

ABSTRACT

Going All In: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Study of the Impact of Social Engagement on the Success and Sense of Belonging of First-Generation College Students

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First-generation college student success is a matter of significance to college leaders across the United States. According to a recent study, over half of all undergraduate students are first-generation (RTI International, 2019). The problem, however, is that first-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation students to drop out of college and never return (Cataldi et al., 2018). College leaders must find ways to retain and graduate the first-generation college students who enroll in their schools. College leaders can address retention issues by ensuring their students are socially integrated into their college and feel they belong there (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Therefore, leaders of colleges that enroll first-generation college students need to actively provide academic and social engagement opportunities for their students.

In this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, I deployed a three-pronged theoretical framework to investigate how social engagement affected first-generation college students' success and sense of belonging at a small, Catholic, private, all

women's college in the Midwest. I collected quantitative data first and then collected qualitative data to further explain the quantitative results. To conduct the study, I used the work of Ishitani (2003) to define the status of first-generation college students. I then framed my study in Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration that concluded that students must be academically and socially integrated into their college to succeed. I also positioned my research in the context of Strayhorn's (2019) work on student sense of belonging and supported that by applying Nodding's (2012) work on caring as an additional lens.

Through my research, I studied how first-generation college students chose to engage socially at their college. I examined the impact of their social engagement on their social integration and their sense of belonging. Through quantitative research, I found that the participants were actively engaging socially. Then, my qualitative follow-up revealed how the students became socially integrated and developed a sense of belonging through their engagement. College leaders can use the results to inform their student engagement strategies, recognizing that social engagement affects the social integration and sense of belonging for first-generation college students, as displayed in my study.

Keywords: First-generation college student, success, sense of belonging, social integration

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by

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DEDICATION

To my husband,
Sean Walsh
for his unconditional love, patience, respect, encouragement, high fives, and support.
Together, with God, we can do anything.
Romans 8:37

To my parents,
Matthew and Heidi Nitz
for first teaching me to love my savior, then how to love others as myself, then how to tie
my shoes, and then how to never give up my dreams. This document is a testament to
their investment in me. I am forever grateful for their love.

To my siblings,
Haley Arndt and Liam Nitz,
for being the kinds of kid-siblings a girl wants to make proud, and the kind of adults a
woman needs as her best friends.

CHAPTER ONE

Background and Needs Assessment

Introduction

Where did you go to college? What did you study? When did you graduate? In recent years, those questions have been asked more frequently of adults in the United States by new friends, professional connections, and, most importantly, on job applications. A college education shifted from a luxury to more of a necessity as many careers across all industries require baccalaureate degrees (Torpey, 2019). Furthermore, jobs that require a college degree showed to pay more than jobs that did not (Torpey, 2019). Thus, an individual pursuing a lucrative career had an incentive to enroll in a baccalaureate program at an institution of higher education.

High schools and college-access programs across the United States have encouraged students to pursue college as their next step. High school leaders and teachers have worked hard to prepare students for college, and the number of students enrolling in bachelor's degree programs has grown in recent years (NCES, 2020). While an increased number of students began their college journey in recent years, only about 60% of them successfully graduated with a bachelor's degree in six years (NCES, 2020). That statistic has caused many to ask what is happening to the other 40% and what can college leaders do about it.

This excessive college dropout rate has economic impacts on students (Cataldi et al., 2018). Students who enter college from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and drop out may suffer most as the loan provider will require them to pay off student loan

debt without the degree that would have helped them pursue a more lucrative career (Kirp, 2019). High numbers of students with college credit, no degree, and debt have increased the number of adults defaulting on their loans (Hanson, 2021). The burden of unpaid student loan debt on individuals has been troubling; furthermore, this burden has not affected all types of students equally.

First-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation students to drop out, which has caught the attention of scholars and college leaders who seek to understand how to increase college graduation rates (Catalidi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2003; Wildhagen, 2015). According to Wildhagen (2015), the number of studies that included the term “first-generation college student(s)” in the title “increased by 606% between 1999 and 2013” (p. 287). Scholars defined first-generation college students as students whose parents did not obtain a bachelor’s degree (Ishitani, 2003). These students were less likely to graduate from college than their peers, and they were more likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (RTI International, 2019). In response to low first-generation college student graduation rates, colleges leaders across the United States initiated and invested in first-generation college student success programs (McGonagle et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2014). In the last decade, scholars conducted much research on first-generation college students, including who they are and what needs they have that may be different from continuing-generation students (Ellis et al., 2019; Schelbe et al., 2019; Sy et al., 2011). This research helped shape how college leaders served first-generation college students and attempted to increase their graduation rates.

