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Becoming a College Student: An Empirical Phenomenological Analysis of First Generation College Students

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ABSTRACT

This article is an empirical phenomenological examination of the perceived security that first generation college students have in their identity as college students. First generation college students (FGCS) have been defined as students whose parents or guardians have not completed a 2- or 4-year postsecondary degree. Previous research (Davis, 2010; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) suggests that FGCS have a particularly difficult time finding confidence in their identities as college students, and that this exacerbates the difficulties that they face as students. The imposter phenomenon (IP) is the deep conviction that one is not good enough to deserve the title, responsibility, recognition, or job that one has (Clance, 1985). IP has been tied to FGCS both theoretically (Davis, 2010) and empirically (Peteet et al., 2015). This study examines the experience of overcoming IP by asking seven self-identified FGCS to describe the experience of recognizing their own identities as college students. There is an important difference that could be understood by separating students who experience that their confidence in this identity is authentic and those who do not. When students view college as in service to something greater, we found that they are uniquely impervious to the obstacles college students typically face. The discussion proposes two simple changes that can be made in service to help students navigate this transition in college student identity: the first is a suggestion for student advising and the second involves classroom instruction.

When I was asked to help on a research project, I was excited. The idea of doing research has long been a dream of mine, and getting a chance to do a phenomenological investigation thrilled me. But then we started. I found myself deeply concerned about doing something wrong. At every stroke of a key I looked at what I had written and doubted it. Nothing I could do seemed right. I would send it to the primary investigator anyhow, and even receive supportive comments: “Great insight”; “Good job, I really liked the way you phrased this”; and so on. For the most part it was nothing but praise. But the praise struck me as disingenuous. Surely that was just the primary investigator being nice about the work I had done. I suspected that he was secretly discarding my own contributions in order to use better, more accurate ones.

Then I realized that what I was experiencing was precisely the phenomenon our research attempts to examine: it is called imposter phenomenon. I’m experiencing it right now and looking at the demographic most prone to experiencing it. How cool is this?

In the introductory anecdote, a coresearcher describes his experience of the imposter phenomenon within the context of conducting research. Imposter phenomenon (Clance, 1985) may be understood as a deep conviction that one is not good enough to deserve the title, responsibility,

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recognition, or job that one has. Many readers of this journal may have had a similar experience: each new course preparation, committee involvement, conference presentation, or classroom presents its own set of problems—problems that sometimes draw into question the confidence one has in one's identity as an instructor, administrator, scholar, and so on.

The present analysis has been directed at the experience that first generation college students (FGCS) have had overcoming IP. The finding is that there seems to be an important difference between those whose identity as college students is in question and those for whom it is not: the latter view college as in service to something greater; the former view it as a means to its own end. The difference between these two types of students may be seen in the way that they handle the many obstacles that come their way. Students for whom college is in service to something greater are not easily shaken in their identities as college students.

First Generation College Students

While the first generation status has been recognized as an important demographic in determining likelihood of success in postsecondary schooling, it remains poorly defined (Davis, 2010; Ward et al., 2012). The reason for its poor definition is complicated. The complications may be seen in the ambiguity about what is intended by FGCS as well as the inconsistent means of gathering this information. Moreover, when defined by the level of schooling achieved by a student's parents or guardians, FGCS status is easily conflated with a variety of distinct sociocultural phenomena like socioeconomic status, race, and other traditionally at-risk demographics. Because the present study is aimed at better understanding the experience of the first generation college student, its focus was on the first complication: ambiguity in its definition.

FGCS has been defined as follows:

- (1) Parents or guardians have no college.
- (2) Parents or guardians have some college.
- (3) Parents or guardians do not have a 4-year degree.

Each of these definitions suggests a different sociocultural phenomenon that encompasses perceived familial support, perceived expectations, familiarity with the college experience, and so on. This ambiguity allows for great variability in what it means to be a FGCS. Ward et al. (2012) provided several examples of this. Their goal was to demonstrate that no college or some college is not what is important in the FGCS experience. "Neither definition—'a student for whom neither parent attended college' or 'a student for whom neither parent attained a baccalaureate degree'—is right or wrong" (Ward et al, 20012, p. 3). As they describe it, FGCS are students who have not received a particular kind of preparation for college—something of which non-FGCS have not been deprived. They call this *Cultural Capital*. Cultural Capital is "the value students gain from their parents that supports and assists them as they navigate the college experience and seek a higher social status and greater social mobility" (Ward et al., 2012, p. 6). The presence or absence of cultural capital is an assumption about the quality of being a FGCS; as such, it would be difficult to quantify.

