievement gap between first-generation and continuing-generation students. By exploring how this language manifests in academic settings, educators can become more aware of its consequences and work toward adopting an asset-based approach, emphasizing students' capabilities and potential. For university administrators and policymakers, addressing the language and framing used to describe and support first-generation students can lead to a more inclusive and empowering academic environment. This could be pivotal in enhancing the national educational landscape by ensuring first-generation students are acknowledged for their resilience and potential, rather than any perceived shortcomings.

Definitions

All key terms that relate to the variables in this study are defined in this section. These definitions explain how each term was used in this study and offer consistency in describing the research in this study.

Deficit ideology. Deficit ideology is any framework for describing disparities in education that situates students and/or their families as deficient as opposed to placing responsibility on the system (Perez, 2019).

First-generation student. The first-generation term was first used by Fuji Adchi in 1979 to describe students without a parent who had earned a bachelor's degree (T.-H. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Broadly speaking there is no consensus on the exact definition for this term. For the purposes of this study, the term is used in the way most commonly used by admissions officers in the United States to include students with parents or guardians who have not earned a bachelor's degree (Garriott et al., 2015).

Relabeling. Relabeling is operationally defined as the psychological process wherein staff, students, or families who have historically been defined as low-status and to lack the necessary skills or capacity for academic accomplishment, engage in processes associated with academic success as a way to counteract harm from labeling (Achinstein et al., 2015).

Stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is operationally defined as the potential damage caused by stereotypes that assume intellectual inferiority on and about particular groups of students (Aronson et al., 1999).

Delimitations

In an effort to create a study that would be both useful and practical, certain choices were made to narrow the scope of the study. The delimitations of this study are as follows:

- Delimited to students in their first year of college.

- Delimited to students enrolled in one first-generation college student academic support program.

- Delimited to students from a diverse, 4-year public institution in the Northeast.

Organization of the Study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter I introduced the study, provided background on the topic, a statement of the research problem, purpose statement, research questions, significance, definitions for variables used in the study, and delimitations. Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of the literature. Chapter III details the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter IV describes the research design, data collection, and subsequent findings. Finally, Chapter V includes the findings, conclusions, implications, and next steps.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background

This literature review—summarized in the synthesis matrix in Appendix A—provides an overview of the literature related to the scope of this study, which is the effect that deficit-oriented language has on first-generation college students. This chapter begins with a historical examination of persistence and attrition in higher education highlighting the first key thinkers on the subject. Next, a synthesis of contemporary thinkers is given with a focus on persistence and attrition specifically related to first-generation college students. An overview of obstacles, barriers, and challenges that first-generation college students face in higher education is described. The conceptual framework is detailed to create a context for which the research for this study was viewed. This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on student persistence and attrition related to first-generation college students.

Historical Review of Inequality in Higher Education in the United States

Higher education in the United States has a rich and complex history that has evolved throughout its lifetime to what it is today. The historical evolution of higher education has been studied extensively from the colonial era to the present day (Loss & Hinz, 2013), and universities today look quite different than what they did at their inception. The origins of higher education in the United States date back to the early 17th century with the establishment of well-known colleges such as Harvard and Yale (Burazer, 2020); these elite colleges catered to the rich, with open-door policies for any who could afford the price and no claims to support career and status advancement as they do today (Hurst, 2012).

The development and trajectory of the American higher education system has been influenced by various factors, including religion (Eisenmann, 1999), gender dynamics (Rose, 2018), government programs, and the decentralization of funding structure in favor of local control (Schalk, 2015). The particular success of higher education in the United States is attributed to decentralized funding and localized influence, the same successful structure that saw success for elementary and secondary education in Europe and the United States.

It is clear that despite changes in the structure of higher education over the course of American history, it has played an integral role in economic development and overall societal wellbeing. Studies have shown that higher education boosts research and development activities, leading to higher economic growth and development (Khan et al., 2021). Accessibility to higher education has also been shown to impact the distribution of income in society, leading to increased productivity and growth, higher individual income and job satisfaction (Morin et al., 2014), and higher lifetime earnings and financial stability (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Higher educational institutions also have a direct impact on raising the standard of living, improving material well-being, career prospects, and overall national and state economic growth and health (Achinstein et al., 2015).

At the same time, higher education promotes social mobility by creating opportunities for social class movement, particularly for marginalized economic groups and disadvantaged social communities to raise their economic and social status (Allan et al., 2016). Studies have shown that research, higher education, and innovation have positive impacts on economic activities, generating higher long-term economic growth

(Osiobe, 2019), reducing costs of law enforcement (Kim & Antonopoulos, 2011), and increasing voting behavior (Ishitani, 2006).

There is, however, growing inequality both in the American higher education system and the college-educated American workforce. Since the 1980s, progress in the American higher education system has stalled, and low and middle-income students are less likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree than they were in the 4 decades before (Mettler, 2014). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, more than 40% of Black and Hispanic students today are likely to leave college before their degree compared to 27% of White students (Perez, 2019). Controlling for race, gender, high school GPA, and familial income, first-generation students were 71% more likely to leave college before attaining their degree than students who came from families with two parents who had achieved a bachelor's degree (Ishitani, 2003). This shows clearly that student background has a significant role in determining who will ultimately graduate and who will not.

After college, for those who do manage to obtain a degree, inequality is still very prevalent. Although women have made some progress at large in terms of postgraduation lifetime salary, women in general still earn less than men (Bach et al., 2018). Beyond salary, women in academia are less likely to achieve tenure in academic appointments and are often held to higher standards than their male colleagues (Ioannidou et al., 2014). When race is taken into consideration, White educated women have more access to professional growth opportunities than women of color who are still at the low-wage end of the economy (Maxwell, 2019). Further controlling for race alone, there is evidence to suggest that although a college-degree increases household wealth for college-educated

White families, it may decrease wealth for Black college-educated families (Meschede et al., 2017). This demonstrates that significantly more must be done to right a system that has favored some groups over others for decades.

Attrition and Persistence in the General Population

College attrition, the act of leaving a program of study before completing it is a serious problem in the United States (Tinto, 2012). Looking at 2-year and 4-year schools combined, about one third, 32%, of enrolled students dropped out in the first 3 years (Knotek et al., 2019); this is despite steady increases in the number of undergraduate students nationwide from 13.2 to 16.9 million between 2000 and 2016 and a projected 17.4 million by 2027 (Ligioso, 2022). Parent and student belief in college as an investment in their future has remained steadily high at 85% (Bowen, 2014).Currently, nearly three-quarters of high school graduates go on to enroll in college in10 years (Hurst, 2012). Although it is tempting to see this as an indication of a healthy postsecondary education system, such high attrition rates mean that millions of current and future students are spending time and money on college without earning a degree in return. To further exacerbate this, as the lifetime earning gap between high school and college graduates continues to rise (T. Nguyen, 2015), the loss of future potential earnings for students who drop out makes this a lifetime net loss instead of a temporary one.

There are many reasons students drop out of college. Some of the most common causes include academic challenges (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014), financial difficulties (Dynarski, 2008), and lack of motivation (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Academically, many students come underprepared for college, increasing their risk of

dropout (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). High school GPA, IQ, standardized testing scores, and high school class rank are all predictors of success in college (Knotek et al., 2019) as well as variables that can show the unequal access to higher education that starts well before students enroll.

Important to note as well is that these variables should be taken together as a full picture in evaluations of college-student preparedness because class rank (Niu & Tienda, 2012) and GPA (Sawyer, 2013) are more accurate predictors of college success than college entrance exam scores. Moreover, the emphasis on standardized college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT, is increasingly being challenged in U.S. higher education. Many institutions have transitioned to test-optional admissions policies, recognizing concerns that these exams can perpetuate inequality by disproportionately disadvantaging students from underrepresented or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Clinedinst, 2019; Hiss & Franks, 2014).

Outside of academic preparation, although financial strain is not currently believed to be the primary driver for attrition (Dynarski, 2008), alleviating students' financial strain can reduce their dropout rates (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Some debate exists as to what forms of financial support are most beneficial to preventing dropout; however, it remains relatively clear that both financial support and financial management training can have a positive effect on students' ability to persist overall (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Beyond financial factors, motivation, which can be influenced by students' sense of belonging at their institution, plays a role in their college success (Perez, 2019), and interest-major alignment, how well a student's major fits their interest, should play a potentially even bigger role (Allen & Robbins, 2010). To support appropriate major

choice among new students, many universities have increased their academic advising over the past quarter century (Cantwell & Mathies, 2012). Yet there is also evidence to show that quality of academic advising can vary among institutions and programs and that higher value academic advising can significantly increase a student's potential for degree completion (Canaan et al., 2022)

Despite a firm understanding of the supports and structures that can set students up for success, about half of all college students who attempt an undergraduate degree do not persist to graduation (Bergman et al., 2014). For public institutions, a decline in public resources over the last 3 decades has resulted in increased time-to-degree (Bowen, 2014), and 6-year degree completion rates at large have stagnated (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013) currently at 64% as of 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). To complement stagnating graduation rates, the cost of a college education has been rising steadily and faster than inflation (T. Nguyen, 2015) leaving many students unable to afford tuition, fees, and living expenses. For those who do leave before a degree, college attrition has a number of negative consequences for students, their families, and society as a whole. Students who drop out of college earn less than those who graduate and enjoy less job satisfaction (Morin et al., 2014). They are also more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty, less likely to be involved in their community, and more likely to engage in criminal activity (Dix et al., 2020).

There are a number of things that can be done to reduce college attrition for students in general. Colleges and universities can make college more affordable by providing financial aid, waiving costs, and reducing the cost of tuition (Hurst, 2012), something that can particularly support working-class and lower-income students (Allan

et al., 2016). Colleges and universities can also provide academic support services to help students succeed, in particular academic advising, which has been shown to support academic success and degree completion (Bahr, 2008). Families can play a role by supporting students both in person and remotely with an institutions' use of family support able to play a significant role for student success, particularly in the crucial first year (Partida et al., 2020). Finally, even investment before students enter college in early childhood education and college preparatory K-12 education can play a critical role in degree attainment down the line (Jackson, 2012; Luo et al., 2018).

Attrition and Persistence in First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students, students whose parents have had little to no education past high school (Rood, 2009), face unique and often layered barriers that make obtaining a degree even more challenging than for their continuing-generation counterparts (Knotek et al., 2019; Pehrson, 2021; Perez, 2019). The first-generation label is one that spans every other identity, often exacerbating the barriers faced through competing minoritized identity backgrounds that interact to disadvantage first-generation students in compounded ways. Beyond this, first-generation college students more often must balance financial and job responsibilities, family obligations, perception of lower skills, unequal college preparation at the high school level, and mental health barriers such as depression (Stebleton & Soria, 2013).

Financial Barriers

One of the biggest challenges to college completion facing first-generation students is the financial piece. Existing research has shown that first-generation students work more hours and have more financial dependents than continuing-generation

students (Mehta et al., 2011). They are more likely to come from lower-income households (Pascarella et al., 2004) and struggle to keep up with the costs of a degree (Martinez et al., 2009). Although there is evidence to show that students who do complete a bachelor's degree (or higher) are often financially better off over their lifetime than those without a bachelor's degree is declining (Carlson & McChesney, 2015), the cost of a college education is continuing to rise (T. Nguyen, 2015) along with disparities in both completion rates and lifetime payoff for that degree (Meschede et al., 2017). At the same time, the 6-year college completion rate—the percentage of students who complete their degree in 6 years—for continuing-generation students has remained about 50% (Bergman et al., 2014) with first-generation students at about 20% (Center for First-Generation Success, n.d.-b). Although ultimately acquiring a bachelor's degree can indeed pay off financially, it is a risky investment both personally and systematically (Toutkoushian et al., 2013).

Academic Preparation

Another challenge facing first-generation college students is academic preparation. Because of structural barriers that affect lower-income areas such as lower-funded schools lacking college-preparatory classes, first-generation college students often do not have the same access to college preparation as their peers whose parents have attended college (Garriott et al., 2015; Yeh, 2014). This unequal college preparation often comes in the form of inadequate test prep, college advising, and lack of access to extracurricular activities (Garriott et al., 2015). As Woods and Domina (2014) found, high schools with higher student-to-college-counselor-ratio, tended to have students who accessed advising less, were less likely to plan to attend college, less likely to take the

SAT, and ultimately were less likely to enroll in a 4-year college. All of these factors combined create a system in which first-generation students are less likely to enroll and succeed in college and beyond.

Cultural Mismatch

Related to unequal access to college preparation is the cultural mismatch between college and home life that many first-generation students must navigate upon entering a university. Because schools and housing across the United States are still largely segregated, the first year of college is often the first time that students must navigate cultural norms different from their own (Gray et al., 2018). This cultural mismatch often induces anxiety for first-generation students who feel academically underqualified and underprepared for success (Yeh, 2014).

Because first-generation students often come from linguistically and culturally nondominant cultures (Achinstein et al., 2015), the fact that K-12 curricula are not organized to explicitly teach and reveal the cultural capital and codes required for success in higher education and beyond is likely one of the reasons differences in completion rates exist. This combined with the fact that first-generation students are more likely to come from lower-income backgrounds, nonnative English speaking families, and poorer performing high schools (Cantú, 2019) exacerbates feelings of alienation, anxiety about living standards including food insecurity and homelessness, and the uncertainty that comes with navigating social decorum different to one's own, increasing the transitory challenges that students face as they enter university (T.-H. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

In addition to the challenges previously discussed, first-generation college students often experience feelings of isolation, anxiety, and imposter syndrome (Berg,

2020; Gray et al., 2018). They may feel as if they do not belong in college, or that they do not have the skills or capacity to succeed. These feelings can layer additional challenges to known challenges such as identity threat—the extent to which a person feels valued or not as an individual (Coyle & Williams, 2001)—financial barriers to participating in extracurricular activities such as service learning and Greek life, and the need to work more hours, that serve as daily reminders of class difference (Gray et al., 2018). Colleges and universities can work to counteract this by increasing targeted financial aid to this group and offering psychosocial supports that explicitly address minoritized identity barriers.

As a result of these challenges, first-generation college students are less likely to persist and ultimately complete college than their peers whose parents have a college degree (Ishitani, 2006). Despite this, there are a number of known things that can be done to help first-generation college students succeed once enrolled. Colleges and universities can provide financial aid to help first-generation college students afford tuition, fees, and living expenses (Latino et al., 2020).They can provide academic support to first-generation college students, such as tutoring, intensive advising, and residential learning/living communities (Achinstein et al., 2015; Yeh, 2014). They can also provide social and cultural support to first-generation college students, such as mentoring programs, peer support groups, and multicultural learning communities (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Yeh, 2014).

Theoretical Foundations

Behaviorism

Behaviorism is a foundational theoretical perspective in the field of psychology that focuses on observable behaviors to understand human actions (Watson, 1913). Founded through the works of Watson (1913) and Skinner (1965), behaviorism asserts that behavior is shaped by environmental stimuli and reinforced through positive or negative consequences. At its core, behaviorism claims that, with the correct understanding of the stimuli-response relationship, human behavior can be projected and controlled.

Behaviorism has had a profound impact in educational settings. Instructional designs, heavily influenced by behaviorist principles, prioritize the role of reinforcement in learning, suggesting that optimal student performance can be achieved through a systematic approach to reward and punishment (Thorndike, 2017). This has shaped numerous pedagogical strategies, including direct instruction and behavior modification programs. However, critics argue that the behaviorist model may oversimplify the complexities of human learning, excluding the nuanced interplay of cognitive and socio-cultural factors (Bruner, 1966). Despite these critiques, however, the behaviorist models are still used today in part or in full.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, influenced primarily through the works of Vygotsky (1979), posits that social interaction and cultural context play a primary role in determining human cognition. Theorists in this school of thought see cognitive development as deeply linked to social experience and coconstruction of knowledge happening through

interactional processes. A central principal in this perspective is the ZPD, which delineates the distance between what an individual can do independently and what can be achieved with support from a more knowledgeable person.

Sociocultural theory in education emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning, scaffolding, and dialogic teaching. Recognizing learners as active participants embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts, it prompts educators to prioritize contextually relevant materials and pedagogies (Rogoff, 1990). Moreover, sociocultural theory underscores the pivotal role of language, not just as a tool for communication, but as a fundamental mechanism for cognitive development and knowledge construction (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, through the lens of sociocultural theory, education is seen less as the transmission of static knowledge and more as a dynamic interplay with social interactions shaping cognitive growth.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, a prominent sociological perspective that aims to understand the social construction of reality through the role that symbols have in shaping human interaction, is one that can be helpful in understanding how one's perception of reality can shape their behavior. Introduced in the early 20th century alongside the advent of urbanization and industrialization, symbolic interactionism arose as a way to study the social problems and associated human behavior of this time (Metzner & Bean, 1987). The underpinning assumption of this conceptual framework is that human beings act based on the meaning that things have for them through their individual lens. Thus, through this assumption, the context for human behavior—the

where and why—must be considered to understand why people act in certain ways (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Like issues of attrition and completion in higher education, symbolic interactionism has been studied and discussed by scholars, researchers, and practitioners in many connected fields of both qualitative and quantitative research (Benzies & Allen, 2001). Although symbolic interaction can and has been applied to many topics in the social sciences, its most prominent area of focus has been on deviance (Dennis & Martin, 2005). Authored by Becker in 1963, this branch of thought argued that society creates rules that, when violated, produce deviants (Achinstein et al., 2015). Important in this idea is the emphasis that labeled deviance from such an act stems from the application of the rules and consequences invented societally and not the act in and of itself (Dennis & Martin, 2005). Generally, this operationalization of deviance creates stigma which in turn enforces social norms (Dix et al., 2020); such an understanding of power has been applied in education to understand the societal conception of deviance as something that predisposes both educators and the public to view some students as acceptable and others as unacceptable (Dennis & Martin, 2005; Gold & Richards, 2012).