College leaders have been pursuing ways to encourage persistence and increase the graduation rates of their first-generation college students. Researchers have named many reasons students choose to drop out of college, including financial, academic, and social reasons (Tinto, 1975). As a result, college leaders have created retention initiatives designed to address the educational and social needs of the students (Inkelas et al., 2007; Oliver & King, 2018; Page et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975). This study explores how social engagement opportunities impact successful first-generation college students' successes and senses of belonging to provide college leaders with the knowledge needed to embark on the task of increasing graduation rates. This study provides college leaders with data that demonstrates how social involvement in college affects their first-generation college students' persistence and chances of graduating from college. Armed with this knowledge, college leaders can create, enhance, or expand the social engagement opportunities that have the most positive impact on the success of their first-generation college students.

Statement of the Problem

Ishitani (2006) described a problem in higher education, that first-generation students were more likely than their continuing-generation peers to drop out of college and never return. According to a recent study, 33% of first-generation college students dropped out of college and never returned, compared to just 14% of students who had at least one parent who had earned a college degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). First-generation college students graduated from college at a much lower rate than their continuing-generation peers (RTI International, 2019). College leaders have become concerned about this trend because about 56% of the current college students in the United States were

first-generation in 2019 (RTI International, 2019). A low graduation rate for first-generation college students has had negative consequences for colleges and their students. The goal of anyone entering college is to leave with a degree, and first-generation college students have been less likely to obtain that goal than their continuing-generation peers.

A student's identity has always affected their college experience (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Carpenter & Pena, 2017; Gray et al., 2018). As a group, first-generation college students were more likely to identify as a member of a racial or ethnic minority and to be from an economically disadvantaged background than their continuing-generation peers (RTI International, 2019). These racial and class differences meant the students were likely to deal with added challenges that could serve as barriers to graduation. These challenges were often related to the student's identity, such as imposter syndrome, cultural mismatch, stereotype threat, and a lack of culturally responsive teaching from their professors (Chang et al., 2019; Museus et al., 2017; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Issues related to identity may have contributed to some students' decision to drop out of college, and they may have prevented students from taking full advantage of their college's services (Chang et al., 2020). As the demographics of students entering college have changed, the academic and social services provided by colleges have not always changed.

A lack of institutional commitment, fostered by social engagement, has negatively impacted persistence (Tinto, 1975). As stated above, when a student does not feel their college values their identity, they may not participate in resources offered by the college, including social engagement opportunities (Chang et al., 2020). Because of this, college leaders have made attempts to encourage their students to participate in social

engagement opportunities and have created social engagement opportunities explicitly designed for the first-generation students enrolled at their school (Inkelas et al., 2007; Oliver & King, 2018). The opportunity to engage with students who share similar racial, class and educational backgrounds on campus has increased students' sense that they belong at their chosen college (Strayhorn, 2019). Understanding the social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students engaged with and the effect that engagement had on their success and sense of belonging may have helped colleges provide the best opportunities for their students in the past. This study, therefore, explored the social engagement habits of successful first-generation college students. It explored the impact of social engagement opportunities on the students' success and sense of belonging. The purpose of the study was to understand how first-generation college student success was connected to social engagement and the students' senses of belonging. This understanding would help college leaders create programs or provide additional support to increase first-generation college student graduation rates.

Colleges that admit high percentages of first-generation students needed to increase graduation rates for the betterment of their students and to remain in business. High dropout rates have impacted students, but they also affected the colleges that enrolled these students. There has been debate about the merits of reporting graduation rates (Cook & Pullaro, 2010; Lax, 2012). However, the fact remains that graduation rates have been a statistic tracked by the United States Department of Education since 1996 (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Parents and students have reviewed these numbers when deciding where to enroll, and grant funders, including government funders, have checked these numbers when making funding decisions (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Low graduation

rates may have negatively affected running the college, causing reductions in enrollment, tuition, and reputation at colleges with low graduation rates. According to Cook and Pullaro (2010), “graduation rates are increasingly viewed as a critical, if not the critical, measure of both student and institutional success” (p. 2). The leaders of colleges and universities have always had the mission-driven imperative to support all their students. They have also suffered financial consequences related to lost tuition and high loan default rates when their students did not persist to graduation. These economic concerns made improving graduation rates for first-generation college students an imperative, creating more need for this study.