The Disadvantages of FGCS

Ward et al. (2012) have provided a table that summarizes the statistics released by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). The USDE defines FGCS as having parents who have not obtained a bachelor's degree. When looking only at the comparisons of means, there are compelling differences between FGCS and non-FGCS in areas that are correlated with student success. FGCS are more likely to attend a 2-year college, delay postsecondary enrollment, take breaks in-between enrollments, and enroll part-time. They are also five times more likely to enroll for less than 1 year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Ward et al., 2012).

To say that FGCS can be found among the groups of traditionally at-risk students is to suggest that first-generation status might have a strong correlation with other at-risk categories such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, language-barriers, and so on. Take, for example, the data that demonstrates how FGCS are more likely to be minority, low socioeconomic status, and women with children (Ward et al., 2012). The danger with conflating these groups comes when the disadvantages of FGCS are reduced to the disadvantages that have been found with these other distinct socio-cultural categories. Doing so ignores how FGCS experience *additional difficulties*. Davis (2010), who is the director of a FGCS program at Sonoma State University, argued that this approach has not served these students very well. He explained that FGCS need to be treated as a demographic with their own unique set of problems.

Imposter Phenomenon

The IP was originally designed as a clinical category useful for describing the feelings of unworthiness as they were experienced by successful businessmen and women (Clance, 1985; Harvey, 1981; Langford & Clance, 1993). “The imposter phenomenon occurs with great frequency among successful, high-achieving people. [...] They’ve done well in school, earned the correct degrees, received awards and praise from their colleagues, and advanced rapidly in their careers” (Clance, 1985, p. 4). On the surface, there is really no reason to suspect that a person is at risk for IP. Indeed, even their position of social prestige—in possession of a diploma and enrolled in college courses—seems like it had not been earned. “Impostors believe they are intellectual frauds who have attained success because they were at the right place at the right time...—never because they were talented or intelligent or deserved their positions” (Clance, 1985, pp. 4–5).

The experience of IP is not entirely uncommon: receiving a promotion one does not think one has earned; getting an acknowledgement, award, or title that seems undeserved; or landing a job or an interview that seems above one’s level of expertise. The IP goes further than humility about recognition. Clance explained that it begins to impair performance because those experiencing IP genuinely feel like their best is insufficient. So instead of continuing to do the work that got them there in the first place, an imposter must continually play the role they feel they have been awarded. The experience of playing the role of a college student proves to be a problematic one for FGCS.

Based on his many years of experience working with the demographic, Davis (2010) suggested that FGCS could be understood through the experience of the IP. He explained how the IP is not simply a factor that will make college more difficult; it is a factor that will complicate the entire college experience down to the seemingly unimportant and insignificant aspects that might even occur outside of class that have been tied to retention and student success.

Educators and those familiar with the college process can quickly see how such feelings regarding the teacher-student dynamic would quickly put the student at a disadvantage—never taking their own contributions seriously.

This phenomenon is common among undergraduate students. Clance has been studying IP at Georgia State University for many decades, and she has supervised a variety of dissertations on the topic. She regularly finds that “[s]tudents tend to score higher on the Impostor Test than any other group” (Clance, 1985, p. 110). However, the literature concerning the IP in the postsecondary classroom is slim. The lack of attention it has received might be explained by the ubiquity of the phenomenon—that is, if it pertains to all students, then for whom would it be helpful? Peteet, Montgomery, and Weekes (2015) have answered this very question. In their paper, IP scores (using the 20-item Clance IP scale; Clance, 1985) were compared with a variety of at risk demographics including socioeconomic status, racial minority, grade point average (GPA), FGCS, and gender. All of the correlations were insignificant except for FGCS. “As predicted, there was a significant negative relationship between generational status and IP. There was no significant correlation for the remaining demographic variables” (Peteet et al., 2015, p. 180).

Design

A range of seven respondents from ages 20–50 participated in the study. Among the seven respondents, three have already obtained a postsecondary degree or certificate. Of these three, two are currently working on subsequent degrees. All respondents have lived in and attended a postsecondary school in the rural Southeast.