Symbolic interactionism provides insight into the ways individuals interpret and create meaning through their interactions with others as well as the shared symbols in a given society (Blumer, 1986). Recognizing that individuals engage in a continual process of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation based on their understanding of how they and others have been categorized societally, it offers a context-focused paradigm for understanding interaction (Scimecca, 1977). Thus, symbols, whether verbal or nonverbal, are the primary focus through which meaning is conveyed and understood in social

interactions (Blumer, 1986). Context-dependent symbols—gestures, facial expressions, and both written and spoken language—carry symbolic meanings that can vary across different cultural contexts (Mead, 1934).

In the symbolic interactionist school of thought, the concept of the self holds particular significance. According to Mead (1934), a key theorist of symbolic interactionism, the self emerges through a dynamic interplay between the individual and society; individuals develop their sense of self through social interactions and the internalization of the perspectives and expectations of others. This process of self-construction is ongoing and influenced by various factors such as cultural norms, social roles, and group dynamics. The symbolic nature of interaction also extends to the construction of social reality. Through communication and shared symbolism, individuals collectively construct and maintain a social order (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This shared reality is not fixed but subject to consistent interpretation and negotiation as individuals ascribe meaning to symbols and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the importance of studying the microlevel dynamics of everyday social interactions. It encourages researchers to examine how individuals interpret and respond to symbols, how meanings are negotiated, and how they influence subsequent actions (Blumer, 1986). By focusing on the microlevel, symbolic interactionism offers insight into the processes through which individuals actively shape and are shaped by their social environments. Alongside this, symbolic interactionism provides a framework for understanding the social construction of reality and the role of symbols in shaping human interactions.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is a prominent sociological perspective that focuses on the social construction of deviance (Achinstein et al., 2015). Stemming from the broader framework of symbolic interactionism, labeling theory builds upon this foundation, focusing specifically on the social process of labeling individuals as deviant and the subsequent impact on their self-concept and behavior through this (Scimecca, 1977). From its roots in symbolic interactionism, this theory acknowledges the power of symbols and the social meanings attached to labels in influencing how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others (Dix et al., 2020). This theory thus can be seen as an application of symbolic interactionism to the study of deviance and social control, providing insights into the social construction of identity formation through interactions and labeling processes.

Originally formulated to understand deviance and recidivism in prison populations, labeling theory suggests that the criminal justice system, through its labeling practices, can inadvertently contribute to the creation and perpetuation of deviant identities (Barmaki, 2019). Arrest, prosecution, and incarceration can solidify an individual's deviant status and hinder their reintegration into society whereas their level of institutional conformity thereafter (e.g., employment status, civic engagement, marriage etc.) can minimize this (Ascani, 2012).

Developed in the mid-20th century, labeling theory explores how individuals come to be identified as deviant or criminal based on societal reactions to their behavior (Dennis & Martin, 2005). Generally in this conceptual framework, the term deviant refers to behavior, actions, or characteristics that deviate from established social norms, values,

or expectations and can be applied to identities outside of the dominant norm (Achinstein et al., 2015). A socially constructed concept, deviance is shaped by cultural, historical, and contextual factors that involve behaviors or attributes considered outside the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable or appropriate in a particular society or social group. According to Becker (1963), deviance is not inherent in an act itself but rather a product of social definitions and reactions to that act; it is the result of the labeling process by which individuals are identified as deviant based on societal responses to their behavior (Lemert, 1972). Ultimately, these labels carry social stigmas and can significantly impact individuals' self-identity and interactions in a society (Goffman, 1963/2014).

Labeling theory operates on several core assumptions that underpin its analysis of deviance and social control. First and most important, it posits that deviance is not an inherent quality in an individual or behavior but a product of social definition and societal reactions to behaviors dubbed nonstandard (Scimecca, 1977). This focus shifts the analysis from the deviant act itself to the societal response and the subsequent labeling of individuals as deviant through this act. In this view, the labeling process plays a crucial role in shaping individual identity and behavior in a given society (Dix et al., 2020).

Central to this theory is the notion that social interaction and communication between individuals and institutions are vital in the labeling process and influenced via hierarchical power structures (Dennis & Martin, 2005). This process involves the identification, categorization, and application of labels to individuals based on their perceived deviant behavior. The label serves as a master status or dominant label for an

individual that influences how they are viewed and treated by others, in turn shaping their own identity formation through this process (Van den Scott & van den Hoonard, 2016).

Labeling theory posits that the application of deviant labels on members of a given society affects individual identity formation while shaping and being shaped by society through stigmatization, the process through which individuals are marked by negative attributes that set them apart from mainstream society (Dennis & Martin, 2005). Goffman (1963/2014) introduced the concept of stigma, highlighting how labels result in social disapproval, exclusion, and discrimination. Once labeled as deviant, individuals often internalize this label and conform to the expectations associated with it, reinforcing any preexisting deviant identity and behavior (Achinstein et al., 2015). Labeling theory recognizes two primary types of deviance: primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to initial deviant acts that may go unnoticed or have minimal consequences. When these acts are officially labeled and identified, however, secondary deviance occurs. Secondary deviance encompasses the intensified deviant behavior and identity resulting from the societal reaction and labeling process. Thus, labeling can escalate deviant behaviors and lead to a self-perpetuating cycle (Lemert, 1972).

Labeling theory offers a potentially helpful framework for understanding the social construction of deviance both in the formerly incarcerated as well as other nonstandard identity groups. It emphasizes the role of social interaction, labeling, and societal reactions in shaping individuals' identities and behaviors (Ascani, 2012). By focusing on the consequences of societal labeling and stigmatization, this theory offers insight into the potential harm caused by the application of deviant labeling. The insights

from labeling theory not only have important implications for criminal justice policies, but they can and have been expanded to include other minoritized identities.

Labeling Theory and First-Generation College Students

Investigating student achievement disparities through the lens of labeling theory offers a potential framework to understand the effects that student labeling has had on the educational landscape in the United States. Emerging from sociological insights into deviance in the criminal population, labeling theory later expanded into the repercussions that labels have had when applied to students by educators, administrators, and their peers (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963/2014). In the educational context, students often find themselves categorized based on their academic performance, behavior, or perceived characteristics, something that is often accompanied by microaggression (Gray et al., 2018). Once these labels are affixed, students may internalize them, subsequently shaping their self-perception and influencing their future behaviors (Rosenberg, 2017).

The core tenet of labeling theory lies in the role that authoritative figures play in their imposition of labels, underscoring the power dynamics at play (Lemert, 1972). These dynamics can exacerbate the marginalization experienced by already vulnerable groups. Using labeling theory to explore the intersection between labeling processes and factors such as racial identity, socioeconomic background, and educational outcomes can help to better understand the driving forces behind sustained educational inequalities in the United States. By critically analyzing the mechanisms of labeling in the educational system through the lens of labeling theory, it may be possible to illuminate the underlying processes perpetuating educational stratification and disparity.

In this study, labeling theory was used to explain how deficit-oriented labeling affects first-generation college students in their first year of study. Some researchers have believed that labeling theory can offer valuable insights into the experiences of first-generation college students in their first-year of study, a year with the highest attrition rate overall (Hanson, 2023) and one that is 71% higher for first-generation college students than for those students with two college-educated parents (Ishitani, 2003). This study explored how labeling theory can shed light on the social construction of deviance and identity among first-generation college students. By examining the impact that internalization of labels and stigma can have on their academic journey, this analysis aimed to deepen educators understanding of the complexities first-generation students face in pursuit of higher education.

The application of labels and stereotypes on first-generation college students can create stigmatization, which in turn often produce feelings of inadequacy and disengagement in academic settings (Stuber, 2011; Yeh, 2014). Goffman's (1963/2014) concept of stigma can also shed light onto the experiences of first-generation students, who may internalize the first-generation label and confront a perceived lack of academic preparedness. Aronson et al. (1999) showed that stereotypes are widely believed both by those whom the label applies to and those whom it does not. Although stereotype threat can actually increase student scores on well-learned or easy tasks, it tends to hinder students who are most susceptible, students who care most about their academic performance. Such stigmatization can thus hinder academic performance as well as confidence and a sense of belonging, affecting students' overall experience and ultimately performance and persistence (Stephens et al., 2012).

Labeling theory offers explanations for two psychological phenomena experienced by first-generation students: stereotype threat and impostor syndrome. Stereotype threat refers to a disrupted state stemming from known stereotypes that undermines success (Spencer et al., 2016). Research has shown that when students are confronted with negative stereotypes, their academic performance generally suffers (Wout et al., 2009). Similarly, research has shown that those affected by impostor syndrome tend to attribute their successes to luck rather than ability, fearing that they will be exposed as imposters, ignoring evidence related to their abilities in favor of evidence related to their insufficiencies (Gadsby, 2022). The labeling process and stigmatization can contribute to both stereotype threat and impostor feelings, affecting first-generation students' academic self-efficacy, engagement, and achievement.

Labeling theory further emphasizes the role of institutions in reinforcing or mitigating the effects of labeling on first-generation college students; identifying students via deficit-oriented labels has been shown to be problematic in its situation of the students themselves as the genesis of such deficits as opposed to an inequitable system of education (Perez, 2019). Institutions that recognize the challenges faced by first-generation students and provide targeted support can help counteract negative labeling and stigmatization (Cantú, 2019; Oldfield, 2012). Support initiatives, such as targeted first-generation student organizations, mentorship programs, and academic advising tailored to students' unique needs, can enhance their sense of belonging and academic success (Stephens et al., 2012)

Labeling theory offers a framework for understanding the experiences of first-generation college students. It highlights how stereotyping and labeling can impact

students' self-identity, academic performance, and overall college experience. By recognizing the stigmatization and potential consequences that labeling has, higher education institutions have the opportunity to develop targeted support systems to reverse the negative effects that these phenomena have on the success of first-generation students. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, a deeper understanding of labeling theory in the context of first-generation students may contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning environments at the higher-education level.

Labeling Theory in Higher Education

Deficit ideology, which includes but is not limited to language, refers to the tendency to situate disparities in academic achievement upon the students and families as opposed to a system that rewards some groups over others (Perez, 2019). In the context of higher education, deficit-oriented language can manifest in various ways, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing inequalities. By examining the effect of such language on marginalized student populations, it is possible to promote more inclusive and equitable practices in academia.

Labeling theory argues that deviance is not inherent in actions or characteristics but emerges through social interactions and societal reaction; the fact that language is socially constructed means that labels such as at-risk or high-needs carry socially-constructed meaning (Dix et al., 2020). For first-generation college students, their categorization as the first in their family to pursue a college degree deviates from the norm, leading to their potential labeling as nontraditional or at-risk students. This labeling process can result from institutional assumptions and stereotypes about nonstandard

groups, affecting how they are perceived and treated in the academic environment (Garriott et al., 2015), something which has been shown to be intuitively understood by nonstandard groups (Dix et al., 2020).

Deficit-oriented language can manifest in the narratives used by educators, administrators, instructors, and policymakers when discussing student demographics or academic performance. This type of language, often stemming from research that is heavily deficit-oriented (Rood, 2009), often focuses on students' perceived weaknesses or challenges, such as their socioeconomic background, language proficiency, or educational preparation (Perez, 2019). Widely used terms such as at risk, disadvantaged, or low income are examples of deficit-oriented language that can reinforce negative perceptions and stereotypes about certain student populations despite a lack of common definition in most cases (Dix et al., 2020).

The use of deficit-oriented language in higher education can have detrimental effects on students and perpetuate systemic inequalities (Perez, 2019). It can create a culture of prejudice and negative treatment of students by teachers and can negatively influence students' own academic self-perception (Shifrer, 2013). Additionally, marginalized student groups and those who face negative academic stereotyping are less likely to feel as if they belong at the university, a key predictor of persistence and completion (Knotek et al., 2019; Winograd & Rust, 2014) This type of language can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies because students may internalize negative labels and feel disempowered or discouraged through this (Steele, 1997).

First-generation college students, whose parents or guardians have not attained a 4-year college degree, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of deficit-oriented

language. They may already face imposter syndrome and stereotype threat because of often overlapping racial, ethnic, linguistic, and financial identities (Gray et al., 2018). Deficit-oriented language can exacerbate these challenges by further marginalizing this group and undermining their confidence and academic self-efficacy. Particularly when educators or administrators use deficit-oriented language to describe first-generation students as at risk or academically challenged, they can hinder the students' sense of belonging and make them question their place in their institution (Perez, 2019). Such language may contribute to the perception that first-generation students are less capable or prepared for college, leading to lower expectations and more limited support.

To counteract the negative effects of deficit-oriented language, higher education institutions may consider adopting empowerment-oriented language and inclusive practices. Empowerment-oriented language includes phrases such as high potential, resilient learners, and future leaders focuses on students' strengths, resilience, and potential, emphasizing their unique assets rather than deficits; it also helps to situate any challenges these students face in the context of a system instead of attributing these challenges to the students themselves (Perez, 2019). Using empowerment-oriented language has the potential to acknowledge systemic inequality without further disenfranchising students (Dix et al., 2020; Strauss, 2019).

Inclusive practices involve creating supportive environments that recognize the diverse experiences and backgrounds of students. Implementing culturally responsive teaching methods, mentorship programs, and targeted support services can help first-generation students thrive and reach their academic goals (Cabrera et al., 2003). In addition to this, programs and practices that promote growth mindset, encourage the use

of institutional resources, and foster relationship building and mutual support can do much to promote persistence and completion in this student group (Aronson et al., 1999; Gray et al., 2018; Korstange et al., 2020)

Deficit-oriented language in higher education perpetuates negative stereotypes and undermines the success of first-generation college students. Recognizing the impact of this language is essential to promoting a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. By critically examining the type of language educators are using and implementing inclusive practices, higher education institutions have the potential to increase success rates for first-generation students both at their institutions and overall.

Identity Threat

Identity threat is the individual perception of one's identity—racial, gendered, socioeconomic status, generational status, and so forth—as being devalued or at risk in a given context (Steele, 1997). There are numerous challenges in the first year of college, identity threat being one of them. Identity threat is particularly significant for first-generation students who must often negotiate their unique identities in a new academic environment containing traditions and culture mismatched to their own (Garriott et al., 2015). Through this, identity threat has the potential to generate heightened states of vigilance, potentially impeding cognitive performance and reducing a sense of belonging (Schmader et al., 2004).

In the higher education landscape, identity threat can manifest in various ways: through microaggressions in classroom settings, overt or covert biases in curricular materials, or through peers' and educators' presumptions and subsequent behaviors (Murphy et al., 2007). Through the lens of identity threat, the academic environment

becomes more than just a place of learning; it becomes a space where identities are constantly negotiated, reassessed, and sometimes threatened. Recognizing and mitigating these threats can pave the way for a more inclusive, supportive educational environment, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and empowerment among all students but particularly for those from marginalized or nontraditional backgrounds (Sue et al., 2007).

Stereotype Threat

Whereas identity threat is a more generalized term concerning any perceived threat to one's identity, stereotype threat is cognitive and emotional response occurring when an individual is in a situation where they may potentially confirm a known negative stereotype about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In the field of social psychology, the stereotype threat means that, when individuals are aware of a negative stereotype associated with their identity group, the fear of confirming this stereotype can negatively affect performance even if they do not personally believe in the stereotype (Steele, 1997). This can thus perpetuate negative outcomes, from test scores to job performance, reinforcing these stereotypes. Stereotype threat is particularly prevalent in minoritized groups in predominantly homogenous environments. The damaging power that stereotype threat has is not in the potential accuracy of a stereotype but in the internalization of societal expectations and the resulting performance anxiety (Perez, 2019).

In higher education, stereotype threat has potential implications for how educators work with first-generation students. The academic arena, with its emphasis on assessments and evaluations, can increase stereotype-related anxieties; this can manifest in a female student's hesitation to participate in male-dominated science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics classes or in the reluctance of a first-generation college student to seek academic assistance, fearing they might confirm presumptions about their capabilities (Schmader et al., 2004). Through this lens, it can be seen that students are not merely navigating their academic responsibilities but are also constantly grappling with societal narratives, trying to carve out and protect their identity amid preconceived notions.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome, originated by Clance and Imes (1978), explains the phenomenon in which individuals, regardless of achievement and competency, struggle with persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. These fears are not based in deficiency of achievement or competency but instead in an internalized belief system discounting objective evidence of competence. Clance and Imes suggested that those who struggle with imposter syndrome attribute success to factors such as luck or the strategic manipulation of others' perceptions instead of their own ability or effort. Research has indicated that imposter syndrome may disproportionately impact those from marginalized or underrepresented groups in certain professional and academic settings (Cokley et al., 2013).

In academic contexts, imposter syndrome has implications for students and educators alike. Students grappling with this phenomenon, even those in elite academic settings and in highly-ranked programs, may perceive their admission or achievements to luck, thereby undermining their academic confidence and potentially their performance (Parkman, 2016). After college, especially those in early-career stages or from underrepresented backgrounds, individuals susceptible to this phenomenon may

experience heightened feelings of inadequacy, which can impede their career and professional progression.

Relabeling

Relabeling is a practice that seeks to counteract the detrimental effects of deficit-oriented labeling, in particular as it pertains to marginalized and minoritized groups. The foundation of relabeling centers on the reframing of traditionally negative narratives by shifting this discourse to emphasize strengths, resilience, and potential instead (Yosso, 2005). Relabeling pushes practitioners to accentuate the unique experiences, cultural wealth, and diverse perspectives that minoritized and marginalized groups bring to academic institutions instead of through the lens of perceived inadequacy or lacking (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Higher education institutions that embrace relabeling practices may engage in revising policies, communications, and programmatic structures to foster a more inclusive and affirming environment. This approach recognizes that terminologies and labels can exert profound influences on students' academic identities, self-efficacy, and overall college experiences (Terenzini et al., 1996). By consciously shifting from deficit-oriented to asset-based terminologies, educators and administrators may be able to reinforce academic engagement, persistence, and success among first-generation students. Emphasizing a strength-based approach through relabeling not only has the opportunity to counter stigmatizing narratives but also proactively position first-generation students as valued contributors to the academic community they are a part of (Valencia, 2010).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, the cultural knowledge, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors that confer power and status to particular groups was first coined by Bourdieu in the 1970s (Achinstein et al., 2015; Bourdiey & Passeron, 1990; Stuber, 2011). This theory states that people possess nonfinancial assets that promote social mobility. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital denotes the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, skills, and other cultural assets that are beneficial in a given social setting (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In higher education, cultural capital plays a key role in shaping student experience and outcome. Students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds often enter their university equipped with cultural resources that place them favorably in this academic setting (Lareau, 1987). These cultural, invisible resources thus situate some students for success over others (Stuber, 2011).