This research study explored first-generation college student success and sense of belonging at Francis College. Francis College needed to understand how to deepen their first-generation college students’ sense of belonging and improve retention rates. Francis College is a small, private, nonprofit, Catholic, liberal arts, women’s college in the Midwest. In 2019, over 70% of the incoming students were first-generation students (Francis College, 2019). In 2019, Francis College reported a six-year graduation rate of 40% (Francis College, 2019). The National average graduation rate for private, nonprofit institutions like Francis college was 67% (NCES, 2020). Therefore, Francis College needed to address its student retention issues and focus on increasing its students’ persistence to graduation. These needs aligned with the purpose of this study, and the results would be helpful to the leaders of Francis College as they sought to improve the graduation rates of their first-generation student population.

Literature Review

The high rates of attrition cited in the previous section were unacceptable to me as a higher education professional and researcher. When I began this research study, it became clear that social engagement was the aspect of the college experience I needed to study so that colleges could learn how their first-generation college students were engaging socially. From my firsthand experiences, I had seen examples of academically successful students who chose to leave college due to lack of engagement or emotional connection to their college. Additionally, I noticed that colleges needed to know what effect their students' engagement had on their successes and senses of belonging to invest in the social engagement opportunities their students needed.

First-generation college students, as a group, have been the focus of research by scholars for decades (Wildhagen, 2015). The number of first-generation college students enrolling in college has grown, and research showing they are less likely to graduate than their continuing-generation peers emerged (RTI International, 2019). Many scholars have done studies on first-generation college student attrition to understand why, and scholars sought to provide research that would aid college leaders in eliminating the achievement gap. There also needed to be research done on first-generation college student success and some of the non-academic reasons students persisted to graduation, like social engagement opportunities.

Throughout this study, I explored the experiences of first-generation college students who have persisted and were on track to graduate with a bachelor's degree in a total of four to six years. The participants in the study were successful first-generation college students, meaning those who persisted while others dropped out. To best understand first-generation students as a group, the literature review below first examined

scholarly research done on the characteristics of first-generation college students and the reasons they faced a higher risk of voluntary attrition than continuing-generation students. This literature review then defined success as persistence from one semester to the next and sufficient progress toward graduation in four to six years. In this section, the literature also explored earlier research done on first-generation college student social engagement and how other scholars have examined the impact of social engagement on success. Finally, this literature review defined how institutions built a sense of belonging for first-generation college students as grounded in ethics of care and developed through relationships with peers and faculty members. Through this literature review, I made a case that a study was needed that explored the social engagement experiences successful first-generation college students had and how these experiences impacted their social integration and sense of belonging.

I conducted a study on how first-generation college students participated in social engagement on their campus and how their participation impacted their sense of belonging and success. The literature review below establishes that while there have been studies of first-generation college student success and sense of belonging, no studies have examined how social engagement impacted first-generation college students' senses of belonging and successes. The following literature review argues that first-generation college students are a subset of the undergraduate student population that needs to be studied separately from continuing-generation students. It sets up that such a study is necessary, given the high attrition rates of first-generation college students and the increased rate at which first-generation college students enroll in college. It also argues that an asset-based study that collects the experiences of successful students, rather than

those that have dropped out, was needed to support the work college leaders were doing to increase persistence and graduation rates among first-generation college students.

First-Generation College Students

I began my review of literature by reading the work of scholars who studied first-generation college students. It was essential for me to deepen my understanding of the characteristics of first-generation college students. I needed to know what earlier research existed on first-generation college students as a subset of the current population of college students. I outlined the results of my review of the scholarly literature pertaining to first-generation college students in this section.