The opportunity to participate in the study was shared with 200 students that were currently enrolled in courses with the primary investigator. Interviews took place the subsequent semester. The study description read as follows:

[PI] and colleagues are soliciting possible subjects for a study concerning the experience of First Generation College Students (FGCS). For the purpose of the study, “FGCS” refers to those students whose parents, guardians, or primary caretakers have *not* received a 2-year or 4-year postsecondary degree. If this describes you, and you would be interested in participating in the study, please contact [PI].

In the spirit of phenomenological inquiry and in recognition of subjective forms of validity, respondents were not asked to prove their identities as FGCS. Of the seven students who responded to the call for research participants, all seven were selected to participate in an in-depth interview. Interviews averaged 12 minutes in length.

Interview questions were asked as follows:

We are interested in what it means to identify *as* a college student. Do you feel like you are, or have you ever felt like you were, a college student?

- (1) ‘If so, will you describe an experience where, in the context of college, you felt like a college student. Or
- (2) If not, will you describe an experience where, in the context of college, you felt like you were not a college student.

Any subsequent questions were asked only in service to the prompt (1 or 2) above. Subject responses were recorded using a smart-phone application recording device, and recordings were deidentified and transcribed by the investigators and onto a work computer. This produced over 10,000 words of transcribed interview data. After transcription, the recordings were deleted and the transcripts were shared with the respondents to ensure accuracy. Once approved, protocols were analyzed using Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive phenomenological method in psychology, described in the Methodology section below.

Respondents were later contacted with the completed analysis to discuss whether they felt like the analysis was apt and fair—that is, did it tell them something *new*, or did it describe something with which they were familiar having experienced it themselves? This recognizes the phenomenological axiom of fidelity to the subject (Keen, 1982). Those that responded found the analysis to be a fair one.

Methodology

As the literature review has suggested, FGCS status is not easily quantified. What is of interest in the present study is the quality of being a FGCS. To better understand this, we have selected Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive phenomenological method. This qualitative method rigorously examines the structure of first-person experience and emphasizes lived meaning. Since phenomenological inquiry is not a traditional approach for conducting research in higher education, we have decided to spend additional time introducing it to the audience of this journal.

Giorgi’s is not the only phenomenological method that has been used in education. Swedish educational psychologist Ference Marton has had success studying the collective processes of learning using a method he has called *phenomenography* (Marton & Yan Pong, 2004). Max van Manen, emeritus professor of education at the University of Alberta, proposed a third phenomenological approach which he calls *vocatio*. This method focuses on the felt sense that is elicited or

evoked by the written or spoken word. Each of these methods would be useful in learning something qualitative and new about the experience of IP among FGCS. Giorgi's method has been selected because it emphasizes the perspective of the respondent and not the collective as with phenomenography, and it provides methodical steps that may be followed for purposes of validity.

Phenomenological methods stem from the school of philosophical thought of the same name. Phenomenologists—which include notable figures such as German mathematician turned philosopher Husserl (1970, 2002); French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962); and German philosopher Heidegger (2008)—argued against the reductionism that had become standard practice in the sciences in the early 20th century. Reductionism is the assumption that any event or experience could be reduced to its simplest parts. For the study in question, a reductionist might be tempted to call enrollment in college the fundamental essence of what it means to be a college student. That is, registering for a college course makes somebody a college student. The literature review has demonstrated that such a reduction fails to recognize the complexity of the experience of being a college student, or even the possibility that a student might feel like an imposter despite her/his enrollment in college courses. To avoid such blanket explanations, phenomenologists resist the assumption that any event or experience can, in principle, be reduced to a single explanation. This is called *avoiding the natural attitude*; in phenomenological methodology it is called the *phenomenological reduction*. Performing a phenomenological reduction means that one allows the phenomenon to stand for itself and not some underlying process or cause.

The descriptive phenomenological method begins, Giorgi (2009) explained, “by obtaining concrete descriptions of experiences from others who have lived through situations in which the phenomenon that the researcher is interested have taken place” (p. 96). These descriptions are the raw data of an empirical phenomenological analysis. The completion of this step has been described in the Design section, above.

Phenomenological analyses follow three distinct steps: (a) Reading each protocol (that is, each interview) for the sense of its whole. This means familiarizing oneself with the event as each respondent has described it. (b) Determining the meaning units within the protocol. In this step of the analysis, the investigator tries to note any affective, experiential, or other shifts that occur within the protocol. (c) Transforming the natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically sensitive descriptions. That is, the insights regarding the phenomenon can be discussed without reducing the phenomenon to its description within the context of FGCS.