Students lacking this form of capital, such as many first-generation college attendees, may face challenges navigating academic terrains unfamiliar to them, thus reinforcing cycles of educational inequality. As higher education institutions strive for more inclusive environments, acknowledging and valuing diverse forms of cultural capital is a primary means to do this. This includes recognizing the unique experiences and assets that all students, regardless of their background, bring to the academic community, and mitigating structures that perpetuate disparities in access to and rewards from cultural capital (Yosso, 2005).

Growth Mindset

The concept of growth mindset, as introduced by Dweck (2006), delves into the psychology of learning and achievement. At its core, growth mindset revolves around the

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belief that intellectual capacities are not static but can be cultivated and enhanced through effort, perseverance, and dedication. This perspective contrasts with a fixed mindset, in which individuals believe their abilities are innate and unchangeable. For first-generation college students, who often face unique challenges and pressures, the adoption of a growth mindset can be particularly transformative. Such a mindset equips them with the psychological tools to perceive academic hurdles not as insurmountable barriers but as opportunities to learn and grow. This perspective can be especially empowering in the face of setbacks, allowing students to reframe failures as temporary setbacks rather than as reflections of inherent incapacity (Paunesku et al., 2015).

The benefits of a growth mindset extend beyond resilience; research has shown that students who embrace this perspective tend to be more motivated, invest more effort in their studies, and demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Their belief in the potential for growth and improvement can lead to a more proactive approach to learning, seeking feedback, and embracing challenges.

The journey of first-generation students in higher education, however, is often complicated by external perceptions and labels. The use of deficit-oriented labeling can undermine a growth mindset by suggesting that these students' challenges arise from inherent deficiencies rather than from surmountable external factors. Such negative labels can create a cognitive dissonance, in which students grapple with reconciling their belief in their potential for growth with societal messages that suggest otherwise. It is important for higher education institutions to recognize the power of these mindsets and the external factors that can influence them. By fostering an environment that consistently supports and reinforces a growth mindset, educational institutions can play a pivotal role

in ensuring that first-generation students not only navigate the academic landscape successfully but also thrive and excel in it.

Conceptual Framework: The Impact of Deficit-Oriented Language on First-Generation College Students Through Stereotype Threat and Resilience Theory

Through the evolution of research on the impact of deficit-oriented language, several foundational theories that shed light on the experiences of first-generation college students have emerged. These theories underscore the significance of observable behaviors, emphasize the impact of societal labels, and discuss strategies and methodologies for countering the harmful effects of deficit-oriented language; these foundational theories not only clarify the complexities surrounding first-generation students' experiences but also support the interplay of factors encapsulated in this study's conceptual framework. By integrating these theoretical foundations, this conceptual framework and study not only delved into the nuances of the student experience but also contribute to bridging the theoretical gap in the literature on first-generation college students.

Deficit-Oriented Language in Academic Contexts

Deficit-oriented language, which Valencia (1997) explained as the belief that specific student populations, notably those of marginalized backgrounds, are inherently lacking in skills or qualities necessary for academic success; such a perspective, whether overt or subtle, positions these students as deficient rather than focusing on systemic or structural barriers that might impede their success. Deficit-oriented language can manifest in a myriad of ways in higher education like faculty perceptions, instructional materials, administrative policies, and even peer interactions. For first-generation college

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students, this language may underscore or even magnify feelings of inadequacy, impostor syndrome, or perceived unpreparedness for the rigors of college life (Stephens et al., 2012).

Stereotype Threat

Steele and Aronson's (1995) introduction of the concept of stereotype threat marked an important moment in the understanding of academic performance in minoritized groups. Stereotype threat arises when individuals perceive themselves as at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes associated with their social group (Aronson et al., 1999).

For first-generation college students, exposure to deficit-oriented language can be a trigger for stereotype threat: the fear that their actions or performances might inadvertently confirm existing negative stereotypes perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy of lowered expectations and performance (Steele, 1997). The emotional toll of consistently combatting these internalized notions can lead to reduced academic motivation, cognitive exhaustion, and even increased dropout rates (Schmader et al., 2008).

Resilience Theory

Although the challenges posed by deficit-oriented language and stereotype threat are substantial, they are only part of the narrative for first-generation college students. Resilience theory, as championed by Werner and Smith (1988) and later by Masten (2001), offers a counter-perspective, highlighting the potential for growth and resilience in the face of adversity.

Resilience, in this framework, is not just the ability to bounce back but also the capacity to thrive amidst challenges. First-generation students often bring with them a surplus of strengths: diverse perspectives, robust familial support systems, grit, and determination stemming from their unique life experiences (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). These protective factors can serve as buffers against the negative impacts of deficit thinking and stereotype threat.

Resilience among first-generation college students can manifest in various ways. Some examples are leveraging on-campus resources, forming supportive peer groups, engaging in mentor-mentee relationships, or even advocating for structural changes in the institution (Feldman, 1994; Strayhorn, 2014; Tinto, 2012).

Summary

This chapter explored the history and background of first-generation student persistence and completion in the United States. Additionally, this chapter reviewed major theories related to symbolic interactionism and labeling theory as a possible way to explain gaps in persistence and completion rates between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Furthermore, this chapter discussed the evolution and history of higher education as an education model. Chapter II stressed the need for more research on the barriers that first-generation college students face as well as potential mitigating factors to these barriers such as relabeling. This chapter highlighted the wealth of literature already in existence that discusses the barriers, obstacles, and challenges that first-generation students face. It also emphasized the need to explore strengths-based approaches to discussing this student group, highlighting the preponderance of deficit-oriented research and language used in academia on this topic.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study examined the impact that deficit-oriented language has on first-generation college students in their first year of undergraduate study. The research design used for this study was mixed methods, employing both surveys and interviews from the sample. A definitive gap in the literature exists about the experience of first-generation college students compared to their continuing-generation counterparts (Lawrence, 2020). An overemphasis in existing research on quantitative data compared to qualitative (Rood, 2009) indicates a need for this study. Mixed methods as a methodology was chosen because it provides a "more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex phenomena than either approach alone" (Patton, 20140, p. 8). Research questions for this study were focused first on quantifying the rate of use of deficit-oriented language used in a program that serves first-generation students and next on understanding how these students perceive and respond to this language.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

Research Questions

1. What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?

2. What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?

3. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?

4. How do first-generation undergraduate students react to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?

5. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

6. What strategies do first-generation undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language?

Research Design

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) cited the research design as one of the most crucial components of a study aimed at solving research problems; in the field of education this involves the "selecting [of] subjects, research sites, and data collection procedures to answer the research question(s)"(p. 28). Selecting an appropriate research design for this study was critical to unpacking the impact that deficit-oriented language has on first-year college students. To more fully understand the complex nature of this problem, the researcher chose a mixed methods approach. According to Creswell (2012), "the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself" (p. 535). The researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the relationship between rate of use of deficit-oriented language in a college setting and how this affects first-year students.

This study's mixed methods design was essential to provide a deep understanding of the effect that deficit-oriented language has on first-generation college students. This design allowed for a triangulation of data sources and multiple perspectives on the issue, which promotes corroboration of research findings, and contributed to the validity and reliability of the data (Creswell, 2012). By using a mixed methods design, the researcher was able to quantify and qualify the effects of deficit-oriented language on first-year college students, providing an in-depth analysis of the problem.

Quantitative Data

This study employed a mixed methods research design, with a nonexperimental and descriptive quantitative component. Participants were surveyed using a 4-point Likert scale to gauge their perceptions of the frequency of deficit-oriented language exposure in their undergraduate program, their responses to deficit-oriented language, their experiences with strengths-based language, and the strategies they employ to counteract the negative effects of deficit-oriented language.

For the purpose of analysis, responses indicating frequent or regular exposure to deficit-oriented language (e.g., *often* or *always* on the Likert scale) were coded as 1, suggesting a higher perceived rate of such language use. Conversely, responses indicating rare or no exposure (e.g., *rarely* or *never*) were coded as 0, suggesting a lower perceived rate. Participants' reactions to deficit-oriented language were quantified based on their reported feelings and behaviors in response to such language. Experiences with strengths-based language were quantified based on the reported positive impacts and feelings associated with such language. Additionally, strategies employed to overcome the

adverse effects of deficit-oriented language were quantified based on reported frequency and effectiveness of various coping mechanisms and resources used.

From this coding, several variables emerged. The perceived rate of deficit-oriented language represented the average score from the Likert scale responses. The response to deficit-oriented language quantified the range and intensity of reactions to such language. The experience with strengths-based language quantified the positive impacts and feelings associated with strengths-based language. Last, the strategies against deficit-oriented language quantified the effectiveness and frequency of strategies employed to counteract the negative effects of deficit-oriented language.

Qualitative Data

According to Patton (2014), sampling a given population is about understanding that population's diversity and experience. Alternatively, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that a sample should be representative of the greater population, accurately representing the characteristics of that population. Because a sample size is variable based on the needs of each researcher and study, the final sample number should reflect the goals of each study. Five interviews were conducted with participants who had filled out the electronic survey and had indicated an interest in completing a subsequent interview. These interviews aimed to understand both the emotional and motivational impact of deficit-oriented labeling on the participants and the influence of such labeling on students' persistence from their first to their second year of study.

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Population

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McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined population as the "entire group of people or objects that meet the research criteria for [a] study" (p. 146). For this study, the

estimated number of first-generation college students enrolled in degree-seeking programs in Massachusetts in 2019—the most recent year with data available—was 32,000, roughly 13% of the entire undergraduate population in Massachusetts (Hussar et al., 2020). The aim of this study was to explain the rate of use of deficit-oriented language from a sample of this larger population to be able to generalize this information to the larger population.

Target Population

The target population is "a group of individuals (or a group of organizations) with some common defining characteristics that the researcher can identify and study" (Creswell, 2012, p. 142). The target population for this study was first-generation and continuing-generation college students in their first year of study at the University of Massachusetts Boston enrolled in the Student Support Services program (SSS). This program is a federal initiative designed to assist college students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who are first-generation college students, low-income individuals, and students with disabilities. Its goal is to increase college retention and graduation rates for these populations by providing comprehensive academic support services such as tutoring, academic advising, financial aid assistance, and career and college mentoring. The SSS program at the University of Massachusetts Boston serves 450 students from the university with 130 students listed as first year students.

Sample

According to Patton (2014), sampling a given population is about understanding that population's diversity and experience. Alternatively, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) maintained that a sample should be representative of the greater population,

representing accurately the characteristics of that population. The goal of this study was to understand how programs that serve first-generation college students communicate with and about this student population. The sample was drawn from students enrolled in their first year of study at the University of Massachusetts Boston's SSS program. Using a voluntary response sampling method, participants initially volunteered for the study through the survey. From those expressing willingness to participate in further interviews, a random sampling approach was employed to select a subset for in-depth interviews. The sample size for the quantitative survey was 21 participants and five for the qualitative interviews.

Instrumentation

The researcher employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods data collection process, starting with a quantitative phase and progressing to a qualitative phase. Initially, the researcher used a sequential explanatory approach to identify patterns and trends in student perceptions of deficit-oriented language through structured surveys. However, certain patterns and unexpected findings in the survey data warranted deeper exploration. Thus, in the subsequent phase, the researcher conducted qualitative interviews with select participants to delve deeper into these patterns and gain richer insights into students' experiences and thoughts about academic advisor behaviors. Alignment of data collection is summarized in Appendix B.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), this sequential explanatory approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the patterns observed in the survey data by allowing subjects to elaborate, clarify, and provide context to their responses in the initial quantitative phase. By conducting the survey first and then tailoring interview

questions based on its findings, the researcher was able to understand not only the overarching trends but also the nuances and intricacies of the students' perceptions and experiences. This methodology ensured that the qualitative interviews were anchored in the actual experiences and perspectives of the participants, as reflected in the survey data.

Quantitative Instrumentation

There are many advantages to using a survey tool as a quantitative instrument. Surveys allow researchers to capture the perceptions, feelings, and reactions of a population toward specific topics or phenomena (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Furthermore, surveys offer a structured method for gathering data, simplifying the subsequent analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

For this study, a survey (see Appendix C) was developed to explore the impact of deficit-oriented and strengths-based language on the academic experiences and self-perception of first-generation college students. The general survey structure and format was informed by research done by Perez (2019).

The survey used in this study delved into participants' encounters with both forms of language throughout their academic journey and evaluated the influence of these encounters on their self-perception and academic experience. This survey used a range of Likert-scale questions to gauge frequency and impact of participants' experiences with deficit-oriented and strengths-based language. The survey contained a broad set of questions, addressing multiple dimensions of the participants' experiences and responses to these types of language; this included their perception of being stereotypically labeled because of first-generation status, experiences of being labeled as at risk or

underprepared, and their encounters with strengths-based language emphasizing their potential and resilience.

The scale used in the survey ranged from 0 to 3 or 0 to 4, depending on the question, allowing participants to express the extent of their agreement or frequency of experiences with options such as *not at all*, *rarely*, *often*, and *always*, or *more than five times* for some items. This approach enabled a detailed exploration of how language use in academic settings influences first-generation college students' self-concept and academic engagement.

By asking participants to reflect on both the presence and impact of deficit-oriented and strengths-based language, the survey sought to uncover the complex relationship between language use and the academic self-concept of first-generation college students. Additionally, the survey probed into the strategies employed by these students in navigating and responding to such language, offering insights into their resilience and coping mechanisms.

Qualitative Instrumentation

The second phase of this study used qualitative interviews to delve into the experiences of first-generation college students when confronted with deficit-oriented language. These interviews aimed to illuminate the emotional, psychological, and academic impact of deficit-oriented language on first-generation college students' experience. In this qualitative phase, interview questions were crafted to further understand their personal stories and feelings concerning the deficit-oriented language they encountered, aiming to provide depth and nuance to the quantitative findings. Given the study's sequential design, the interview questions were finalized only after all survey

responses were collected, ensuring that the specific instances or effects of deficit-oriented language were thoroughly explored.

Interviews were carried out virtually using Zoom to ensure convenience and comfort for participants. The interview framework (see Appendix D) consisted of 12 structured questions, created to address the primary and secondary research objectives. The literature review, conceptual framework, and data from survey items were used to formulate these interview questions. To further refine the questions and ensure their validity, field-testing was employed.

Researcher as an Instrument

The researcher took on the task of executing all qualitative groundwork by interviewing first-generation college students about their experiences with deficit-oriented language. Throughout these interactions, the researcher diligently ensured impartiality, posing open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely share their experiences without being led in any specific direction. Following the interviews, these dialogues were transcribed, and the resulting transcripts were shared with the participants to validate accuracy and foster transparency. Given the researcher's direct involvement in gathering these primary data, they were considered an integral instrument in the study.

Quantitative Field Test

Field-testing for both qualitative and quantitative tools is crucial to affirm the content validity of a tool's responses and enhance the framing of questions (Creswell, 2012; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Quantitative field-testing was employed to gauge perceptions regarding deficit-oriented language. A colleague, well-versed in the challenges faced by first-generation college students, was chosen to take the survey

before it was released to participants. Upon completion, this colleague was provided with a reflection sheet (see Appendix E), designed to capture their immediate thoughts and feedback on aspects like the survey's clarity, its duration, and their overall experience navigating through the questions. Their insights from the reflection sheet offered valuable pointers for refining the survey.

Qualitative Field Test

For the qualitative portion, an interview was set up with another colleague. This colleague, possessing a deep understanding of the nuances concerning deficit-oriented language in higher education, was seen as an ideal candidate for this test. To ensure the feedback was comprehensive, an expert was asked to observe the interview. The entire session, hosted on Zoom, was designed to mirror the structure and duration of the primary research interviews. After the interview, the colleague was handed a reflection sheet (see Appendix F) to jot down immediate thoughts and feelings about the interview process. This allowed a structured way to capture their experience and any suggestions they might have. Following this, a detailed discussion between the researcher and the expert observer took place. The conversation revolved around the feedback received, both from the reflection sheet and the expert's observations, and both parties deliberated on potential improvements to the interview process.

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Validity

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Researchers believe a survey tool is valid to the degree that it gauges what it aims to gauge and correctly fulfills its designated role (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Although achieving perfect validity is impossible, it is imperative for the researcher to craft tools aiming for the highest validity possible. In the context of this study, the survey sought to

evaluate the extent of the perceived impact of deficit-oriented language on the motivation and academic journey of first-generation college students.

To validate the survey's authenticity for this study, both face validity and an expert panel's expertise were used. Face validity was ascertained by analyzing each survey item to confirm its alignment with its intended measure. Three expert scholars were invited to be part of the expert panel. An official invitation detailing their potential involvement was dispatched. Each expert rigorously assessed and provided feedback on the survey tool to enhance its precision. Taking their recommendations into account, the researcher refined the instrument accordingly.

The expert panel consisted of scholars who possessed substantial expertise in both qualitative and quantitative research, specifically related to higher education and who had completed their doctoral studies in the previous 5 years. These experts played a vital role in shaping the survey tool (see Appendix C) and the interview questions (see Appendix D). Their invaluable insights were incorporated to fine-tune the research instruments and guarantee their alignment with the research objectives.

Reliability

Validity describes the capacity of a tool to measure what it purports to measure, and reliability is about the consistency with which an instrument yields results (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Reliability can also be perceived as the degree to which measurements are devoid of errors (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Potential errors can arise from the instrument's construction, its administration, or factors related to the participant's context when taking the test.

In this study, focusing on the influence of deficit-oriented language on first-generation college students, both interviews and survey were designed to be administered to the target group once, warranting the use of intercoder reliability. Subsequent to the transcription process, the primary researcher collaborated with a fellow researcher to independently code a minimum of 10% of the collected data. Both the primary researcher and an independent coder delved into the interview transcripts, identifying emergent themes autonomously. By sharing and comparing these themes, intercoder reliability was ensured. This was to discern shared patterns and themes, fortifying the foundation for intercoder reliability. After this exercise, a clear connection was established between the raw data, coded segments, and resulting themes, aiming for a concurrence rate of at least 80% (Patten & Newhart, 2017).