First-generation college student status. In reviewing the literature, I found evidence that first-generation college students differed from their continuing-generation peers in many different demographic categorizations (Ishitani, 2003). First-generation students, as a group, were more likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds than their peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). The median family income of first-generation college students was \$41,000 annually, compared to \$90,000 annually for continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students were more likely to belong to a racial or ethnic minority group (RTI International, 2019). Also, because their parents did not attend college, first-generation college students experienced different parental involvement in their degree pursuit than their continuing-generation peers (Harper et al., 2020; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). These differences across a broad range of demographic categories solidified my belief that first-generation college students were a subset of the college student population and warranted special consideration in my study.

I grouped first-generation college students as a population for this study, as past studies had done. The decision to consider first-generation college students as a group was helpful but also called for caution. If not careful, institutions and researchers who used the designation risked unintentionally creating a barrier for their students (Wildhagen, 2015). As a researcher, I understood the differences between first-generation college students and continuing-generation students. Understanding these differences meant I needed to study first-generation college students as a group independent of their continuing-generation peers. The category of first-generation college students was created by researchers and was not a category that students selected for themselves, nor one with which they identified outside of their lives in college (Orbe, 2004). College leaders began using the category of first-generation college students to figure out why they saw higher attrition numbers among their new students (Wildhagen, 2015). Putting students into this category served the institution more than it served the students. Not all students saw the benefits of being a part of the first-generation programs their school offered (Wildhagen, 2015). It was vital for me to recognize that the status of first-generation college students was just one aspect of students' identities when I conducted my research.

My study explored first-generation college students as a group to align with existing literature. Studying first-generation college students as a population helped me identify patterns in my research and align my study with the work of earlier scholars. However, I understood that these students existed as individuals outside of the demographic grouping of first-generation college students, and therefore, I respected their individuality when conducting my research.

First-generation college student attrition. One of the primary drivers of this study was the realization that first-generation college students dropped out of college at a higher rate than continuing-generation students. Ishitani (2003) conducted an analysis of first-generation student attrition rates while controlling for “other, potentially confounding characteristics,” including race, gender, high school grade point average, high school rank, and family income level (p. 434). Ishitani (2003) concluded that first-generation college students were still far more likely than their continuing-generation peers to drop out of college, even when controlling for many other variables correlated with retention (Ishitani, 2003). Many scholars have cited Ishitani’s (2003, 2006) work as they researched first-generation college students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Schelbe et al., 2019). Scholars have used Ishitani’s (2003, 2006) study so often because it showed the need to study first-generation college students as a group and identify how to best support them to increase their likelihood of graduating. Ishitani’s (2003, 2006) work served as one part of a three-pronged theoretical framework foundation for the study that I explained in a subsequent section of Chapter One.

The national graduation rates of first-generation college students initially drew my attention to the need to study first-generation college student success. Ishitani (2003) demonstrated that first-generation college students graduated at a lower rate than continuing students. For years, every college and university in the United States have reported their six-year graduation rates as public statistics (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Graduation rates have historically varied by type and size of institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). First-generation college students have enrolled at all types of

colleges and universities, including two-year, four-year, public, private, nonprofit, for-profit, and community (RTI International, 2019). In 2019, on average, private nonprofit universities had the highest graduation rates for all types of students, and private for-profit universities had the lowest graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). First-generation college student graduation rates were lower than the overall graduation rates at all types of institutions (Ishitani, 2003). A consistently lower graduation rate meant that no matter the type of institution at which I conducted my study, the research would be valuable because graduation rates were vital to institutions of all types and sizes.

The site selected for this research study was a private nonprofit college with a graduation rate of 40% in 2019, which was lower than the national average of 67% for private nonprofit colleges (Francis College, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The research of Dong (2019) suggested that small liberal arts colleges, like the one used as the site for this study, were generally successful at supporting their first-generation college students. While private liberal arts colleges performed better than other colleges at helping first-generation college students in Dong's (2019) study, according to Ishitani (2006), no matter the type of institution, first-generation students had a higher rate of attrition than continuing-generation students.

In addition to having a lower graduation rate than continuing-generation students, first-generation college students who graduated from college often took longer than continuing-generation students to do so (RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students enrolled full-time at a lower rate than continuing-generation students and completed credits slower than continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2019).