Reading for a Sense of the Whole

The sense of the whole of the description of an experience begins with the first encounter between interviewer and respondent. This extends into the transcription, and it continues as the investigator reads and rereads the protocol. In each, the investigator is faced with the description of an event as the respondent has experienced it. During this step, the investigator must take a back seat to the subjective description of the phenomenon. What is the respondent describing? What were the important elements of the phenomenon *from their perspective*? Gathering a sense of what is being described takes a great deal of time and attention. Even during the transcription process, one sees how easily the investigator's assumptions and superstitions about the phenomenon get in the way. One must be careful to transcribe *what the subject has said* and not simply *what the investigator thought she has heard*. Recognizing the difference between expectation and actual description is an important thing to learn when listening to descriptions of experience—thus, the transcription process is an important part of the analysis.

After many passes through a written description, an investigator will begin to develop a sense of the meaning that is being expressed by a respondent. For instance, what is sometimes described as a single experience may, after several times reading it, appear as three separate events—each of which contributed to the meaning of the phenomenon in question.

Determination of Meaning Units

Once the investigator has become familiar with the protocol, she may begin noting shifts of meaning that occur throughout. Even though the descriptions may often seem linear from beginning to end, this does not mean that shifts do not occur within them. The same is true with a story. When listening to or telling a story (or even listening to a piece of music), one can often discern a beginning, middle, and end. These shifts are recognizable not because they have been made explicit, but because the quality or tone of the story (or musical movement) has changed.

In order to understand the *meaning* that respondents find in certain events, they must be understood within the context in which they are situated. Such shifts may include any apparent change in tone, affect, time, relation, and so on. The intention behind the shift need not be understood at this point; the investigator must simply indicate that a shift seems to have taken place. While punctuation might indicate a shift in description, this does not necessarily mean that the subsequent sentence or clause does not belong with what preceded it. The investigator tries to get a sense for which parts of the description seem to go together, but he/she is careful never to throw out any part of the description. Just because something is not immediately clear to the investigator doesn't indicate that it means nothing to the respondent.

Transforming Descriptions into Phenomenologically Sensitive Descriptions

Once the protocols have been parsed into meaning-units, the investigator may begin to try to understand the phenomenon in question. By focusing on each unit of the overall description independently from the others, the investigator may examine what is occurring here that is of consequence to the respondent—that is, how might *this* meaning unit be understood in relation to the whole? This is where the iteration of phenomenology within the context of higher education becomes important: how might this be understood for FGCS? The meaning units are viewed from within the historical and sociocultural context in which they're found, and discussed from the vantage point of an investigation of FGCS. This is when the themes developed in the literature review become helpful.

The guiding motivation for each level of analysis is a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question, *as it has been described by the respondent*. Thus, it is important that the respondent is able to listen to the phenomenological description and find that it validates their experience.

Findings

All seven students had taken for granted that they were, without doubt, college students. However, by this they meant different things. Their descriptions of being a college student may be separated into two categories: those with certainty about this identity and those without. Moreover, there seems to be a distinct transition that occurs between uncertainty in this identity and certainty. The goal of this section is to describe this transition.

As with any transition, becoming a college student may be understood as having three parts: a beginning where one does not identify as a college student (stage one); a middle where a change takes place that shapes one's relationship to this identity (stage two); and an end where one experiences the consequences of this transition—decidedly happy consequences for the students who have made it here (stage three). However, unlike most transitions, the transition of becoming a college student is not linear. That is, it does not always follow the order of beginning, then middle, and finally end. It does in some cases, but not all. This is a problem if you're doing modern physics. It is not a problem if you're doing phenomenology. What is important to remember is that beginning, middle, and end are qualitatively distinct. In the beginning, students are missing something that those at the end have, and they suffer for it.

Stage One: Playing the Role of College Student

At the time of the interviews, two respondents (R1 and R2) were in this first stage—that is, they had not yet begun the transition. R3 began her college experience in this stage, but upon returning after several years off she had already passed through the second stage and into the third. The juxtaposition of R3's two experiences in college provided a good description of this transition from beginning to end.