Data Collection

Research was conducted at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which houses several TRIO programs, a federal grant that aimed to expand access to underserved populations in the United States (Hurst, 2012). Data were collected through surveys and in-depth interviews from participants enrolled in the University of Massachusetts Boston SSS program. An email was sent out inviting all first-year students to participate in the survey (see Appendix G); a follow-up email was sent when data collection was complete thanking participants for their time (see Appendix H). Although the minimum desired number of participants was set at 20, the hope was to garner as many responses as possible to enrich the data. The rationale behind this approach was that a larger sample would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences and

perceptions. Following the survey, a subset of participants, selected randomly, was invited for more in-depth interviews to delve deeper into individual experiences.

All data related to the study were stored on a password-protected computer belonging to the researcher, with backup copies on a secure cloud storage system. Electronic consents were kept separate from the data. After the study concluded, all electronic records were securely stored for 3 years, after which they were permanently deleted. Any printed materials were stored in a filing cabinet and shredded after 3 years.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

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This study used a mixed methods approach including both qualitative and quantitative data. An explanation of analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data used is included in the following sections.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data collected by the researcher involved transcribed Zoom interviews, which were subsequently analyzed. Transcripts were generated in Zoom via Temi.com, a program add-on that automatically generates interview transcripts. To ensure the accuracy of each transcript, they were sent to the participants for review and verification. The researcher then used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to organize and code the themes derived from the interviews. The codes were then used to extract behaviors and feelings associated with deficit-oriented labels to answer Research Questions 3 through 6.

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data analysis of the survey results was carried out using Megastat, a software add-on for Microsoft Excel 2016. The survey instrument was specifically

designed for this purpose. This survey was designed to address Research Questions 1 and 2:

- Research Question 1: What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?

- Research Question 2: What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data from the survey. As Patton (2014) noted, descriptive statistics aims to summarize the general nature of the data in a manner that's easily comprehensible. Measures of central tendency, specifically the mean, median, and mode, were employed to summarize participants' responses. This provided insights into the general trends and patterns regarding how first-generation college students perceive and respond to deficit-oriented language during their academic journey at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Google Forms was used to organize and collect data. Frequency tables were used to organize data to summarize and present the data set in a clear and concise manner. The purpose of the frequency tables was to show how often each category in the Likert scales was ranked 1 to 5 (Survey Item 2) and 1 to 3 (Survey Items 3 and 4).

Data Collection Procedure

The first step in this mixed methods approach was to gain consent from participants. Those who indicated a lack of interest were redirected away from the study, and those who expressed interest were presented with a consent form and asked to acknowledge receipt of both the consent form and the participant Bill of Rights (see

Appendix I). Before data collection began, approval was received from the Institutional

Review Board (IRB) at the University of Massachusetts Global and the University of

Massachusetts Boston. The IRB ensured that all research practices upheld the highest

ethical standards, particularly concerning participant anonymity and data protection.

Participants were assured of their anonymity throughout the study. Their personal

identifiers were removed or changed, ensuring that their responses could not be traced

back to them.

The subsequent step involved administering an online questionnaire to students

enrolled in the SSS program, a TRIO granted program, who had completed 1 year of

study at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Participants identified themselves as

either first-generation or continuing-generation college students and then answered a set

of survey items. All data related to the study, including survey responses and interview

transcripts, were stored on a password-protected computer belonging to the researcher.

Backup copies were stored on a secure cloud storage system requiring authentication.

After the research was completed, all electronic records were securely stored for 3 years,

after which they were permanently deleted from all storage systems.

After the survey phase, a randomized selection of participants was chosen for in-

depth interviews. An email invitation was sent to these randomly selected participants,

detailing the purpose of the interview, its expected duration, and a link to an online

scheduling tool where they could pick a convenient time for the interview. Upon

confirmation of a suitable time, a Zoom meeting link was provided to the participant. A

reminder was dispatched 24 hr prior to the scheduled interview to ensure their

availability. During the interview, participants were prompted with open-ended questions,

aiming to explore their experiences with deficit-oriented language in their program. With the consent of the participants, each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed using Temi.com for thorough analysis.

Limitations

As is the case with all studies, the conclusions in this study have limitations that should be addressed. First, research was conducted remotely and fully online, which allowed for broader reach and a targeted sample. There are limitations to conducting research virtually, however, including a more limited control over participant responses to study questions; whereas a physical location allows for more control over participants' understanding of survey instructions and prompts, there is a more limited control over this in a virtual setting.

The choice to use a survey allowed for the quantification of responses and subsequent aggregation of results. Surveys, however, rely on self-reported data, which increases the potential for participant response bias, a social phenomenon whereby participants alter their responses to conform to social norms or perceived expectations (Larson, 2019). In terms of geographical location, this study was limited to the University of Massachusetts Boston, a 4-year public university in the Northeast that has a large first-generation student population at about 59% of the undergraduate population University of Massachusetts Boston, n.d.) as well as programs specifically set up to serve this population. Because of this, the generalizability of results is more restricted; future studies may seek to replicate this study with multiple institutions to produce more generalizable results.

Related to the limitations is the limited sample size for qualitative data. The sample for this study consisted of a group of students from the SSS program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, a public research university in the Northeast where approximately 59% of undergraduates are first-generation students (University of Massachusetts Boston, n.d.). This small sample size also limits the generalizability of results; future studies may wish to increase this sample number to further promote generalizability. Finally, researcher bias is an inherent part of all studies, and although it can be minimized, it cannot be avoided (Smith & Noble, 2014). The researcher chose a sample that he had access to, namely a previous institution where he was an administrator. Although this allowed for access to participants and information related to participants, this also risked bias related to analysis of results.

Summary

In Chapter III, the methodology employed in this study was detailed, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative components. The chapter started with a concise overview, stating the purpose of the study and outlining the research questions. The research design was described next, encompassing aspects such as the study's target population, the sampling frame, and the process of sample selection. Next, the qualitative and quantitative instruments employed were explained, including discussions on validity and reliability. This chapter also explained the process of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations and limitations inherent to the study were also addressed. Chapter IV focuses on the presentation of the quantitative analysis and corresponding findings. Finally, in Chapter V, the study concludes by engaging in a comprehensive discussion of the findings and providing recommendations for future research endeavors.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This study explored the efficacy of relabeling as a transformative approach in higher education, particularly focusing on its potential impact on the academic persistence and identity of first-generation college students. Using a conceptual framework that integrates cognitive constructs like language framing, stereotype threat, and community cultural wealth, this study examined how first-generation students perceive and respond to deficit-oriented language in academic settings as well as the positive outcomes of empowering, strengths-based narratives. Chapter IV presents a comprehensive overview of the study's objectives, research questions, methodologies, and the data collection process, including a detailed description of the population and the sample involved. The chapter culminates with the presentation of data and analysis in response to the research questions, offering a summary of the key findings that highlight the significance of relabeling practices to foster an inclusive and supportive educational environment for first-generation college students

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

Research Questions

1. What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?

2. What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?

3. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?

4. How do first-generation undergraduate students react to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?

5. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

6. What strategies do first-generation undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

This sequential exploratory mixed methods study was conducted to identify and describe the impact of deficit-oriented language on the academic persistence of first-generation college students at a large public university. The study also examined the perceived effects of strengths-based language and relabeling practices on first-generation college students' journey to degree completion. The research design followed a sequential data collection approach, beginning with a quantitative survey, followed by qualitative one-on-one interviews.

In the initial phase, a survey was administered to first-generation college students to measure their exposure to deficit-oriented language and their experiences with

strengths-based and relabeling narratives in the academic setting. The goal of this quantitative stage was to establish foundational data on the prevalence of different language frameworks and their impact on students' academic self-concept.

Following the survey, the second phase involved conducting in-depth interviews with a selection of survey participants who had consented to further discuss their experiences. The interviews were designed to explore the emotional and psychological impacts of language framing in academia that were not fully captured by the survey. A phenomenological approach was employed to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these students.

The interviews were scheduled and conducted virtually over a video conferencing platform during January and February, 2024. The participants, who were chosen based on their survey responses, represented a cross-section of first-generation college students and provided a rich source of insights into their daily experiences with language in the academic context, the influence of such language on their persistence, and their views on relabeling initiatives.

Prior to data collection, each participant was provided with an electronic informed consent form (see Appendix J) and the University's Bill of Rights, which detailed the study's purposes, participant rights, and confidentiality agreements. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes, ensuring the participants' privacy. To aid in accuracy, the transcripts were transcribed using the online service Temi.com and subsequently reviewed and verified by the researcher. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their transcripts to confirm accuracy and make any necessary changes.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using NVivo, a software designed for such analysis, to identify and code themes. These themes were then examined alongside the survey data to form a comprehensive understanding of the language's impact on the students. Themes that were recurrently mentioned by at least three interviewees were deemed significant for the study.

Population

As defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a population is the "total group to which results can be generalized" (p. 143). Considering the focus of this study on first-generation college students, the population encompasses all such students enrolled in undergraduate programs across the United States. For the academic year 2015-2016, data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that 56% of undergraduate students nationally were first-generation college students of the 16,607,735 total undergraduate enrollment in the fall of 2015 (Center for First-Generation Success, n.d.-a); this represents approximately 9 million students who were first-generation college students. The sampling frame for this study was refined to first-generation college students who were enrolled in a university program designed to support first-generation students. From the national population, the sample was further delimited to students attending a large public university with a federally funded support program for first-generation students. In this context, this study targeted students who were actively engaged in the university's support program in their first year of study during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Sample

A sample, as defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), is "a group of individuals from whom data are collected" (p. 143). In this study, convenience sampling was employed to select participants from the first-year cohort of the SSS program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. This program specifically serves first-generation college students. The following criteria were applied to the potential participants:

- enrolled as first-year students at the University of Massachusetts Boston during the 2023-2024 academic year.

- enrolled in the university's SSS program.

- self-identified as a first-generation college student

- were available and willing to provide insight into their experiences with language use in the academic setting.

The entire first-year cohort of the SSS program was approached with an invitation to participate in the survey, aiming for the broadest possible sample to enhance the richness of the data. From the respondents of the survey, a random sample was selected for in-depth interviews to further explore individual experiences.

Participant Data

There were 130 students invited to participate in this study. These were first-year students enrolled in the SSS program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Of this group, 34 students initially responded with an expression of interest, and 22 of these ultimately completed the survey. From this group, 14 participants responded in the survey that they were interested in continuing for an interview. Of these 14 participants, five

responded to an email request from the researcher to interview and ultimately completed

an interview. Table 1 displays the demographic data for these participants.

Table 1

Participant Data

Participant identification number	First-generation status	Survey completion month/year	Interview month/year
A6723C	First-generation	November 2023	January 2024
A3844D	Not first-generation	November 2023	N/A
A5012B	First-generation	November 2023	January 2024
A2955E	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A1299I	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A3067P	First-generation	December 2023	January 2024
A9402T	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A4956O	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A1289R	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A6734M	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A8513U	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A6735W	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A3188H	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A7866F	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A3188H	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
B9513E	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
B2280B	First-generation	December 2023	January 2024
A4068Z	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A5846X	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
B5957I	First-generation	December 2023	N/A
A8512K	First-generation	December 2023	February 2024
B6846H	First-generation	January 2024	N/A

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Six research questions were addressed in this study using a sequential exploratory

approach. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with five participants via

Zoom, each of which lasted approximately 30 min. Interviews were recorded, and the

audio was transcribed using Temi.com. The researcher coded transcribed transcripts to

address Research Questions 3 through 6. The qualitative data revealed how first-

generation college students described their experience with deficit-oriented and strengths-based language, how they reacted to this type of language, and what strategies they used to overcome the adverse effects associated with this language use.

Research Question 1 (Quantitative): Examining the Prevalence of Deficit Language Research

Research Question 1 was, "What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?" The goal of Research Question 1 was to quantify the perception of deficit-oriented language use in a program funded to serve first-generation college students. The data were collected through an electronic survey, which asked participants whether they felt that the SSS program focused more on students' strengths or deficiencies over the past academic year.

Prevalence of Deficit-Oriented Language

Survey results, shown in Figure 2, revealed the perceived existence of deficit-oriented language (48%) versus strengths-based language (52.4%) in the SSS program.

Figure 2

Prevalence of Deficit-Oriented Language in the SSS Program

Student Support Services (SSS) Program Focus
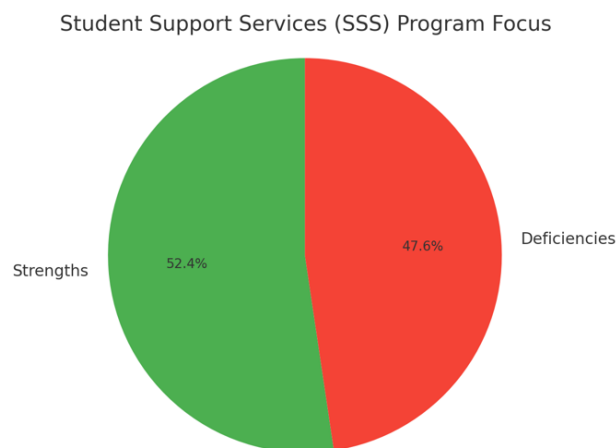
Research Question 2 (Quantitative): Examining the Relationship Between Deficit-Oriented Language and Perceptions of Academic Questioning

Research Question 2 was, "What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?" The data showed that perception of deficit-oriented language did not significantly correlate with feelings of being academically questioned by others because of students' first-generation status. The weak correlation between students' perceptions of deficit-oriented language in the SSS program and their academic self-concept, suggests a minimal negative link. This means that although there is a slight trend for students who notice more deficit-oriented language in the SSS program to experience a somewhat lower academic self-concept, the relationship is not strong enough to be significant either statistically or in practical terms; this implies that other facts may be more significant and points to a minimal influence of the program's language to shape student self-concept, indicating that to enhance the program's effectiveness, focusing on language change alone might not be the most impactful approach. Exploring other aspects of the program that can more substantially support first-generation college students could be more beneficial.

Figure 3 presents a correlation matrix heatmap, which visually represents the relationship between participants' perception of deficit-oriented language in the SSS program and their feelings of being academically questioned because of their first-generation status. The correlation coefficients are represented with warmer colors indicating a stronger positive correlation and cooler colors indicating a weaker or negative correlation. The value of -0.058 reflects a weak negative correlation between the perception of deficit language in the SSS program and students' feelings of being

questioned academically, implying that as students perceive more deficit language, their feeling of being academically questioned does not significantly increase. The value of 0.279 shows a weak positive correlation between the perception of deficit-oriented language university-wide and students' academic self-concept, suggesting that students who are exposed to deficit language at the university level may have a slightly stronger academic self-concept, potentially because of resilience factors or effective support structures that mitigate the negative effects of such language.

Figure 3

Correlation Matrix Heatmap
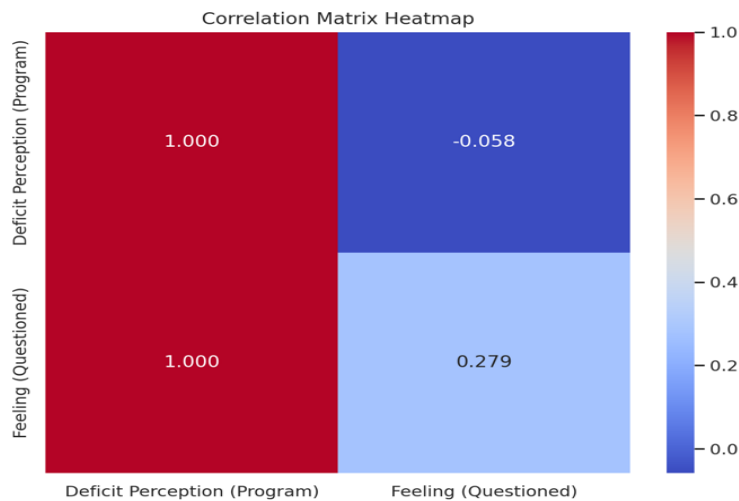
Impact on First-Generation Students

The data highlighted that even in the absence of a strong correlation with the survey question asking respondents to rank feelings of being academically questioned, the presence of deficit-oriented language in educational settings is of concern given what is known about the potential harmful effects of deficit-oriented language in educational settings. Current literature has shown that deficit-oriented labels are regularly used by

staff, administrators, and faculty when applying educational interventions or supports (Castro, 2014; Perez, 2019; Valencia, 2010). Frequency of use for deficit-labeling has been associated with negative academic self-perception and sense of belonging (Perez, 2019). Student awareness of such language suggests that it is a notable element in their academic environment and could have implications for their educational experience.

The data suggest that although deficit-oriented language is recognized by students in the program and university, its perceived prevalence does not necessarily correlate with feelings of being academically questioned in the program. This might indicate that other factors, potentially outside the scope of this study, play a role in how students internalize language and feel about their academic capabilities. Despite the lack of a direct link, the existing presence of deficit-oriented language could still warrant consideration for change. An environment that actively promotes a strengths-based narrative might better support the academic and personal growth of first-generation students by fostering a more inclusive and affirming educational climate.

Research Question 3: (Qualitative): Examining the Experiences of First-Generation Undergraduate Students With Deficit-Oriented Language

Research Question 3 was, "How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?" The qualitative analysis for Research Question 3 examined the lived experiences of first-generation college students and their perception of deficit-oriented language in an academic setting. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo to identify themes that captured participants' perceptions and emotional responses to deficit-oriented language. The following themes were identified that corresponded to this research question: (a) instances of deficit-

oriented language encountered and (b) students' interpretations and feelings about deficit-oriented language when it is encountered. These are described in the following sections.