First-generation college students continuously enrolled in college courses at a rate lower than continuing-generation students, which resulted in a slower graduation pace (Ishitani, 2006). Some of the slowed pace to graduation was a result of stopout. Stratton et al. (2008) named stop out the process by which students withdrew from their school “but returned within one year” (p. 320). According to Stratton et al. (2008), about 40% of first-year students intended their break in enrollment to be a stopout and not a dropout. However, stopping out was potentially detrimental to a student’s chances of graduating because about 60% of the students who took a break after their first year of college never returned to complete their degree (Stratton et al., 2008). Students who started and stopped multiple times on their journey to graduation proceeded slower, faced financial aid concerns, and lowered their chances of ever reaching graduation (DesJardins & McCall, 2010). Therefore, stopout and slowed progress to graduation negatively affected first-generation college students’ chances of graduating.

In addition to having higher dropout and stopout rates than continuing-generation students, first-generation college students did not follow the same attrition patterns as continuing-generation students. In general, continuing-generation students who left college had the highest chance of doing so in the first few years of college (Ishitani, 2003). While it was still true for first-generation college students that the highest risk of dropping out of college came in their first year, their risk of drop out continued throughout their time in college and varied more year to year than that of continuing-generation students (Ishitani, 2003). The year-to-year variation showed that first-generation college students had unique needs from continuing-generation students throughout their time in college, not just at the beginning.

College leaders and scholars recognized that first-generation college student attrition habits differed from continuing-generation students and that dropout rates were higher among first-generation college students. To address the unique needs of first-generation college students in my study, I needed to understand the scholarly literature that addressed the unique characteristics of first-generation students as a group. Therefore, I conducted a review of the literature that I synthesized in this section.

Success

The research study I designed considered the success of first-generation college students. To address high attrition rates, college leaders developed student success programs for students at all college grade levels (Inkelas et al., 2007; Malmgren & Galvin, 2008; Thomas & Hanson, 2014). Scholars have studied student success for all demographics of students and in a myriad of settings. To conduct a study that supported the work of student success professionals in higher education, I needed to examine earlier scholars' work related to student success. Therefore, I conducted a review of the scholarly literature on college student success in this section.

Defining success. The leaders of higher education institutions have worked to improve graduation rates for all students, including their first-generation college students, for decades (Kirp, 2019; Tinto, 2006). Reducing college dropout rates and increasing student retention has been “one of the most widely studied areas in higher education” (Tinto, 2006, p. 1). I noted previously that the federal government had required all public and private higher education institutions to report their six-year graduation rate annually as a publicly reviewed metric of their success (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Therefore, college leaders across the United States have devoted their institution's

resources to developing, expanding, and adjusting programs and services that increased graduation rates (Kirp, 2019). The government's decision to make graduation rates public affected individual students and institutions.

Since institutions have tied their success to overall six-year graduation rates, it has logically followed that they have linked the successes of individual students to their likelihood of graduating in six years or less (Tinto, 2006). I found no definition of student success that all scholars universally used. However, I did find that most colleges have developed systems to actively measure student retention from semester to semester and their progress toward being able to graduate with a bachelor's degree in six or fewer years (Kirp, 2019; Millea et al., 2018). According to Ishitani (2006), "students who were continuously enrolled were eleven times more likely to graduate within four years" (p. 879). Therefore, for this problem of practice, I defined success as students being retained from one semester to the next and being on track to graduate with a bachelor's degree in four to six years. To graduate with a bachelor's degree, a student must have earned at least one hundred and twenty credits (Endsley, 2017). Therefore, to be on track to graduate in four to six years, students needed to complete at least twenty credits per academic year.

Graduation rates and persistence informed the definition of success I used for this study. To graduate on time, students must have remained enrolled and continued to progress toward their degree (Ishitani, 2006; Tinto, 2006). Stopping-out costs students time and money, as college leaders may have changed degree requirements while the student was not enrolled (Federal Student Aid, 2021). Federal student loan providers often required students to begin to pay back loans three to six months after they stopped

taking courses, whether they graduated or not. So, students who stopped out for an extended period often found themselves paying off loans before completing their degree (Kirp, 2019). Also, being continuously enrolled, even part-time, increased a student's chances of graduating on time, according to Tinto (2006). Therefore, college leaders and student success scholars have linked persistence and graduation to each other and chances of success.