In this first stage, three things stand out in respondents' perception of their identities as college students: (a) Students seem to be going through the motions or playing the role of a college student. The second two stem from the first. (b) Students feel it is necessary to defend their college-student identities from peers and family members; and (c) Students rely on external measures of affirmation in order to determine how successfully they are pulling off the role of being a college student.

Going through the Motions

R1 and R2 both reported that they began taking college courses before they had decided that college was for them. R1 is well into her second semester before it becomes clear to her that college is different from high school and that there is something beneficial to her in it. "Probably after I finished that semester since it was so short. It became clear to me that I wanted to do this." For R1, this recognition accompanies a change in major. R2 reported that the realization of being a college student did not come until she began receiving end-of-the-semester grades: "Like when I receive my grade I feel like, oh yeah, I have achieved something."

It is a curious endeavor to participate in something about which you are not yet certain, but this is a common theme in higher education—indeed, it is the axiom of educational breadth that is held in high esteem by liberal arts colleges. This is not a bad thing, but we are reminded here that this imposes certain obstacles like lack of clarity of purpose and meaning. When students are unclear about what college is for, they find themselves going through the motions. R2 explains:

I... barely studied for my first test. I studied, but I didn't study. I was thinking about it in the back of my mind like "remember to study, remember to study, you need to study. Okay, [R2], you need to study!" I studied so hard while I was at work: studying, studying, studying. That's the moment I felt like was just going through the motions. Like just because I was a college student I had to do this.

Notice how R2 does everything that college students do, but she only seems to be doing them for the sake of trying out the role of being a college student. She even recognized a lack of authenticity to her actions: "I studied, but I didn't study."

Also, when compared to the stage two transition below, we see that for R2 studying actually *interferes* with work and not the reverse, as R3, R4, R6, and R7 each explain.

The Need to Defend Their Identity

Respondents explained that their identity as a college student was one they felt necessary to defend from family members' perceptions and the perceptions of their peers. For them, the college identity was one they were trying out for one reason or another, but they were concerned that they would be unsuccessful.

R1 and R2 both described instances where they have defended their identities as college students to others. R3 also explained her perceived need to do this when she attends college for the first time. For the remaining respondents, it seems there was nothing in need of defense.

R1 explained that her parents both had responsibilities that prevented them from attending college: her mother had siblings to take care of and her father had children of his own. It is upon this background of familial obligation that R1 chose to attend college. Even though she did not have the same responsibilities that prohibited her from attending college, she felt it necessary to explain that her mother eventually approved of her decision—but not until it was evident that *taking care of classes* was as difficult as *taking care of children*:

I had more classes to take care of... and so my mom was like “well, I know she wants to take it seriously because she has this many classes so that she can do what she’s got to do for these classes.”

Throughout the entire interview, R1 continued to talk about how seriously her mother has taken her decision to attend college. R1 explained an important occasion when her mother “actually asked me to teach her some of [my math] stuff.” This proved to her that what she was doing as a college student was meaningful.

Like R1, R2 also felt compelled to defend her identity as a college student to her parents. This manifested in two ways. The first is the feedback she received from her parents after she failed her first course. R2’s parents said to her, “you pass everything so why are you failing this?” To which, she had to defend her identity: “But it was just a level of studying that I wasn’t used to.” The second time came after doing poorly in a science lab course. R2’s father explained that he made the dean’s list the semester that he took that same course, so R2 belittled his achievement by reminding the interviewer that her father never finished college.

Finally, when describing her decision to attend college the first time around—that is, as “what you’re supposed to do [after high school]”—R3 explained that she did not feel prepared because she was self-conscious when compared to the other, older students.

Relying on External Affirmation

When uncertain about one’s identity as a college student and going through the motions of this in order to try and do it correctly, students relied on external feedback for affirmation. R1 relied on affirmation from her mother, and R2 relied on affirmation first from the state by way of a scholarship, then from her instructors, and finally from her peers.

The reliance on external feedback has already been seen above with R1 who explained that she felt compelled to defend her decision to go to college. It isn’t until her mother experienced first-hand what R1 was learning in school—how to solve math problems—that R1 felt confident in what she has been doing. The endorsement from her mother proved to be an important one.