Instances of Deficit-Oriented Language Encountered

Instances of deficit-oriented language encountered had an overall frequency in NVivo of 24.58% and was identified by four out of five respondents. Deficit-oriented language is identified for this study as any linguistic framework that situates educational disparities on the student as opposed to the system (Perez, 2019). Although it is important to note that first-generation college students as a group have lower rates of retention, adapting, and ultimately graduating (Ishitani, 2006; Pehrson, 2021), a linguistic focus that places responsibility for this on the student as opposed to the system is what was explored in this study. Given that four out of five respondents recognized deficit-oriented language (either internal or external) that blames the individual during their first academic year shows its potential prevalence in the lived experience of first-generation college students.

Two participants indicated that they experienced internal deficit-oriented language (negative self-talk). Participant A3067P seemed to place blame on their own shoulders: "Sometimes it's personal you know, I think to myself, oh my God, I don't know what I'm doing." Participant B2280B seemed to recognize both the situation and himself in his recount of a challenge in his first semester: "I had a couple talks with the professor… Like, 'Hey, mister. So I don't know how to write this paper. I'm struggling. I don't know how to write this way.'" When asked whether he was the one that recognized the challenge and found support, he agreed that he did.

A recognized challenge that first-generation college students face is one of family support. Although traditionally the focus on language use in existing literature has been peri-classroom, deficit-oriented language can happen at home and even before students begin their college career. Because this group by definition are the first in their family to graduate from college, support from home, where immediate family cannot relate to the college experience in the same way as a parent/guardian with a bachelor's degree, can suffer (Herron, 2015). A lack of family support and in some cases even a discouragement to attend college by immediate family has been recognized in the literature as a reoccurring theme (Pehrson, 2021; Yeh, 2014) and was seen here.

Participant A3067P indicated that her family questioned her choice of major and decision to go out of state: "Because my extended family, not my immediate family, when I told them, 'You know, I want to go out of state for college,' they were like, 'Why would you do that?'" She acknowledged that although she understood that staying in state and living at home would save her money, ultimately this would not get her to where she wanted to go in life.

The way that instructors talk to and about students in the classroom can have an impact on their success. Students whose instructors report lower expectations of them in turn report lower expectations of themselves (Perez, 2019). Participant A6723C indicated that although there was an emphasis on strengths-based language in her sociology class—a class populated by first-generation and continuing-generation students—the rest of her professors neither used strengths-based nor deficit-oriented language:

Definitely my sociology professor, she was always encouraging us. She'd be like, "Well, you guys are doing really great. I love how all of all of you were willing to

participate in the assignments." So yes, she was very positive about that. But other than that, for my other professors, they did not really focus on that like, "Oh, you guys are doing great."

Participant A8512K—whose name was changed to Michelle in this quote—indicated that although she did not experience deficit-oriented language in the classroom, she knew students experienced deficit-oriented language one-on-one:

So I guess like my professors don't really use that language. They normally go, like they message the students one-on-one, and they tell them, "I know that a lot of professors don't like saying those things out loud in class because it's, it's disrespectful to everybody."

She then discussed deficit-oriented language that she had experienced in high school before her freshman year, indicating that it angered her:

So I remember, there was this like one teacher and she said to me because I told her my parents were not able to help me like that. My dad didn't know how to read or write. Like, my mom wasn't that smart when it came to school. And she said to me, "Oh like you're very smart, Michelle, you're so smart. Like, I know you, I know you have it in you. You just need to try harder." And I was just like, does she think that I'm not trying like, what does she mean?

Students' Interpretations and Feelings About Deficit-Oriented Language When it Is Encountered

Students' interpretations and feelings about deficit-oriented language had an overall frequency of 29.25% and was identified by four out of five respondents. There was a diverse response and interpretation from participants. One participant perceived

deficit-oriented language as a motivator, stating that the SSS program, "focuses on deficits, but in a positive light." This participant believed that the SSS program's focus on deficiencies, something she indicated both in the survey and interview, helped students to overcome challenges by pointing them out. When asked why she thought this was motivating and not demotivating, she stated that the staff had also been first-generation college students and explained, "It's easier if they understand what you're going through because they either went through it or something similar."

This is supported by existing literature that showed that when students perceive that an educator shares a similar background or identity, they may be more receptive to their messages, including critical feedback, because of perceived empathy or understanding of shared challenges (Pettigrew, 2018); important to note here is that, there is no direct evidence that all staff members in the SSS program are first-generation college students themselves, and this participant did not offer evidence to prove this. Although there is evidence in the literature to has shown that shared identity can improve relationships and how critical feedback is received, there is also evidence that has shown that explicitly speaking on or naming an identity without sharing this identity can also do this (Bovill et al., 2023).

One participant indicated that he perceived the act of getting or receiving help negatively: "It is just like in school if you're needy, like you need certain things to help you, you're just gonna be seen as a bad student." This negative framing of the act of receiving help is common (Valencia, 2010) and may be an indication of internalized stigma associated with deficit-ideology. It may be that a shift toward strengths-based ideology for this student and those like him would result in an internalized shift in

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perception from seeing the act of receiving help as damaging to enhancing (Babij et al., 2020).

Finally, one participant indicated that the use of specific language did not matter to him as long as he was receiving help whereas another participant indicated that deficit-oriented language makes her feel dumb:

It would make me feel a little dumb honestly, because not all first-generation students are the same way. I know that I would do good just to prove them wrong…And I wouldn't go to them for help because I'm like, okay, I'm gonna do it on my own. I'm gonna show you that I don't need you.

Although the responses for this theme show a diversity of thought and response from participants, it was well documented in the literature that deficit-ideology is pervasive particularly for minoritized communities including first-generation college students. This suggests that responses such as the perception of help as a weakness may be a result of internalized deficit-orientation. These narratives underscore the potential transformative impact of integrating a strengths-based ideology in academic settings, which may foster an environment in which seeking help is not a sign of deficiency but a step toward empowerment and growth.

Research Question 4: (Qualitative): Exploring First-Generation Undergraduate Students' Reactions to the Use of Deficit-Oriented Language in Their College Environment

Research Question 4 was, "How do first-generation undergraduate students react to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?" Student reactions to deficit language had one theme identified and frequency in NVivo of 16.84% and was

identified by three out of five respondents, indicating that reaction to deficit-oriented language is significant although not universal. In the context of this study, deficit-oriented language is defined as any dialogue or narrative that places the onus of educational disparities on the student rather than systemic factors, aligning with Perez's (2019) framework. This perspective is important to understand the unique stressors on first-generation college students, who face lower rates of retention and graduation (Ishitani, 2006; Pehrson, 2021), and shifts the discourse from individual blame to systemic evaluation.

Behavioral Responses to Deficit-Oriented Language

Two participants disclosed their personal strategies for managing self-doubt, a reflection of internalized deficit-oriented language. Participant A3067P conveyed an active coping mechanism: "I've learned to just deal with it; if it's something I'm unsure about, I just try it anyways." This sentiment demonstrates a resilient approach to self-criticism. In contrast, Participant A5012B discussed a more passive approach to similar feelings: "Maybe at certain times if I do something, I might think that person's thinking something bad about me. So yeah, that's kind of the way. I don't really react. I just keep pushing."

Participant A3067P also recognized peer support in the SSS program as helpful for overcoming challenges: "It's just nice to have someone who's gone through what you have because they were also a first-generation college student." This quote emphasizes the importance of a communal network in mitigating the effects of negative self-talk.

Participant A8512K expressed that deficit-oriented language served as a motivator. When asked whether proving people wrong was motivating to them, they

agreed. Participant A5012B had another perspective and revealed a reluctance to seek

mental health support because of doubts about its efficacy in dealing with deficit-oriented

thinking: "Well, in general… I feel like talking to people about my problems, it won't

really help me."

Last, A8512K described an encounter with a professor whose harsh words led to a

hesitation to seek future assistance, an example of the long-term consequences of

negative faculty interactions:

> I don't know if this correlates, but I would go late to class all the time and this
> was in my first semester… And [the professor] was really rude to me. And I, I just
> looked at him and I walked away and then the next time, when I went into class,
> he's like, "Hey I'm sorry, for what I said to you the last time we spoke but I was
> looking it up and here's some resources for you on campus." And I didn't take
> them because I was just like, okay whatever.

These findings underscore the nuanced stressors and behavioral reactions to these

for first-generation college students. Responses ranged from active coping strategies, like

Participant A3067P's determination to "try anyway" in the face of uncertainty, to passive

nonreaction as a defense mechanism, as described by Participant A5012B. The

communal network in the SSS program was highlighted as an important support, and the

motivational influence of proving others wrong was also noted. Negative experiences,

however, such as those with faculty, had a lasting effect and deterred future help-seeking

behaviors, illustrating the profound impact of deficit language on student experience.

Research Question 5 (Qualitative): Exploring First-Generation Undergraduate Students' Experiences With Strengths-Based Language

Research Question 5 was, "How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?" The qualitative analysis for Research Question 5 examined the impact of strengths-based language on the academic experiences of first-generation college students. The following three themes were identified that corresponded to this research question: (a) instances of strengths-based language, (b) students' interpretations and feelings about strengths-based language when it is encountered, and (c) the influence of university and SSS program's focus strength-based language.

Instances of Strengths-Based Language and Positive Reinforcement Encountered

Instances of strengths-based language and positive reinforcement encountered had an overall frequency in NVivo of 25.71% and was identified by five out of five respondents. This prevalence suggests a significant and constructive presence in classroom dynamics. Participant A3067P represented this, saying, "I've seen it mostly strength-based… They're addressing the entire class and saying something… they don't shame you for not knowing. They're like, 'Okay, that's great. Let's teach you about it'… And they wanna help you." Such experiences may be instructive because they not only show how instructors can avoid shaming but also actively contribute to a learning environment in which students feel valued and their development is supported.

The sentiment of being encouraged and recognized for their efforts was a common thread among the narratives. Participant A5012B shared a personal reflection:

Well, okay, so for example, I think I suck at [English language arts], but I don't

like writing that much, but my teachers, they do push me and they tell me that I

actually do have good writing skills, even though I just don't see it.

This encouragement to recognize and build upon their potential speaks to the ability of

positive reinforcement to fostering self-efficacy. Similarly, Participant A6723C

highlighted the specific support received from a sociology professor, noting the

distinctive and positive focus on class progress: "Definitely my sociology professor, she

was always encouraging us… She was very positive… It kind of felt like they really

focused on our progress as a class."

Participant A8512K and B2280B's experiences with educator acknowledgment

highlighted a fundamental aspect of student engagement and affirmation. A8512K

recalled a particularly poignant instance:

I mean, like I've had instances where I was already doing good and then the

professor was so proud and they told me exactly what you said. And so I just kept

doing good even though the assignments were hard. But I trusted them because I

would go to their office hours. They seemed interested in me.

This genuine recognition served as a catalyst, propelling A8512K to continue striving for

excellence despite challenges. Similarly, B2280B described a memorable classroom

interaction:

In one of my classes, it was very engaging, so professors would reach out or ask a

lot of questions regarding themes, morals, lessons, questions about the novels that

we've read. And so there were times where I brought a lot of what they perceived

to be interesting perspectives. And they appreciated that. They noticed that and

said, "You know you bring a lot of interesting perspectives and interesting ideas

to this course to this class."

B2280B's experience underlines how recognition from faculty for contributing

meaningful insights to class discussions was not only validating but also encouraged

deeper intellectual engagement and a sense of belonging in the academic community.

Finally, Participant A3067P observed a strengths-based ethos permeating the

university culture, which aligns with the idea that institutions that prioritize such an

approach can significantly enhance student engagement and resilience. The collective

impact of these interactions suggests that when faculty actively employ strengths-based

language, they not only affirm students' capabilities but also play a crucial role in

shaping their academic trajectory and self-concept. This approach, in which professors'

encouragement becomes a driver for perseverance, aligns with the assertion that positive

faculty interactions can enhance students' academic persistence (Achinstein et al., 2015;

Aronson et al., 1999; Dix et al., 2020).

Students' Interpretations and Feelings About Strengths-Based Language When it is Encountered

Students' interpretations and feelings about strengths-based language had an

overall frequency in NVivo of 23.64% and was identified by three out of five

respondents. The emotional responses to strengths-based language span a spectrum from

motivation to validation. This suggests a tangible, beneficial impact on classroom

interactions. For instance, Participant A6723C appreciated the dual nature of classroom

communication, which coupled realism with encouragement:

I think they're very encouraging 'cause I love people being honest with me. I love

honesty, but I feel like it's always the best if somebody is like, "Well, I know you

might be struggling right now, but you'll get through it."

This balanced approach, blending challenge acknowledgment with supportive

reinforcement, was a consistent theme. Participant B2280B described experiences that

conveyed the motivational influence of faculty recognition:

I would say strength-based knowledge. In my American Literature class… [they]

said I bring a lot of interesting perspectives and interesting ideas to this class…

and I was satisfied, I was happy with it that my ideas and my work is appreciated.

On the other hand, Participant A8512K's reflections quoted earlier brought to

light the essential nature of authenticity in such interactions with observations suggesting

that without genuine belief behind the encouragement, the effect could be

counterproductive, potentially reinforcing negative perceptions. Yet, the narrative

changed for Participant A8512K when the support was perceived as heartfelt and

authentic motivating her to go to office hours and work harder. This type of genuine

educator acknowledgment has the potential to catalyze continued effort and resilience in

students (Yosso, 2005).

Similarly, Participant B2280B's memories of engaging class discussions (quoted

earlier) highlight the potential benefits to students who are acknowledged by professors

in the classroom, stating that it made him feel really good. Such interactions not only

validated student contributions but also fostered a deeper sense of academic belonging

and intellectual curiosity. Finally, Participant A3067P shared their observation of a

strengths-based ethos:

I've probably seen that the most in classes when talking with professors. Whether

they're addressing the entire class or when professors ask questions like, "Who

has done one of these assignments before? Who hasn't?" And even if you haven't,

they don't shame you for not knowing. They're like, "Okay, that's great. Let's

teach you about it."

This ethos, echoed in the collective experiences of the participants, affirms that when

faculty leverage strengths-based language, it can substantively affirm students' academic

capabilities and play a pivotal role in their academic and personal growth, aligning with

the broader educational research that advocates for positive faculty-student dynamics as a

cornerstone of academic success (Astin, 1999).

The Influence of University and SSS Program's Focus on Strengths-Based Language

The influence of university and SSS program's focus on strengths-based language

had an overall frequency in NVivo of 8.63% and was identified by two of five

respondents showing a smaller but still important perspective. These are described in the

following sections.

Participant A3067P discussed the pervasive nature of a strengths-based approach

in her educational experience as quoted previously, showing that even in the face of

challenges, a recognition of these challenges with a strengths-based approach to

overcoming them was perceived positively. This account supports this university's

supportive and nonjudgmental learning environment. The acknowledgment of effort and

the absence of shaming for lack of prior knowledge has the potential to not only foster an

inclusive atmosphere but also reinforce the university's dedication to the success of first-

generation college students.

This was further exemplified by Participant A3067P's active participation in campus events, encouraged by the university's affirming message, which is represented in the form of free pens and pins:

> I always go to the events that they hold at the campus center. And a lot of the times I'll see the table for SSS. And I always get free pens and pins that say first gen college student <laugh>… It's nice. Like even though it's a little pin that probably costs like 15 cents to make. It's nice to know that someone there is thinking about your situation.

Participant depictions of the integration of strengths-based language in the university's communication strategy seems to serves as a source of motivation; this approach resonates with pedagogical theories that emphasize positive reinforcement and is indicative of an educational ethos that values and uplifts students in their academic journey, further aligning with existing research on the importance of positive faculty-student interactions to enhance student resilience and academic success (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Perez, 2019).

Research Question 6: (Qualitative): Investigating Strategies Employed by First-Generation Undergraduate Students to Overcome Adverse Effects of Deficit-Oriented Language

Research Question 6 was, "What strategies do first-generation undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language?" The qualitative analysis for Research Question 6 examined the strategies that first-generation college students use to overcome adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language. One theme was identified that corresponded to this research

question: first-generation undergraduate students use strategies to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language. Coping strategies identified by the participants can be seen in Figure 4 and are described in the following sections.

Figure 4

Coping Strategies Employed by Participants

Coping Strategies Employed by Participants
Open and Direct Communication
Self-Advocacy
Leveraging Peer Support Networks
Positive Reinterpretation and Growth Mindset
Resilience
Active Coping Mechanisms
Passive Nonreaction
Motivation by Proving Others Wrong
Seeking Supportive Networks

Specific coping strategies emerged as tools to help participants navigate the challenges posed by deficit-oriented language, with a notable emphasis placed on conversation for resolving interpersonal and academic challenges. Participant A3067P highlighted the necessity of open and direct communication: "Definitely if it's like a problem with a person like my roommate, I've learned you just need to talk it out and communicate well or it's never gonna end well." This approach underscores the importance of clear and direct dialogue in overcoming obstacles.

Self-advocacy was another critical strategy, as articulated by Participant A6723C: "Advocacy is a very important thing in college … you gotta advocate for yourself if you want something." This sentiment underscores the role of personal initiative in navigating the academic landscape, including seeking support from a broad network of professors, staff, and peers.

Furthermore, strategies such as positive reinterpretation and growth mindset, resilience, active coping mechanisms, and passive nonreaction illustrate the students' adaptive responses to the challenges encountered. Participant B2280B's reliance on peer networks exemplifies the significant role of community and shared experience in fostering resilience and success: "So I've gotten support more so from friends than advisors."

The strategy of motivation by proving others wrong also surfaced as a powerful motivator, driving students to excel in the face of skepticism or low expectations. Collectively, these coping mechanisms reveal the depth of strategic thinking and resilience that first-generation students apply to their educational experiences, aiming to overcome the hurdles presented by deficit-oriented language and affirm their academic identities.

Major Findings

Quantitative Analysis

This study began with a quantitative exploration into the prevalence of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program funded to serve first-generation college students. The analysis quantified the rate at which deficit-oriented language is perceived by students in this program, setting the stage for a qualitative investigation into its

impacts. There was one key finding, which was that there is a correlation between deficit-oriented language and academic self-concept.