First-generation college student success has become central to the graduation rate success of institutions of higher education. As more first-generation college students have enrolled in college, scholars have produced more studies to explore ways to improve their graduation rates (RTI International, 2019; Tinto, 2006; Wildhagen, 2015). Since first-generation college students graduate at lower rates than their peers, scholars studying successful first-generation college students have used four and six-year graduation rates as their benchmarks as well (Byrd et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006;). Additionally, because first-generation college students who stopped out were unlikely to return, scholars who studied these students also considered retention from one semester to the next an essential measure of success (Demetriou et al., 2017; Ishitani, 2006). I defined success as persistence from one semester to the next and being on track to graduation in four to six years to align my work with the work of earlier scholars.

Research on retention. Students achieved success in higher education through academic and social commitment and commitment from the institution to offer the right services to the students (Tinto, 2006). In the past, college leaders believed that a student's failure to succeed in college was due to their academic weaknesses or lack of preparation (Tinto, 2006). However, in recent years, the focus has shifted to the college, causing

many to hold colleges accountable for low graduation rates or high levels of voluntary student attrition (Tinto, 2006). While college leaders have dismissed some students for academic or behavioral failures, most first-generation student attrition was voluntary, which meant the student elected to leave by personal choice (Ishitani, 2003). College leaders have worked to understand why voluntary attrition happened and built systems to try to prevent it.

Tinto (1975) examined student attrition and persistence. It was a seminal work and served as a crucial part of the three-pronged theoretical framework that was the foundation for the data collection and analysis in this problem of practice dissertation. Tinto's (1975) work concluded that a lack of academic engagement, social engagement, or both contributed to voluntary student attrition. While scholars confirmed that students dropped out of college due to a lack of academic success, Tinto's (1975) work explained that there was substantial evidence that students chose to leave college because they were not engaged socially with others at their college. Although Tinto's (1975) work was not specific to first-generation college students, I applied it to the population as they were a subgroup of all college students I was interested in studying. Scholars such as Demetriou et al. (2017) cited Tinto's (1975) work about first-generation college students. Additionally, many scholars have cited Tinto's (1975) work when researching social integration efforts (Inkelas et al., 2007; Metzger, 2006). I designed my study to specifically apply Tinto's (1975, 2006) work to the social integration of first-generation college students.

First-generation student preparedness. According to scholars, first-generation college students often experienced different levels of pre-college academic preparation

than continuing-generation students (Atherton, 2014; Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). Like the site used for this study, colleges have used admissions criteria like grade point average, advanced math course participation, and standardized tests to determine a student's likelihood of success at their institution as part of their admissions process (Francis College, 2021). They have aimed to avoid admitting students who were likely to drop out before completing their degree. Scholars have measured academic preparedness deficiencies with several variables, including lower average scores on standardized tests, a lower level of participation in advanced math classes before college, and a lower grade point average in their first year of college courses (Atherton, 2014; Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017; RTI International, 2019). As I studied first-generation student success, it was vital to understand that academic preparedness may have affected the student participants' ability to persist to graduation.

Scholars have uncovered many reasons for voluntary attrition that range from academic to social to familial (Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani, 2006; Roksa, 2020; Vuong et al., 2010). Vuong et al., 2010 examined the self-efficacy of sophomore first-generation college students and noted that their self-efficacy levels were lower than their continuing-generation peers. Low self-efficacy often led to lower grade point averages, which led students to voluntarily stop out or drop out (Vuong et al., 2010). Studies like Vuong et al. (2010) indicated that personal and social factors, like self-efficacy, had impacted first-generation student graduation rates.

Scholars have been studying the voluntary attrition habits of college students for decades, and they have learned that familial expectations have affected voluntary student attrition (Ishitani, 2003, 2006). Moreno (2021) explored feelings of guilt among Latino

first-generation college students. These students often felt guilty when their studies required them to put their collegiate commitments before familial commitments. Voluntary student attrition often resulted from this dichotomy of family values and school obligations (Moreno, 2021). Concerns about self-efficacy and family demands have affected the college experiences of all types of students. I demonstrated earlier in this literature review that first-generation college students were more likely to belong to ethnic minority groups continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2019). Therefore, studies like Moreno (2021) were relevant to my research.