R2 first found external affirmation from the state government. When walking for high school graduation, R2 explained that she and a number of her peers received recognition as recipients of a grade point average based, full tuition-remission scholarship (The Scholarship). At the ceremony, it was announced that The Scholarship recipients were “college ready.” In addition to easing the financial burden of college, The Scholarship also validated one’s identity as a college student; it served as an endorsement on its own. It was evident that this endorsement was an important one for R2 in confirming her identity as a college student because she lost it after a few semesters when her GPA dropped below the standard. “It was really difficult. When I lost it I was like ‘what am I gonna do?’” This question remained unanswered until R2 confirmed through her peers that it is still possible to be a college student without this endorsement. She asked her peers if *they* had the prestigious scholarship, and found out that not all “college students” are necessarily “college ready.” She described finding out that a friend of hers also did not have The Scholarship:

So I was like: she didn’t have it, it’s okay, other people didn’t have it either. Well other people don’t have any and they’re fine, so... I swear I asked like 30 people. I was like “Do you have [The Scholarship]?” ... I know I shouldn’t have done that, but that’s what I did, and that’s what made me feel better about the situation. Because I shouldn’t base my achievements on what happens in other people’s life. I shouldn’t have to go out to other people to make myself feel better.

Even as she described it, R2 recognized that she should be able to solve this uncertainty with her own internal resources. But in the end, it was the comparison to others that allows her to rest assured that she is still a college student.

The third piece of external affirmation that R2 relied on was the feedback from instructors or grades. The importance of this affirmation for students in the first stage of the transition we are describing is evident from the juxtaposition of the protocols from R2 and R4. Because it demonstrates the resilience of students in stage three, this comparison will be saved for that section, below.

Stage Two: Selection of a Goal to Which College May Be in Service

Five of our respondents had selected a goal to which college was in service. For these students, it is as if college itself becomes an afterthought. It is so much a part of their identity that it is no longer a question for them. Four of them had established this goal well ahead of the decision to attend college. For these four, their identities as college students actually preceded their college days. That is, they understood that college was a necessary step in accomplishing their goals. This demonstrated the a-linearity of this transition: a student may select the goal to which college will ultimately be in service before ever deciding to attend college. The third respondent (R3) didn't select said goal until dropping out of college. For her this transition was linear: she was a college student going through the motions; she made a decision in service of her family; and she reenrolled as a college student on a specific mission. The important detail is that the decision to pursue the "something greater" has been made independently of the decision to attend college. Comparatively, for R1 and R2 the decision to attend college was still subject to doubt; Thus, their identity as a college student was still in question.

Four respondents knew they would attend college well in advance of graduating high school. R4 explained that she knew in elementary school:

Umm... like in elementary, you would have days to dress up or what you want to be when you grow up, and I would always dress up in the medical field, like a doctor or something. And then, the only way to get there is to go to college. I guess you could say that I've always known.

R5 knew a little bit later: "When I got pathed in middle school, I was starting to do music more, and I realized that I needed something to support my music later on. So that's when I finally started caring about schooling." It is unclear when exactly R6 knew she would attend college; but from her description, we suspect that it was most likely secondary school: "One of the reasons that I thought about becoming a teacher was I was going to be that teacher that was a 'good' teacher—one that really cared about their students." Finally, R7 explained that it was "middle school" when she "realized what [she] needed to do to become a veterinarian."

With R1 and R2, the respondents for whom college seems to be in service to itself, the recognition of their identity as a college student coincides with the performances of college. For R2, this has already been seen in the moments after exams are returned or grades are posted. She also described, in very much detail, the scene from high school graduation where she receives the distinction of being "college ready." Similarly, R1 took the first semester to test the waters to see if she could do it, explaining that her college identity "became more clear to me whenever I actually started the first semester I started...."

At this point, it seems as though an important constituent of recognizing that college is in service to something greater requires that it be chosen well in advance. This is where the experiences of R3 are particularly helpful. Like R1 and R2, R3 attended college shortly after high school, and was similarly subjected to the whims and caprice of the obstacles an unsuspecting and unfocused student would face. For a variety of reasons, she did not finish. Nearly 8 years later, R3 has experienced firsthand the struggle of trying to support a family on a variety of minimum wage jobs that promise limited upward mobility. She has also obtained a professional certificate and found this too limiting as well. In returning to school, she had dedicated herself to the task of providing for herself and her child. By juxtaposing R3's two decisions to obtain a college degree, we see a major difference: precisely the element we have been describing all-along. The first decision to attend college was in service to attending college: "I started to go to college and that was... because it's what you're supposed to do. Uh, you graduate high school, you're supposed to go to college, get a degree; that's kind of what I felt pressured to do." Her second decision to college is in service to a much different goal: "And then, again, back in school because that's not gonna pay the bills; that's not gonna save for college for my daughter when she's older—something that I never had. Cars, things like that. For her."