Contrary to expected outcomes, the data revealed that the perception of deficit-oriented language in the SSS program did not significantly correlate with feelings of being academically questioned because of students' first-generation status. A weak correlation suggested a minimal negative link between the perception of deficit-oriented language and students' academic self-concept. This finding indicates that although students who notice more deficit-oriented language might experience a slightly lower academic self-concept, the relationship is not statistically or practically significant. This points to the minimal influence of the program's language on shaping student self-concept and suggests that other factors may play a more critical role in supporting first-generation college students.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative exploration of this study provided insights into the experiences of first-generation college students in their first year of study. Through thematic analysis of interview data, several key coping strategies and resilience mechanisms were identified, offering a deeper understanding into how students counteract and transcend the potential negativity associated with deficit-oriented language when they encounter it. These coping strategies and resilience mechanisms included

- Active communication and problem solving: Students cited the importance of open and direct communication as a strategy for resolving misunderstandings and conflicts that may arise. This approach was not limited to interactions with peers

but extended to engaging faculty and administrative staff, highlighting the necessity of advocating for clearer understanding and support.

- Self-advocacy: A significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the practice of self-advocacy; this involved students taking proactive steps to seek out resources, support, and opportunities that could enhance their academic and social experiences. Self-advocacy was described as an empowering process, enabling students to navigate the complexities of higher education more effectively and assert their needs and rights in the academic community.

- Leveraging peer support networks: The value of peer support networks was another critical theme, and students often turned to other college students for advice, encouragement, and practical support. These networks provided a sense of belonging and community, offering a buffer against the potential isolating effects of deficit-oriented language and reinforcing students' resilience and persistence.

- Reflective practices and continual learning: Engagement in reflective practices was identified as a key component of students' resilience. Reflecting on their experiences allowed students to process their feelings, assess their strategies for dealing with challenges, and adapt their approaches as needed. Continual learning, both academically and in terms of personal growth, was seen as essential for overcoming barriers and achieving success.

- Positive reinterpretation and growth mindset: Interestingly, some students reported using deficit-oriented language as a catalyst for self-improvement and motivation. By reinterpreting negative labels as challenges to be overcome, these

students demonstrated a growth mindset, viewing obstacles as opportunities for learning and development.

Implications of Qualitative Findings

These qualitative findings underscore the complexity and agency of first-generation college students as they navigate an educational landscape that may not always recognize their strengths and potential. The strategies identified not only reflect the resilience of this student group but also point to areas in which institutions can enhance support and create more empowering environments. By understanding and addressing the nuanced ways in which language affects student experiences, educators and policymakers can foster more inclusive and supportive academic communities.

Summary

This mixed methods study explored the impact of deficit-oriented language on the academic self-concept and persistence of first-generation college students and to identify the coping strategies and resilience mechanisms these students employ. Using a sequential exploratory design, the research involved both qualitative interviews to gather in-depth insights into student experiences and a quantitative survey to measure the prevalence and perceived effects of deficit-oriented language in the academic environment. This chapter systematically presented the findings from both portions of study, highlighting not only the minimal negative link between deficit-oriented language and academic self-concept but also the proactive and adaptive strategies first-generation students adopt to navigate their educational journey. Chapter V synthesizes these findings, offering conclusions, implications for educational practice and policy, and suggestions for future research on supporting first-generation college students.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study investigated the impact of deficit-oriented and strengths-based language on the academic self-concept of first-generation college students. The study consisted of six research questions aimed at understanding how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive how deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. This study also identified how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language. Chapter IV detailed the methodologies used and presented the study's quantitative and qualitative findings. This chapter builds on the data analysis to present a comprehensive synthesis, offering a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed, drawing conclusions, and suggesting recommendations for action and future research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

Research Questions

1. What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-oriented language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?

2. What is the relationship between deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned?

3. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?

4. How do first-generation undergraduate students react to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?

5. How do first-generation undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

6. What strategies do first-generation undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language?

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed methods design and collected quantitative data through a survey and qualitative data through semistructured interviews. This approach allowed a rich, layered understanding of the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students regarding deficit-oriented and strengths-based language.

Population

The study focused on first-generation college students enrolled at a large public university, which has a diverse student body and a significant percentage of students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Sample

A convenience sample of first-year students enrolled in a federally funded support program for first-generation college students was selected to participate in the study. This

sample provided a concentrated view of the phenomenon under investigation, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences with deficit-oriented and strengths-based language. Table 2 summarizes the themes.

Key Findings

Research Question 1: What Is the Perceived Rate of Use of Deficit-Oriented Language in an Undergraduate Program That Serves First-Generation College Students?

Key Finding 1: Deficit-Oriented Language Is Present but Not Significant

The findings from this study revealed that the prevalence of deficit-oriented language in the university's program for first-generation college students was not significantly prevalent. The data, collected through an electronic survey, indicated that although many first-generation college students recognized instances of deficit-oriented language, there was a notable incidence of strengths-based language as well. This balance underscores a complex narrative environment for first-generation students, in which deficit-oriented language is present but not significant in defining their academic experiences.

Research Question 2: What Is the Relationship Between Deficit-Oriented Language and Feelings of Being Academically Questioned?

Key Finding 2: Deficit-Oriented Language Has a Minimal Negative Impact

This study investigated the potential correlation between the perception of deficit-oriented language and feelings of being academically questioned because of first-generation status. The analysis indicated a negligible correlation of ($r = -.058$), suggesting that deficit-oriented language in the SSS program has a minimal negative

Table 2

Themes

Research question	Theme	Key insight
Experiences with deficit-oriented language	Instances encountered	Participants noted both internal and external instances of deficit-oriented language, highlighting its presence in educational interactions and self-talk.
	Students' interpretations and feelings	Varied responses to deficit-oriented language, with some finding it motivating under certain conditions, indicating the impact is subject to individual interpretation.
Reactions to deficit-oriented language	Behavioral responses	A spectrum of behavioral responses to deficit-oriented language, from active coping mechanisms to passive nonreaction, demonstrating diverse strategies for managing self-doubt and negative self-talk.
	Impact of negative faculty interactions	Negative encounters with faculty illustrated the lasting impact of such interactions, potentially deterring future help-seeking behaviors.
Experiences with strengths-based language	Instances of positive reinforcement	Universal acknowledgment of strengths-based language and positive reinforcement, showing a significant and constructive role in classroom dynamics.
	Students' interpretations and feelings	Motivation and validation from strengths-based language, emphasizing the need for authenticity in positive feedback.
	Influence of university and SSS program focus	Observations of a strengths-based ethos in the university and specific programs, suggesting institutional support plays a role in reinforcing positive academic identities.
Strategies to overcome adverse effects	Active communication and problem solving	Emphasis on open and direct communication as essential for resolving conflicts and misunderstandings, highlighting the importance of clear dialogue in navigating educational challenges.
	Self-advocacy	Importance of self-advocacy and proactive engagement with academic resources and services, underscoring the need for students to advocate for themselves and seek supportive networks.
	Leveraging peer support networks	The critical role of peer support in providing advice, encouragement, and practical help, illustrating the value of communal coping mechanisms and shared experiences.

impact on students' academic self-concept. This finding challenges the initial hypothesis that such language would undermine student academic self-concept. Interestingly, a more positive link of ($r = .279$) was observed at the university-wide level, hinting at a possible resilience strategy among students or the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms. Despite the lack of a strong correlation, the prevalent usage of deficit-oriented language in educational settings is still discouraged given the findings in the existing literature on its potential harm. These insights suggest that interventions focusing solely on language may not be the most effective solutions, and broader programmatic changes might be required to foster a supportive educational environment for first-generation students.

Research Question 3: How Do First-Generation Undergraduate Students Describe Their Experience With Deficit-Oriented Language?

Key Finding 3: The Influence of Deficit-Oriented Language Is Subject to Individual Interpretation

The qualitative portion of this study looking at first-generation students' experiences with deficit-oriented language revealed a diverse perception of such language in academic settings. Through a thematic analysis of interview transcripts, two main themes emerged: instances of deficit-oriented language encountered and students' interpretations and feelings about it.

Although four out of five participants recognized experiences with deficit-oriented language in some way, participants' interpretations and emotional responses to deficit-oriented language were complex and varied. Participants reported both internal and external deficit-oriented language with some internalizing negative self-talk, and others noticed its prevalence in educational interactions. Some students found such

language to be a motivating factor; one noted the program "focuses on deficits, but in a positive light," suggesting a nuanced role of deficit language as a motivator when perceived as coming from a place of empathy and shared experience. Another student shared mixed feelings elicited by deficit-oriented feedback: "It would, it would make me feel like a little dumb, honestly… I would do good just to prove them wrong." This spectrum of reactions indicates that the impact of deficit-oriented language is not uniformly negative and may interact with other factors in students' educational experiences.

Key Finding 4: Deficit-Oriented Self Talk Impacts Students' Academic Journey

Participants in this study reported various instances in which deficit-oriented language surfaced, both in self-referential contexts and in the broader educational environment. Notably, a significant portion of participants recognized the presence of deficit-oriented language in their first year of study at their university. As one participant reflected, negative self-talk was a personal challenge: "Sometimes like it's personal you know, I think to myself, 'Oh my God, I don't know what I'm doing.'" This internalization of deficit-oriented language underscores its potential prevalence in students' academic journeys regardless of its real-time usage at their university.

Research Question 4: How Do First-Generation Undergraduate Students React to the Use of Deficit-Oriented Language in Their College Environment?

Key Finding 5: Students Navigate the Challenges of Deficit-Oriented Language in Various Ways

This study's examination of students' reactions to deficit-oriented language revealed a spectrum of behavioral responses. Students adopted various coping strategies

to manage the internalization of deficit-oriented language, which often manifested as self-doubt or negative self-talk. One student described employing an active coping mechanism of resilience by "trying anyway" when confronted with uncertainty, illustrating a form of resistance to the negative implications of deficit-oriented language. Another student's strategy was more passive, choosing to "keep it pushing" without overt reaction, highlighting a method of self-preservation.

Support networks in the SSS program were recognized as critical for some students, emphasizing the value of shared experience and communal coping: "It's just nice to know you have someone who's gone through what you have because they were also a first-generation college student." For others, however, the experience of deficit-oriented language led to a reluctance to seek help because doubts about the efficacy of support services persisted. One participant shared, "I've learned to just deal with it if it's something I'm unsure about just trying it anyways." A particular instance with a faculty member illustrated the long-lasting impact negative encounters can have, potentially deterring students from future help-seeking behaviors:

I don't know if this correlates, but one time, I would go late to class all the time and this was in my first semester… And he was like really rude to me. Yeah. And I, I just looked at him and I walked away and then the next time, like when I went into class, like he's like, "Hey, like I'm sorry, like for what I said to you the last time we spoke but I was like looking it up and like, here's some resources for you on campus." And like, I didn't take them because I was just like, okay, like whatever.

These varied responses demonstrate the complex ways in which first-generation students navigate the challenges posed by deficit-oriented language and ideology, balancing between resilience, reliance on community, and internalized stigma. Each reaction captures a unique aspect of the student experience, underscoring the need for sensitive and supportive communication practices in educational institutions.

Research Question 5: How Do First-Generation Undergraduate Students Describe Their Experience With Strengths-Based Language?

This study's investigation into the experiences of first-generation students with strengths-based language revealed their response to positive reinforcement and recognition. The qualitative analysis highlighted three distinct themes, which led to three findings discussed in the following sections.

Key Finding 6: The Use of Positive Reinforcement Propels Students to Persist

All participants acknowledged the presence of strengths-based language and positive reinforcement in their educational experiences, indicating a significant and constructive role in classroom dynamics as noted in the theme: Instances of strengths-based language and positive reinforcement encountered. Participant A3067P described this approach: "They're addressing the entire class and saying something… they don't almost shame you for not knowing. They're like, 'Okay, that's great. Let's teach you about it' … And they wanna help you with the steps you're taking."

The narratives shared by Participants A5012B and A6723C further illustrate this point. Participant A5012B's instructors provided reassurance about their writing skills despite personal doubt, which underscores the power of positive reinforcement in enhancing self-efficacy. Participant A6723C shared a similar experience receiving

encouragement from a sociology professor who acknowledged the class's collective progress: "Definitely my sociology professor, she was always encouraging us … She was like very positive about that … it kind of felt like they really focused on our progress as a class."

Additionally, Participant A8512K explained how a professor's praise served as a motivational force:

I mean, like I've had instances where like I was already doing good and then like the professor was so proud and like they told me like exactly what you said. And so I just like kept doing good even though like the assignments were hard. But I, I trusted them because I would go to their office hours. They, they seemed interested in me and yeah.

This authentic recognition not only propelled the student to persist despite difficulties but also cultivated a trusted bond with the educator. This type of environment in which educators actively avoid shaming and focus on teaching, fosters a learning atmosphere where students feel valued and supported.

Key Finding 7: Students Benefited from Authentic Feedback That Recognized Challenges While Offering Support

Participants' emotional responses to strengths-based language ranged from feeling motivated to validated. Participant A6723C for example, appreciated the honest yet encouraging communication from professors: "I love honesty, but I feel like it's always the best if somebody be like, 'Well I know you might be struggling right now, but you know, you'll get through it.'" This blend of realism with encouragement was echoed by

other students who felt their efforts and contributions were recognized and appreciated, enhancing their self-efficacy and academic engagement.

This balanced approach of recognizing challenges while offering support was a recurring theme among the participants. It underscores the need for educators to acknowledge the difficulties students face without diminishing their capacity to overcome them. Participant B2280B shared how professors acknowledged their unique contributions to class discussions: "They appreciated that. They noticed that and said, 'You know, you bring a lot of interesting perspectives and interesting ideas to this course to this class.'" Such positive reinforcement has the dual effect of validating the students' efforts and promoting deeper intellectual engagement.

Finally, the importance of authentic support was underscored in the narratives of the participants in this study. When educators expressed genuine belief in the students' abilities, it significantly enhanced the students' motivation and confidence. Participant A8512K stated, "I mean, like I've had instances where like I was already doing good and then like the professor was so proud… I trusted them because I would go to their office hours. They seemed interested in me." This trust, built on authentic recognition, served as a powerful motivator for the student to persevere through challenging assignments.

The collective experience of the participants in this study demonstrates the vital role of strengths-based language in cultivating an educational environment that not only acknowledges student efforts but actively contributes to their sense of worth and capability. It is evident that when educators employ this approach, they are not only teaching academic content but also promoting students' belief in their potential to succeed.

Key Finding 8: Students Recognize the Positive Influence of Symbolic Gestures

The influence of strengths-based language in the university and SSS program was noted by participants as less pervasive but still impactful. Participant A3067P remarked on the inclusive and nonjudgmental approach of many instructors she had: "Whether they're addressing the entire class and saying something, or like all professors ask questions like, 'Who has done one of these assignments before? Who hasn't?' And even if you haven't, they don't shame you for not knowing." This approach aligns with the educational ethos that prioritizes student engagement and resilience, which has the potential to foster an environment in which students' academic capabilities are affirmed and their growth is supported.

Additionally, symbolic gestures, such as the distribution of pens and pins celebrating first-generation college students, may seem small but may have significant psychological value in addition to an ethos of strengths-based language university-wide. Participant A3067P's participation in campus events and her appreciation for these tokens illustrates how the university's focus on strengths-based ideology moves beyond the classroom can positively influence student sentiment and sense of belonging: "It's nice to know that someone there is thinking about your situation,"

In a strengths-based environment that employs both strengths-based language and positive symbolic gestures tied to identity, students have the potential to be not only academically engaged but also instilled with a sense of perseverance. Participant A6723C articulated, "I love those kind of encouraging words, those encouragement like, you know, kinda like motivate me, pushing me to always, you know, to not give up to give my best or to try again." This reinforcement has the potential to build a psychological

buffer against discouragement and fosters a proactive attitude toward academic

challenges (Dweck, 2006).

Research Question 6: What Strategies Do First-Generation Undergraduate Students Use to Overcome the Adverse Effects Associated With the Use of Deficit-Oriented Language?

This study's investigation into the strategies that first-generation students use to overcome deficit-oriented language revealed three distinct strategies discussed in the following sections.

Key Finding 9: Students Identify Open and Direct Communication as a Tactic for Resolving Conflict

The first strategy was an emphasis on open and direct communication as a tactic for resolving interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings. Participants stressed the significance of clear dialogue not only with peers but also with faculty and administrative staff, thereby advocating for better support and understanding. Participant A3067P articulated this approach: "Definitely if it's like a problem with a person like my roommate, I've learned you just need to talk it out and communicate well or it's never gonna end well." This proactive stance on communication shows a commitment to effective problem solving when faced with disagreement or negativity.

Key Finding 10: Students Identify Self Advocacy as an Effective Tool to Combat Challenges

A second theme that emerged was self-advocacy, whereby students take the initiative to seek out resources, support, and opportunities that enrich their academic and social lives. Participant A6723C highlighted this, noting, "Advocacy is like a very

important thing in college… you gotta advocate for yourself if you want something."

This participant also underscored the reliability of seeking support from a diverse

network of professors, staff, and friends, often more dependable than advisors. Self-

advocacy is an effective tool that students can use to combat challenges and hurdles that

they face throughout their academic journey (Achinstein et al., 2015).

Key Finding 11: Students Identify Peer-Support Networks as Crucial Aspect of Support

Systems

The significance of peer support networks was highlighted because students

frequently discussed turning to fellow college students for advice, encouragement, and

practical help. Participant B2280B shared, "So I've gotten support from it from, more so

from friends rather than advisors." This reliance on peer networks for guidance represents

a crucial aspect of support systems, offering a buffer against isolation and reinforcing the

students' resolve to persist (Achinstein et al., 2015).

Unexpected Findings

In exploring the impact of deficit-oriented and strengths-based language on the

academic self-concept of first-generation college students, this study uncovered several

unexpected findings. These discoveries challenged preconceived notions and added depth

to current understanding of the nuanced ways language influences academic identity. The

following paragraphs detail these results.

Unexpected Finding 1: Deficit-Oriented Language Identified as a Potential

Motivator

Despite anticipating a clear preference for strengths-based language among

participants, the data revealed a nuanced scenario in which some students found a certain

degree of deficit-oriented feedback to be motivating. This suggests that the impact of language on self-concept is more complex than a binary good-bad evaluation and may depend on individual resilience factors as well as personal histories and circumstances.