First-generation college students, as a group, have had different lived experiences than their continuing-generation peers, and therefore, enter college prepared for the academic and social engagement expectations differently (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Their educational lived experiences were different, often because of their status as first-generation college students. As mentioned earlier, first-generation college students, as a group, entered college with less rigorous academic preparation than their peers (Atherton, 2014; Choy, 2001; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students who entered less selective colleges with low high school grade point averages or finished in the lower quartile of their high school class had a lower chance of graduating than continuing-generation students with the same attributes (Ishitani, 2006). Parental involvement also shaped the students' high school education and college preparation (Reid & Moore III, 2008). In a recent study, first-generation college students reported feeling as though they were less prepared than their peers because no one had taught them to develop good study habits and time management skills in high school (Reid & Moore III, 2008). Since first-generation students did not have

parents who attended college, it was unlikely their parents modeled good college-level study and time management skills. One can infer that if parents were not able to teach academic college readiness, they were likely not able to teach their children about the administrative or social aspects of college either. Therefore, I needed to understand the unique challenges first-generation college students faced related to success to understand how they factored into their academic and social integration at their school.

First-generation college student social integration. One way to encourage students to remain continuously enrolled in college was to address their level of social engagement. Academic achievement was essential to student retention, but so was social engagement (Tinto, 1975). First-generation college students were less likely than their peers to engage socially on campus because they were more likely to live and work off-campus and because they were more likely to be enrolled as part-time students (Lundberg et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; RTI International, 2019). According to RTI International (2021), college leaders only engaged 46% of first-generation college students in student clubs outside of class. However, college leaders needed to increase their students' levels of social engagement to reduce voluntary attrition, according to Tinto (1975). To do this, college leaders needed to offer social engagement opportunities that celebrated their first-generation college students and appealed to a wide variety of interests (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). This section explored social engagement further and addressed the connection between social engagement for first-generation college students and their chances of being successful in college.

Scholars have been interested in studying first-generation college students and the programs designed to support them as a group for decades (Cataldi et al., 2018; Grice et

al., 2016; Ishitani, 2006; Wildhagen, 2015). Colleges have designed programs to support first-generation college students, and scholars have produced research that evaluated those programs (Inkelas et al., 2006; McGonagle et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2014). There were various aims for the programs and interventions created for first-generation college students, but they all focused on social integration to increase retention.

Scholars have studied how first-generation college students benefited from programs designed to build community. Inkelas et al. (2007) examined the benefits to first-generation college students' participation in a living-learning community instead of a traditional residence hall experience. Schwartz et al. (2018) studied how a pre-college intervention that introduced first-generation college students to each other to form a community and get academic support before beginning courses increased their social capital and impacted their time as a student. These studies varied in their approach to examining first-generation college student programming and the types of programs studied, but they shared the common goal of understanding how to provide additional support to first-generation college students through social engagement and learning interventions.

Leaders at colleges and universities have addressed differences in preparation by using an asset-based approach to educating first-generation college students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). College leaders did not create interventions like the living-learning community explored by Inkelas et al. (2007) or the social capital intervention examined by Schwartz et al. (2018) to end the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Instead, college leaders created these programs to help first-generation students find strength and support in their community. Wildhagen (2015)

argued that college leaders and scholars needed to avoid using deficit-based solutions to support first-generation college students. Instead, they focused on the needs of the first-generation students as they were (Wildhagen, 2015). This approach allowed for the differences between first-generation college students and continuing-generation students to enhance all students' experiences in college.

Organizations outside of higher education have also noticed the need to support first-generation college students' social integration. Educators created research organizations to further the understanding of first-generation college students as a group, including The Center for First-Generation Student Success (RTI International, 2019). Each November, the Center for First-Generation Student Success has celebrated a National First-Generation College Student Day (RTI International, 2021). The Center staff created this day to draw attention to first-generation college students' needs and promote an asset-based approach to recognizing the differences between first-generation college students and their continuing-generation peers (RTI International, 2020). The support and research of organizations like the Center for First-Generation Student Success have provided college leaders with examples of how to create social integration opportunities for their first-generation students.