Experiencing College as in Service to Something Greater

The consequential quality that we have called “becoming a college student” was present in five of our respondents and was absent in the remaining two. Specifically, it is the experience that college is in service to something greater. It is to this higher aspiration that they have dedicated themselves, and they have understood that college was part of this. For the two respondents who mentioned no such greater aspiration, college was experienced as the means to its own end. The difference between these two types of students was apparent even before the analysis. R4 clearly demonstrated this quality: it was as if nothing that happened during college could shake her from her conviction that she was doing the right thing. Moreover, this difference in relation to one’s identity as a college student proved to be consequential in the manner by which obstacles were navigated by the FGCS. Obstacles less deter students who view college as in service to something greater.

College students face a great number of obstacles. The students that we interviewed mentioned poor grades, failed classes, work, family problems, financial aid problems, transportation issues, among others. As the respondents described these obstacles, it was easy to imagine how any of one them could easily derail even the most optimistic college student. The obstacles led some participants to uncertainty regarding their decision to attend college; for others, similar obstacles were simply absorbed into their forward momentum. It was as if nothing would stand in the latter students’ way.

An example of this difference may be seen between R2 and R4. Both students reported failing a course. This causes R2 to lose her GPA-based scholarship, and for R4 this leads to a sit-down with an advisor who suggests that she change majors (because the failed course was a core class for her selected major). Both students lost a respected endorsement—one fiscal and the other professional. But they responded in different ways. R2 described her reaction: “...my first time failing a class I felt like... a failure...” This last word was even delivered with an audible shudder. In comparison, R4’s description was much different. She mentioned that she was getting ready to graduate in the same sentence where she quotes what her advisor had told her many years ago—“maybe this isn’t for you, maybe you should find something different”—as if telling a joke.

This juxtaposition of reactions to an obstacle demonstrates an important difference that we found across the respondents: for five of the FGCS, it was as if no obstacle could deter them from the meaning they had found in their college student identity—an identity that does not end with college. With these students, it is clear that college is in service to something greater: to support herself and her child in a comfortable lifestyle (R3); to become a dermatologist (R4); a musician (R5); a teacher (R6); and a veterinarian (R7).

It is not that these students are naïve to the obstacles that they face. Indeed, in many cases, they know quite clearly what the consequences are. R3 experienced first-hand how difficult it is to raise a child without a degree: “It’s impossible to have a child and not have a college degree and have anything beyond basic needs. It has proven to be difficult.” R4 explained that a fallen GPA means money out of her own pocket: “...if you fail too many classes, you know you have to pay out of pocket”; R6 carefully described her experience of discrimination as a person of lower socioeconomic status; and R7 understands that losing a scholarship means finding a different school. R5 described a practical decision that is made about where to attend school and what to study and how this is *in service to* an unrelated artistic passion. This example is an important one because the college degree may still be in service to a higher aspiration even if the degree one seeks is not in the field most clearly aligned with said aspiration. Once again, it is the separate decision in favor of this “something higher” that is paramount.

When motivated by something over and above college, FGCS are not easily deterred. This was not the case with R1 and R2. These two never seem to get beyond college for the sake of college. R1 repeatedly defends her decision to go to college against her mother’s wishes, and ultimately uses the example that she was able to teach her mother how to solve a math problem as the proof that what she is learning matters. Attending college has made R1 a better college student, but it is unclear what this means to her. R2 explains that she feels most like a college student when grades are distributed

after an exam or at the end of the semester—unless that grade is a poor one—in which case, she wonders what she has been doing the whole time:

[W]hen I finally get the grade for what I'm doing, then I feel like then my work is worth something. That's when I finally feel like yeah I guess I'm—yeah—I'm doing something. That's when I really feel like a college student.... (R2)

Discussion and Suggested Applications

The work of phenomenological research does not conclude once the protocols have been analyzed. Because it emphasizes such themes as consciousness, awareness, circumspection, and care, an important concluding action is to take the findings back to the people. This has been accomplished in part through the presentation of our findings at the Southeast and South Atlantic Philosophy of Education Societies' combined winter meeting. From the subsequent discussion that was had during this meeting, a few insights for the application of these findings have been generated.