Unexpected Finding 2: Peer Support Positively Influences Self Concept

Another unforeseen result emerged in the substantial impact of peer support on academic self-concept, a finding that was unexpected not because the importance of peer support is unknown—in fact, its significance is well-established in educational research—but because of the specific context and degree of its influence alongside the anticipated impact of instructor language. This unexpected aspect highlights the complexity of the broader linguistic environment in educational settings, suggesting that peer interaction plays a potentially critical role in reinforcing or undermining academic self-belief. The assumption entering this study was that the primary linguistic influences on first-generation college students' self-concept would stem from formal educational authorities, such as instructors and advisors; thus, the pronounced effect of peer support emerged as unexpected, underscoring the nuanced ways in which peers contribute to the shaping of academic identity and self-concept beyond what was initially hypothesized. This finding underscores the need for a deeper exploration into the dynamics of peer influence in educational contexts, particularly how these interactions can significantly enhance or detract from the development of a positive academic self-concept.

Unexpected Finding 3: Students Want Honest and Authentic Feedback in Strengths-Based Language

Last, although it was expected that strengths-based language would universally enhance academic self-concept, the findings in this study indicated that overly positive

feedback without constructive critique or authenticity was sometimes perceived as insincere, potentially undermining trust in the student-educator relationship. This underscores the importance of balance and authenticity in feedback; strengths-based language needs to be coupled with authentic, actionable feedback to be most effective.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Deficit-Oriented Language Can Be a Motivator for First-Generation Students

Current research in the field of education has shown a generalized belief that deficit-oriented language has a negative effect on students, in particular those who face more stigmatization like first-generation college students (Aronson et al., 1999; Dix et al., 2020; Gold & Richards, 2012). Recent research, however, has shown a more nuanced and potentially individualized response based on how individual students perceive the stigma associated with their identity and internalized self-belief (Perez, 2019). Building on the premise that feedback plays a pivotal role in educational outcomes (Dweck, 2006), this research revealed a deeper complexity in the potential that deficit-oriented feedback has to motivate. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that contrary to the assumption that only strengths-based feedback fosters positive academic self-concept, when perceived as a constructive challenge, deficit-oriented feedback can encourage resilience and motivation among first-generation college students. This nuanced understanding aligns with growth mindset principles, suggesting that the context and perception of feedback critically influences its motivational capacity.

Conclusion 2: First-Generation Students Self Perception Is Influenced by Peers

The findings presented in this study and detailed in Chapter IV underscore the significant role of peer interactions to shape students' academic identities and resilience. By examining Vygotsky's (1979) theory of social development, the impact of peer language on academic self-concept can be understood as a potentially motivating factor. The data presented in this study indicate that first-generation college students' perceptions of their academic capabilities are potentially influenced by their peers, highlighting the importance of fostering opportunity for this in educational settings.

Additionally, Becker's (1963) labeling theory suggests that the labels ascribed by peers can have a profound effect on self-perception. In academic environments, these labels have the potential to reinforce stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), whereby the fear of confirming negative stereotypes impedes academic performance. The resilience observed in this study, however, can also be interpreted through the strength-based perspective of Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, which argues that students bring with them a host of cultural strengths and assets that contribute to their academic success.

Ultimately, the complex nature of peer influence on first-generation college students' academic self-concept makes clear the need for a nuanced approach to student support. This requires the integration of sociocultural theory, symbolic interactionism, and resilience theory, acknowledging that although peers can sometimes unintentionally promote deficit-oriented views, they also have the capacity to affirm and strengthen their peers' self-concept through positive interaction and support. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the nuanced nature of peer influence is a critical factor in the academic

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self-concept and resilience of first-generation college students, necessitating comprehensive support strategies that leverage the positive aspects of peer interactions.

Conclusion 3: Educators Who Provide Authentic Strengths-Based Feedback Build Rapport and Trust With First-Generation Students

The need for authenticity in strengths-based feedback is an important conclusion in this study because it shows that not only the type of feedback but also the truthfulness of that feedback is important to students. Using the research by Perez (2019), who extensively discussed the dynamics of language in educational settings, this research underscores the balance between encouragement and constructive criticism. The feedback's authenticity, as perceived by first-generation college students, significantly influences their academic self-concept and trust in the educational milieu.

Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the use of genuine, strengths-based feedback, coupled with actionable insights, is pivotal in fostering a learning environment conducive to the academic resilience and success of first-generation students. This approach not only builds rapport and trust but also challenges traditional pedagogical practices, advocating for a nuanced application of feedback in educational contexts. The findings in this study can be related to Valencia (2010), who found that authentic, strengths-based language, when aligned with actionable insight, fosters a more conducive learning environment; this research finds that this type of feedback pushes students toward academic resilience and success, challenging traditional pedagogical approaches and advocating for a more nuanced understanding and application of feedback in educational contexts.

Conclusion 4: Student Who Are Able to Successfully Navigate Challenges of Deficit-Oriented Language in Their First Year Use a Variety of Strategies

The resilience of first-generation college students in the face of deficit-oriented language is supported by their employment of diverse strategies that help them navigate and overcome such challenges. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that students who successfully transcend the negative implications of deficit-oriented feedback do so by leveraging a combination of internal and external resources. Internally, students adopt a growth mindset, viewing challenges as opportunities for development rather than insurmountable barriers. Externally, they seek supportive networks, including peers and mentors who provide constructive, strengths-based feedback. Furthermore, active engagement with academic resources and services plays an essential role in their ability to reframe and counteract negative perceptions. These findings suggest that the capacity to navigate environments with deficit-oriented language is not solely dependent on individual resilience but significantly enhanced by the availability and accessibility of supportive educational environments and resources.

Implications for Action

Based on the major findings and conclusions from this study, the implications for action that follow are recommended for faculty, staff, and policy makers in higher education.

Implication for Action 1: Educators Must Employ Balanced Feedback Strategies

The findings in this study reveal the importance of nuanced feedback strategies that first-generation college students perceive as both constructive and authentic. It is critical to move beyond simple acknowledgment to implement structured feedback

systems that incorporate regular, multidimensional assessments. Educators should aim to deliver feedback that is not only timely and ongoing but also combines strengths-based affirmations with targeted, constructive critique; this balance can help to construct a growth-oriented narrative around students' academic work and progress. Specific strategies include incorporating rubrics that highlight areas of strength as much as those requiring improvement and developing feedback sessions in which students are encouraged to engage in self-reflection guided by facilitative questioning. This tailored approach can reinforce students' academic self-concept and build resilience, actively supporting first-generation students' unique educational journeys.

Implication for Action 2: Training for Educators on the Nuances of Language in Feedback

Educators in higher education need comprehensive training on the impacts of language on student motivation and self-concept, including how to provide authentic strengths-based language as discussed in Implication for Action 1. This training should include tools such as case studies, role-playing exercises, and reflective practice sessions that emphasize the importance of authenticity and the potential motivational aspects of deficit-oriented feedback when appropriately applied. These methodologies can encourage educators to critically examine their own language use, understand the diverse effects of their words on students, and develop strategies for delivering feedback that fosters growth and resilience.

Implication for Action 3: Dissemination of Research Findings

The insights from this study should be shared with broader educational communities such as educational policy makers, university administration, and educators

at all levels through professional organizations like the Council for Opportunity in Education and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' Center for First-Generation Student Success. Findings should be presented at conferences dedicated to equity in higher education, such as the First-Generation College Student conferences, and publish in specialized journals like the Journal of First-Generation Student Success. This targeted dissemination will inform key stakeholders of the nuanced impacts of feedback language on student outcomes with a particular focus on supporting first-generation college students' academic journeys.

Implication for Action 4: Policy and Practice Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

Higher education policies need to be revised to reflect the importance of language in shaping academic self-concept. Institutions could implement practices that recognize and address the unique needs of first-generation college students, ensuring their academic and personal support systems are robust and effective. A culture of inclusivity and support must be fostered from the top down. Universities must aim to create environments that actively celebrate and empower first-generation students through initiatives like dedicated resource centers, mentorship programs, and public acknowledgment of their achievements. Leadership at all levels must also be trained to understand the specific challenges faced by first-generation students and advocate for policies and practices that facilitate their success, thereby embedding a culture of support and recognition throughout the institution.

Implication for Action 5: Peer Mentorship Programs for First-Generation College Students

Higher education institutions must establish peer mentorship programs that connect upper-level students with incoming or lower-level first-generation students. This initiative would leverage the shared identity and experiences of first-generation college students to foster authentic feedback and support networks. Older students, as mentors, can be trained to provide feedback and guidance that explicitly acknowledges the common challenges and strengths associated with being a first-generation college student as well as successful coping mechanisms that counter common challenges. Additionally, institutions could develop and distribute toolkits for mentors containing resources, strategies, and best practices for supporting their mentees effectively. This recommendation is intended to enhance the academic and personal development of first-generation students by reinforcing a sense of community, belonging, and mutual support in the educational environment.

By implementing these implications for action, higher education leaders, educators, and academic advisors can better support the academic success and self-concept of first-generation college students, fostering environments in which all students have the opportunity to thrive.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on data collected in this study, additional research may be helpful to move the field forward. Recommendations from the study for further research are discussed in the next sections.

Recommendation 1: Enhance Sample Size in Subsequent Research

Future research should aim to increase the sample size for studies examining the impact of educational language on first-generation college students. This recommendation is inspired by findings in this study and the work of Perez (2019), which underscores the significant role language plays in shaping student outcomes. Expanding the sample size has the potential to not only provide opportunities for corroborating these results but also improve the generalizability of findings across a broader demographic spectrum.

In doing so, future studies should deliberately incorporate the insights provided by Yosso (2005) on the concept of community cultural wealth, which recognizes the unique forms of capital that students from diverse backgrounds bring to their educational experiences. Similarly, acknowledging Valencia's (2010) critique of deficit thinking in education highlights the necessity of examining how language use in educational settings can either perpetuate systemic inequities or empower students by acknowledging and leveraging their cultural wealth.

Recommendation 2: Longitudinal Studies on Language Impact

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal research to examine the long-term effects of deficit-oriented versus strengths-based language on the academic outcomes and persistence of first-generation college students. This approach aligns with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory, suggesting that the impact of language on self-concept and academic achievement may evolve over time.

Recommendation 3: Comparative Studies Across Institutions

Future research should consider a comparison of the influence of language use on first-generation college students across various educational settings, including precollege, community colleges, and private institutions. This recommendation is informed by the work of Garriott et al. (2015), who discussed the different challenges and supports available to first-generation students in varied institutional contexts.

Recommendation 4: Impact of Language on Faculty and Staff

Investigating how educators' use of deficit-oriented language influences their perceptions and interactions with first-generation college students could provide insights into training and development needs for faculty and staff. This area of inquiry would benefit from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Benzies & Allen, 2001), examining how language shapes the dynamics between educators and students.

Recommendation 5: Cultural and Contextual Influences

Future research should delve into the cultural and contextual influences on the reception and impact of deficit-oriented versus strengths-based language among first-generation college students. Studies focusing on specific populations could provide important insights into tailored support mechanisms and feedback strategies, echoing the need for a nuanced understanding as discussed by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) and Valencia (2010) regarding the role of cultural and contextual factors.

Recommendation 6: Quantitative Analysis of Language Use

Further quantitative studies with larger sample sizes are recommended that rigorously measure the prevalence of deficit-oriented language in educational settings and its correlation with first-generation college students' academic engagement and success.

This recommendation is supported by the call for more empirical evidence on the effects of language use in education, as highlighted by Achinstein et al. (2015) and Perez (2019).

Recommendation 7: Examining the Influence of Educator-Student Relationships on Feedback Reception

Finally, future research is recommended that evaluates how the nature of the relationship between educators and first-generation college students affects the way feedback is perceived and internalized. The interpersonal dynamics between educators and students could significantly mediate the impact of feedback, shaping whether it is seen as a tool for growth or as a reinforcement of deficit views. Based on Vygotsky's(1979) sociocultural theory, which underscores the importance of social interaction in the learning process, this line of inquiry would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the socioemotional context in which feedback is given and received. Further exploration into this area could also build on the insights of Tinto (2012), who extensively discussed the critical role of meaningful faculty-student interactions in fostering student persistence and academic success. Investigating the dynamics of educator-student relationships in relation to feedback practices offers the potential to uncover strategies that enhance the positive impacts of educational feedback, aligning with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset principles by highlighting the importance of supportive relationships in promoting students' beliefs in their ability to develop and succeed academically. This recommendation advocates for educational research that considers not only the content and delivery of feedback but also the relational context in which it occurs, recognizing the profound and complex influence of educator–student

relationships on the effectiveness of feedback in promoting academic resilience and success among first-generation college students.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

I chose to enroll in and complete a doctoral program in the field of education because I believe strongly in the power that education has to both improve lives and to create curious, critical, confident, powerful people. I have been given such opportunity to study and learn from incredible people through my 30+ years as both a student and an educator. In my second year at the University of Massachusetts Boston (as both an employee and master's student), I was given the opportunity to run a college access program for first-generation college students. Although this was similar to positions I have had in the past, it was a new demographic of student. This both excited and intimidated me. I quickly started to build relationships with students as I worked to build and enhance the program. What I found was that, like most people in this beautiful and challenging world, this was a group of students who wanted to learn. They wanted to study and push themselves and build a pathway for themselves and their families.

This opportunity solidified for me the belief that when we create programs that are inclusive, welcoming, challenging in the right ways but above all supportive, students will rise to this and succeed. This study is a love letter to that experience and to all of the students I have worked with that I have had an opportunity to push and who at the same time have pushed me. I wanted to understand deeply and intimately the existing research on program building and implementation for first-generation students so that I could take this and use it to further create opportunity and programming that serves this group. It is

my hope that the novel research in this study can also contribute to the field in a small way.

We must push for equitable education so that those who want an opportunity to study and expand their understanding of their world and themselves in it can do so in a way that uplifts and celebrates them. More than ever, we have the tools to do this.

Human knowledge is never contained in one person. It grows from the relationship we create between each other and the world, and still it is never complete.

—Paul Kalanithi

Justice is what love looks like in public.

—Cornell West

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Synthesis Matrix

Deficit-Oriented Language Use: Understanding the Effects of Deficit-Oriented Labeling on First-Generation College Students – A synthesis Matrix

Reference	First-Generation College Students	Deficit-Oriented Language	Stereotype Threat	Relabeling	Symbolic Interactionism	Sociocultural Theory
Aaron (2019)	X					
Achinstein et al. (2015)	X					
Allan et al. (2016)	X					
Allen & Robbins (2010)						X
Aronson et al. (1999)			X			
Ascani (2012)				X		
Bach et al. (2018)						
Bahr (2008)	X					
Barmaki (2019)				X		
Becker (1963)				X		
Bell (2018)		X				
Benzies& Allen (2001)					X	
Berg (2020)	X					
Berger &Luckmann (1967)					X	
Bergman et al. (2014)	X					
Blumer (2012)					X	

Bourdieu &Passeron (1990)						X
Bowen (2014)						X
Braxton et al. (1988)	X					
Bruner (1966)						X
Burazer (2020)		X				
Bustamente (2019)	X					
Cabrera et al. (2003)	X					
Cahalan et al. (2019)	X					
Canaan et al. (2022)						
Cantwell & Mathies (2012)						
Canty et al. (2020)	X					
Capannola & Johnson (2022)	X					
Carlson & McChesney (2015)						
Castro (2014)		X				
Charon (1979)					X	
Chen & Hossler (2017)	X					
Choy (2001)	X					
Clance & Imes (1978)			X			
Cokley et al. (2013)			X			
Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015)	X					

Coyle & Williams (2001)					
Creswell (2012)					
DeAngelo & Franke (2016)	X					
Delgado (1989)					
Dennis & Martin (2005)					X	
Dix et al. (2020)		X		X		
Dweck (2006)					
Dynarski (2008)					
Eisenmann (1999)						X
Eitel & Martin (2009)	X					
Feldman (1994)			X			
Gadsby (2022)					
Garriott et al. (2015)	X					
Gloria & Castellanos (2012)	X					
Goffman (1963)				X	X	
Gold & Richards (2012)		X		X		
Gray et al. (2018)	X	X				
Herron (2015)	X					
Huber (2009)		X				X
Hurst (2012)	X					

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Hussar et al. (2020)						
International (2019)	X					
Ioannidou et al. (2014)						
Ishitani (2003)	X					
Ishitani (2006)	X					
Jackson (2012)						
Khan et al. (2021)						
Kim & Antonopoulos (2011)						
Knotek et al. (2019)	X					
Korstange et al. (2020)	X					
Lantolf (2000)						X
Lareau (1987)						X
Larson (2019)						
Latino et al. (2020)	X					
Lawrence (2020)	X					
Lemert (1972)					X	
Lewis (1998)						
Ligioso (2022)		X				
Loss & Hinz (2013)						
Luo et al. (2018)						
Marger (2014)						
Martinez et al. (2009)	X					

Masten (2001)						
Maxwell (2019)						
McMillan & Schumacher (2010)						
Mead (1934)					X	X
Mehta et al. (2011)	X	X				
Meschede et al. (2017)						
Mettler (2014)						
Metzner & Bean (1987)						
Morin et al. (2014)						
Murphy et al. (2007)			X			
Nguyen (2015)						
Nguyen & Nguyen (2018)	X			X		
Niu & Tienda (2012)						
Oldfield (2012)	X					
Oreopoulos & Petronijevic (2013)						
Osiobe (2019)						
Padilla-Díaz (2015)						
Parkman (2016)			X			
Partida et al. (2020)	X					
Pascarella et al. (2004)	X					

Patten (2016)						
Patton (2014)						
Paunesku et al. (2015)			X			
Pearl (2012)		X				
Pehrson (2021)	X					
Perez (2019)	X	X		X		
Petty (2014)	X					
Rogoff (1990)						X
Rood (2009)	X					
Rose (2018)						
Rosenberg (2017)					X	
Sawyer (2013)						
Schalk (2015)						
Schmader et al. (2004)			X			
Schmader et al. (2008)			X			
Scimecca (1977)				X	X	
Shifrer (2013)		X		X		
Skinner (1965)						
Smith & Noble (2014)						
Solorzano & Bernal (2001)						X
Solórzano & Yosso (2002)	X					X
Sowell (1981)						

Spencer et al. (2016)			X			
Statistics, N. C. f. E. (2019)	X					
Stebleton & Soria (2013)	X					
Steele (1997)			X			
Steele & Aronson (1995)			X			
Stephens et al. (2012)	X					X
Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner (2014)	X					
Strauss (2019)		X		X		
Strayhorn (2014)	X					
Stryker (2008)					X	
Stuber (2011)						X
Sue et al. (2007)						
Terenzini et al. (1996)	X					
Thorndike (2017)						
Tinto (2012)	X					
Toutkoushi an et al. (2013)						
Valencia (1997)		X				
Valencia (2010)		X				
Van den Scott & van den					X	

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Hoonard (2016)					
Vygotskij& John-Steiner (1979)					
Watson (1913)					
Werner & Smith (1988)					X
Winograd & Rust (2014)	X				
Woods & Domina (2014)	X				
Wout et al. (2009)			X		
Yeager & Dweck (2012)					X
Yeh (2014)	X				
Yosso (2005)					X
Yosso (2013)					X

APPENDIX B

Chart of Research and Data Collection Alignment

Research Question	Survey Item	Interview Questions

_RQ 1_ What is the perceived rate of use of deficit-based language in an undergraduate program that serves first-generation college students?	1. To what extent (if at all), on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (More than 5 times) this academic year:
	  a. Do you feel that your performance is being evaluated based on stereotypes associated with your first-generation status?
	  b. Have you experienced being labeled an _at-risk underprepared,_ and/or _disadvantaged student?_
	  c. Do you feel that your academic abilities are being questioned by others because of your background as a first-generation college student?
	  d. Have you heard professors or staff use language that implies first-generation students are less prepared than other students?
	  e. Have you encountered academic materials or resources that specifically target first-generation students as needing extra help or remediation?
	  f. Do you feel that the Student Support Services (SSS) program focuses on students' deficiencies rather than their strengths?
	  g. Do you feel that you have been stereotyped or pre-judged by your peers based on your status as a first-generation student	

_RQ 2_ What is the Relationship between Deficit-	1. Do you feel that your university has focused more on students' deficiencies or their strengths this past academic year? 2. Do you feel that the Student Support Services (SSS) program has focused more	

Oriented Language and Feelings of being Academically Questioned?	on students' deficiencies or their strengths this past academic year? 3. Do you feel that your academic abilities are being questioned by others because of your background as a first-generation college student?	

RQ 3 How do first-generation, undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?		1. Can you describe any specific instances where you felt that deficit-based language was used in reference to first-generation students at this college?
		   a. In what settings or situations have you most frequently encountered language that you perceive as deficit-oriented? (For example, in classrooms, advising sessions, social events, etc.)
		   b. How do conversations or references about first-generation students typically unfold in your classes

		or academic settings? Can you provide any examples? 2. Are there particular individuals or groups (e.g., faculty, peers, administrators) that you feel are more prone to using deficit-based language when discussing first-generation students? 3. How do you typically feel or what goes through your mind when you encounter language or remarks that you perceive as deficit-based regarding first-generation students?

_RQ 4_
How do first-generation, undergraduate students respond to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?
	1. When you hear deficit-based language regarding first-generation students, how likely are you to (1 = Very Unlikely, 5 = Very Likely)
	   a. Speak out against it?
	   b. Avoid the situation or individual using such language?
	   c. Seek support or discuss with peers?
	   d. Feel motivated to prove the deficit-thinking wrong
	   e. Feel demotivated to prove the deficit-thinking wrong
	   f. Feel less academically confident
	   g. Change your extracurricular choices
	   h. Change your academic choices
		1. How do you perceive the impact of deficit-oriented language on your overall college experience as a first-generation student?
		   a. How do you believe the use of deficit-based language has influenced your participation or engagement in academic or

| | | i. Defend your background as a first-generation student
j. Other
2. When encountering deficit-based language, how frequently do you experience the following emotions? (1 = Never, 5 = Always)
   a. Frustration
   b. Motivation
   c. Resignation
   d. Determination
   e. Alienation
   Other | extracurricular activities?
b. Can you recall any specific instances where deficit-oriented language was used in conversations or lectures? How did you feel?
c. Do you believe that deficit-oriented language has influenced your self-perception or confidence in academic settings?
d. Have there been moments where you've challenged or addressed the use of deficit-oriented language? If so, can you describe that experience?
2. How do you typically feel or what goes through your mind when you encounter language or remarks that you |

		perceive as deficit-based regarding first-generation students?
		3. How do you think these deficit-oriented narratives have influenced your self-confidence or self-worth during your first year?
		a. (Probe) In moments when you encountered deficit-based language, how did that affect your motivation or enthusiasm toward your studies?
		b. Have there been moments where you felt you had to prove yourself because of the underlying assumptions associated with being a first-generation student?
RQ 5 How do first-generation, undergraduate students	1. On a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (More than 5 times) this academic year: a. How often have you heard professors or staff use strengths-	1. Can you describe any instances where you felt that your identity as

describe their experience with strengths-based language?	based language that in regard to first-generation students? b. Have you encountered academic materials or resources that utilizes strengths-based language in regard to first-generation students? 2. On a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely) to what extent do you believe that the strengths-based language you have encountered has positively influenced your motivation to succeed academically? a. Response Options: • Not at all • Slightly • Moderately • Significantly • Extremely	a first-generation student was acknowledged in a positive or strength-based manner? 2. Are there any resources, programs, or initiatives on campus that you feel effectively counteract or challenge the use of deficit-based language about first-generation students?
RQ 6 What strategies do first-generation, undergraduate students use to overcome the adverse effects associated with the use of deficit-oriented language	1. When confronted with deficit-oriented language about first-generation students, how often do you use this strategy**?** ***(Likert scale, responses for A should be used for all)*** a. Seeking support from friends or family. • I have never used this strategy • I rarely use this strategy • I sometimes use this strategy • I often use this strategy • I never use this strategy b. Discussing the experience with a mentor or advisor. c. Engaging in self-affirmation exercises (e.g., positive self-talk, journaling about personal strengths). d. Avoiding or distancing oneself from the source of the negative language. e. Directly addressing or challenging the language/source.	1. Can you provide examples of any coping strategies or mechanisms you've adopted when dealing with situations where deficit-oriented language is used? 2. In your first year, have there been instances where you felt empowered or supported despite encountering deficit-based language? Can you describe that experience? 3. Are there resources, mentors, or support systems on campus that have helped you navigate or respond to experiences

	f. Other g. I do not use specific coping mechanisms. 2. To what extent do you believe that facing and addressing deficit-oriented language has contributed to building your resilience and determination as a first-generation student? Response Options: • Not at all • Slightly • Moderately • Significantly • Extremely	where you felt deficit-based language was prevalent? 4. Can you recall a specific moment when you personally responded to the use of deficit-based language directed at you or another first-generation student? How did you react?

Electronic Survey Questions

Deficit-Oriented Language Use: Understanding the Effects of Deficit-Oriented Labeling on First-Generation College Students

Form description

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jeff Foulkes, a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this sequential mixed-methods study is to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study is to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research material in a locked file drawer that is only available to the researcher

b) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding how language is used in relation to first-generation college students.

c) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the researcher using the information provided by the invitation to participate

d) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the

---

d) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide to not answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. In addition, the investigator may stop the study at any time.

e) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowable by law. If the study design of the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained. I undusted that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor or Academic Affairs, UMass Global, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "agree" button indicates that you have read the informed consent and the information in the document and that you voluntarily agree to participate.

If you do not wish to participate in this electronic survey, you may decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button. The survey will not open for responses unless you select agree to participate.

○ AGREE: I acknowledge receipt of the complete "Informed Consent" packet and "Bill of Rights." I have re...

○ DISAGREE: I do not wish to participate in this electronic survey

Please choose the pass code provided to you by the researcher from the drop down list

1. Option 1

Please indicate your status

○ First-generation college student (neither of my parents or legal guardians has obtained a bachelor's de...

○ Continuing-generation college student (one or more of my parents or legal guardians has obtained a b...

Please select your age from the list below

1. 18 or older

2. under 18

To what extent (if at all), on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (More than 5 times) this academic year:
Description (optional)

:::

Do you feel that your performance is being evaluated based on stereotypes associated with your first-generation status?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Have you experienced being labeled an *at-risk underprepared,* and/or *disadvantaged student?*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Do you feel that your academic abilities are being questioned by others because of your background as a first-generation college student?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Do you feel that your academic abilities are being questioned by others because of your background as a first-generation college student?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Have you heard professors or staff use language that implies first-generation students are less prepared than other students?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

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Have you encountered academic materials or resources that specifically target first-generation students as needing extra help or remediation?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Do you feel that the Student Support Services (SSS) program focuses on students' deficiencies rather than their strengths?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

Do you feel that you have been stereotyped or pre-judged by your peers based on your status as a first-generation student

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

When you hear deficit-based language regarding first-generation students, how likely are you to (1 = Very Unlikely, 5 = Very Likely):

Description (optional)

Speak out against it?

Speak out against it?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Avoid the situation or individual using such language?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Seek support or discuss with peers?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Feel motivated to prove the deficit-thinking wrong

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Feel demotivated to prove the deficit-thinking wrong

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Feel less academically confident

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Change your extracurricular choices

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Change your academic choices

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Defend your background as a first-generation student

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	Very Likely

Other

Short answer text

When encountering deficit-based language, how frequently do you experience the following emotions? (1 = Never, 5 = Always)
Description (optional)

Frustration

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Motivation

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Resignation

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Determination

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Alienation

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Other

Short answer text

On a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (More than 5 times) this academic year: How often have you heard professors or staff use strengths-based language that in regard to first-generation students?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

On a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (More than 5 times) this academic year: Have you encountered academic materials or resources that utilizes strengths-based language in regard to first-generation students?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	More than 5 times

On a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely) to what extent do you believe that the strengths-based language you have encountered has positively influenced your motivation to succeed academically?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely

When confronted with deficit-oriented language about first-generation students, how often do you use this strategy?
Description (optional)

Seeking support from friends or family.

1. I have never used this strategy

2. I rarely use this strategy

3. I sometimes use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

5. I never use this strategy

Discussing the experience with a mentor or advisor.

1. I have never used this strategy

2. I rarely use this strategy

3. I sometimes use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

5. I never use this strategy

Engaging in self-affirmation exercises (e.g., positive self-talk, journaling about personal strengths).

1. I have never used this strategy

2. I rarely use this strategy

3. I sometimes use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

5. I never use this strategy

Avoiding or distancing oneself from the source of the negative language.

1. I have never used this strategy

2. I rarely use this strategy

3. I sometimes use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

5. I never use this strategy

Directly addressing or challenging the language/source.

1. I have never used this strategy

2. I rarely use this strategy

3. I sometimes use this strategy

4. I often use this strategy

5. I never use this strategy

Other

Short answer text

To what extent do you believe that facing and addressing deficit-oriented language has contributed to building your resilience and determination as a first-generation student?

Linear scale

1 ▾ to 5 ▾

1   Not at all

5   Extremely

Required

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APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Participant Survey on Deficit/Strengths-Oriented Language

Interview Date:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Introduction

Hello, my name is Jeff Foulkes and I am a doctoral candidate at University of Massachusetts Global. Thank you for meeting with me today.Y our time is valuable and I sincerely appreciate your participation.

First, I would like to review the Informed Consent Form that was provided to you when the interview was scheduled. I understand that you have already read and reviewed this form. I will provide an additional copy. Please let me know if you have any questions. To review:

- Your name, responses, and opinions will be kept confidential.
- The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes.
- Research findings will be shared with you upon request.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study is to identify how first-generation undergraduate college students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

To help find out this information, my intention is to interview first-generation college students in their first year of study. You were selected because you are a student from this demographic.

Before we begin the interview, I want to inform you that this research was approved by the University of Massachusetts Global IRB which is the Institutional Review Board. This committee reviews and approves research that involves human beings. I would like to remind you that this interview will be recorded so I can make sure to transcribe your answers correctly. Again, this transcription will be sent to you upon request or so you can review it for accuracy. Please remember that your name will be anonymous. Additionally, all names will be removed from the transcript as well. Once again, thank you for taking time to allow me to interview you. If you have any questions or need a break, please feel free to pause the interview. As previously agreed upon, we will end the interview at ____.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How do first-generation, undergraduate students describe their experience with deficit-oriented language?

Interview Questions:
1. Can you describe any specific instances where you felt that deficit-based language was used in reference to first-generation students at this college?

2. Are there particular individuals or groups (e.g., faculty, peers, administrators) that you feel are more prone to using deficit-based language when discussing first-generation students?

3. How do you typically feel or what goes through your mind when you encounter language or remarks that you perceive as deficit-based regarding first-generation students?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How do first-generation, undergraduate students respond to the use of deficit-oriented language in their college environment?

Interview Questions:
4. How do you perceive the impact of deficit-oriented language on your overall college experience as a first-generation student?

5. How do you typically feel or what goes through your mind when you encounter language or remarks that you perceive as deficit-based regarding first-generation students?

6. How do you think these deficit-oriented narratives have influenced your self-confidence or self-worth during your first year?

RESEARCH QUESTION 5: How do first-generation, undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

Interview Questions:
7. Can you describe any instances where you felt that your identity as a first-generation student was acknowledged in a positive or strength-based manner?

8. Are there any resources, programs, or initiatives on campus that you feel effectively counteract or challenge the use of deficit-based language about first-generation students?

       Thank you for your time today. I will send you a transcript of your responses upon request or so you can review it for accuracy.

RESEARCH QUESTION 6: How do first-generation, undergraduate students describe their experience with strengths-based language?

Interview Questions:
9. Can you provide examples of any coping strategies or mechanisms you've adopted when dealing with situations where deficit-oriented language is used?

10. In your first year, have there been instances where you felt empowered or supported despite encountering deficit-based language? Can you describe that experience?

11. Are there resources, mentors, or support systems on campus that have helped you navigate or respond to experiences where you felt deficit-based language was prevalent?

12. Can you recall a specific moment when you personally responded to the use of deficit-based language directed at you or another first-generation student? How did you react?

       Thank you for your time today. I will send you a transcript of your responses upon request or so you can review it for accuracy.

APPENDIX E

Quantitative Field Test Reflection Sheet

Quantitative Field Test Reflection Sheet

Participant Name:

Date:

1. Clarity of Survey Questions: Please comment on whether the questions were easy to understand and identify any that were confusing.

2. Survey Length and Duration: Was the survey length appropriate, and how long did it take you to complete it?

3. Navigation and Format: Was the survey easy to navigate, and did you encounter any technical difficulties?

4. Overall Experience: Describe your overall experience with the survey.

5. Additional Comments and Suggestions:

APPENDIX F

Qualitative Field Test Reflection Sheet

Qualitative Field Test Reflection Sheet
Participant Name:
Date:
1. Clarity and Understandability of Questions: Were the interview questions clear and understandable? Identify any that were difficult to understand or answer.

2. Comfort Level During Interview: Did you feel comfortable throughout the interview? Were there any moments of discomfort?

3. Interview Duration: Was the length of the interview appropriate? Did you feel rushed at any point?

4. Overall Experience: Describe your overall experience of the interview process.

5. Additional Comments and Suggestions:

APPENDIX G

Informational Letter

Dear (Participant),

My name is Jeff Foulkes I am a doctoral candidate at University of Massachusetts, Global in the process of identifying how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

You have been selected because you are a first-year student in the Student Support Services (SSS) program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

I am asking your assistance in the study by participating in a survey, which will take between 15-20 minutes and a potentially an interview which will take between 20-30 minutes and will be set up at a time that is convenient for you. If you agree please be assured that the interview will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview. All information will remain accessible only to the researcher and no employer, supervisor, or agency will have access to the interview information. You will be free to stop the interview/discussion and withdraw from the study at any time. Further, you may be assured that the researcher is not affiliated in any way with your institution.

I will be the sole researcher and interviewer.

In appreciation for your participation, you will be entered into a prize opportunity. If you have questions, please reach me at [redacted] or [redacted]@mail.umassglobal.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Jeff Foulkes

Doctoral Candidate, University of Massachusetts, Global

APPENDIX H

Letter of Appreciation

Dear (Participant),

Thank you for participating in the research in understanding the effects of deficit-oriented labeling on first-generation college students. In addition, your assistance helped identify how strengths-based language effects first-generation college students.

Your participation assisted in the research to understand how institutions and programs should talk to and about first-generation college students.

Once again, thank you for your participation. If you have questions, please reach me at [redacted] or [redacted]@mail.umassglobal.edu.

Respectfully,

Jeff Foulkes

Doctoral Candidate, University of Massachusetts, Global

APPENDIX I

UMass Global Institutional Review Board Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.

2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.

3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.

4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.

5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.

6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.

7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.

8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.

9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

UMass Global IRB Adopted 2021

APPENDIX J

Informed Consent Form

INFORMATION ABOUT: Deficit-Oriented Language Use: Understanding the Effects of Deficit-Oriented Labeling on First-Generation College Students

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Jeff Foulkes

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jeff Foulkes, a doctoral student from the School of Education at UMASS GLOBAL. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to describe how first-generation undergraduate college students perceive that deficit-oriented and strengths-based language has impacted them during their first year of study. A further purpose of this study was to identify how these students overcome the negative influences that are associated with deficit-oriented language.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in a survey and an individual interview. The survey will last approximately 15 - 20 minutes and the interview will last approximately 20 - 30 minutes and will be conducted via Zoom by the researcher, Jeff Foulkes.

I understand that:
a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that theInvestigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and researchmaterials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.
b) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.

c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding best practices in developing student self-efficacy to prepare rural, predominantly disadvantaged, students for college and career readiness. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights about the self-efficacy building practices research, in which I participated. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Jeff Foulkes at [redacted] or by phone at [redacted]; or Dr. Carlos Guzman (Advisor) at [redacted].

e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study, and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed, and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_____
Signature of Participant

_____
Signature of Principal Investigator

_____
Date