Based on the considerable strength and fortitude that students demonstrate with the attribute that “College is in service to something greater,” it is recommended that institutions place a greater emphasis on a student's 5- or 10-year plan. For example, instructors at our institution routinely advise upwards of 50 students a semester. This task can quickly devolve into counseling students on which classes to take in order to graduate most quickly. This approach encourages students to take courses for the sake of finishing college and not in service to a career path, personal interest, or the development of a particular skill. We recommend that this advising time be spent discussing career aspirations. Instead of recommending that students simply take the 18 credits required to satisfy the psychology major, time could be spent describing what, specifically, each class will accomplish and how it might benefit their career aspirations. General psychology, for example, covers a considerable amount of material and can seem daunting; but if students know ahead of time that a few of these topics will be directly applicable to their anticipated career paths (e.g., health psychology for the nursing major; learning theory and cognition for the education major, etc.), then they can approach that class with goals in mind.

To be sure, advisors are going to have to approach advising a little bit differently and will likely end up spending more time with each student. However, we suspect that this shift will be in the direction of the expertise of advisors anyhow, at least at the community college level where instructors are also given an advising load. At our institution advisors are assigned based on selected majors. This means that psychology faculty advise students who have declared the psychology major, and psychology faculty are at a decided advantage when it comes to knowing what kinds of jobs within the field of psychology and what skills they require. Instead of acting as course-catalog consultants, advisors can share their knowledge about their field of expertise in a one-on-one advising environment. Such conversations can, of course, seem a bit premature for students, and discussing career aspirations with a student that has ambivalence about her/his career can seem like a waste of time for the advisor. We argue that the opposite is true in both cases. By including career aspirations during advising meetings, these aspirations can provide a context through which course-work derives its meaning (you can explain *why* proficiency in statistics would be beneficial when applying for a job, for example). Advising is also precisely the time for any ambivalence to be addressed. I (author one) remember having one such student who was divided by two possible career paths: work with delinquent youth or become a certified psychotherapist. Her indecision had crippled any forward progress. We discussed the pros and cons of each (as best as a first-year undergraduate can anticipate them), and I described a few possible careers at their point of intersection. She liked the idea of becoming a marriage and family therapist, perhaps one that specializes in adolescent developmental issues.

Within the context of instruction, it is our recommendation that material should be intentionally linked to aspects outside of class: whether this takes the form of discussing career fields where such

work is regularly employed or examples that pertain directly to the students' lives. Our mathematics department has begun incorporating the latter into its classes. As an access institution, many students come in without high-school-level math and reading abilities. Remedial math and reading courses are provided so that they may get to this level in order to complete first-year courses. In fact, over half of our incoming students are in such remedial courses. Students in the social sciences may elect to take a course we have called Quantitative Reasoning in lieu of the standard college algebra course. The quantitative reasoning courses emphasize real-life circumstances where arithmetic might be needed: calculating a tip, making change, predicting the interest levels on their federal student loans, and so on. Another good example of this is Gillen's (2014) Idealized Algebra Project Classroom, which demonstrates that a meaningful, real-world context makes a difference in students' abilities to solve problems. Gillen explains that math is not only about numbers, but also involves situations in which the numbers mean something. One of his students had been struggling with long subtraction problems, but had had no problem solving these calculations when responsible for the bookkeeping of his brother's side-business. By hypothetically putting the math problems into meaningful situations, the struggle of Gillen's student was resolved.

Conclusion

This study has described the dramatic difference between two types of college student: the ones for whom college is in service to something greater and the ones for whom college seems to be in service to itself. While this may seem like a subtle difference, we have found that students in the former group have a much greater confidence in their identities as college students and are resultantly more capable of handling the obstacles they will inevitably face. It has been argued that this difference is an important one to understand for those interested in solving the unique problems faced by FGCS.

The perspective that this study affords has allowed us to make a few recommendations about how to address the experience of IP that is common among college students, particularly FGCS. These include a shift in emphasis for advising appointments as well as the provision of context-specificity and of meaningful applications of content for instruction.

Our analysis has emphasized the experience of overcoming the IP as FGCS. What remains is a phenomenological analysis of the experience of the IP among FGCS.

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