Scholars have found social integration to predict student success (Flynn, 2014; Tinto, 1975). Therefore, scholars have researched the impact of all types of social engagement opportunities on retention and persistence. Scholars have explored the effects of living on campus, participating in service-learning offerings, participating in athletics, joining a student organization, having a mentor, and studying abroad to students' success (Demetriou et al., 2017; Malmgren & Galvin, 2008; McElveen & Ibele,

2019; Metzger, 2006; Ramos, 2019; Revilla, 2010; Roberts, 2018; Schudde, 2011; Webber et al., 2013). They have also researched programs developed to support first-generation college student success related to academic and social engagement (Inkelas et al., 2007; McGonagle et al., 2014; Page et al., 2019; Sneyers & De Witte, 2018; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Thomas & Hanson, 2014;).

Scholars have determined that active involvement in all types of social engagement ventures influenced social integration. Metzger (2006) examined the value of study abroad programs to student retention. The study concluded that the study abroad program positively impacted retention and enhanced the students' social experiences (Metzger, 2006). Thomas & Hanson (2014) examined a program that purposefully integrated students into social interaction with peers and employees of the institution. They concluded that when college leaders intervened to connect students into the social systems of the college, they were able to increase retention (Thomas & Hanson, 2014). These scholars, who studied social integration programs, concluded that "involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters" (Tinto, 2006, p. 4). While these two studies, and the others cited, were different and had different intentions, interventions, and subjects, they all proved the value of active involvement in student retention.

College leaders have tried to promote social engagement and build a community to support student retention by requiring active contributions from their faculty and academic staff (McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Roberts, 2018). Scholars found that college faculty were the employees that most often interacted with students (Roberts, 2018). Therefore, college leaders often required faculty to answer student questions that did not

relate to the academic content of their course (Roberts, 2018). McCallen and Johnson (2020) argued that faculty provided more resources to students inside the classroom to meet the needs of first-generation college students who may not have had the knowledge or time to obtain information about college processes outside of the classroom. Roberts (2018) acknowledged that colleges were large, complex, hierarchical structures and that it was difficult for colleges to break down many of the divisions between faculty and staff. Still, Roberts (2018) stated that it was necessary to make access to resources more accessible for students. To do so, faculty and staff both had to play active roles in all aspects of retention, including social engagement (Roberts, 2018). The whole college system needed to work together in order to retain and graduate first-generation college students.

Scholars have pushed college leaders to become more intentional about providing relevant social opportunities to students (Demetriou et al., 2017). Too many studies on first-generation college student success have been focused on perceived student deficits and not enough on the assets that first-generation college students bring to the campus (Demetriou et al., 2017; Macias, 2013). This literature review shows that first-generation college students experienced college differently than continuing-generation students (Ishitani, 2006). According to Tinto (2006), college leaders needed to shift their focus to how higher education institutions could adapt to serve their students and ensure they had what they needed to succeed. Roberts (2018) argued that good retention strategies “needed to be student-focused and learner-oriented, rather than based on the traditional, bureaucratic organizational structure of the university that resulted in alienating student support services and activities” (p. 141). These systems may have been especially

alienating to first-generation students, who did not have the advice of parents who had previously navigated the systems to guide them (Roksa et al., 2020). Students should have been able to feel empowered to succeed as unique individuals, rather than forced to assimilate to be successful (Macias, 2013). Therefore, an asset-based approach was needed to build academic and social commitment from the student. The study I conducted was asset-based due to the need for asset-based studies described by earlier scholars.

Tinto (1975, 2006) concluded that social engagement was a vital aspect of the college experience and impacted retention. While academic issues were often the primary cause of forced attrition, academically successful students still chose to leave school voluntarily due to social engagement issues (Tinto, 1975). For a student to be successful, they needed to do more than perform well academically. Colleges needed to engage their students socially with their peers and faculty (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) modeled the process of dropout “as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college” (p. 94). Social experiences, whether positive, negative, or absent, informed the student’s dropout decision (Tinto, 1975). Therefore, I decided to study student social integration, specifically how social experiences developed social integration in first-generation college students.

Sense of Belonging

In this final section of my review of literature, I discussed scholarly research on belonging. Colleges leaders needed to pay attention to students’ academic and social risk factors to reduce the likelihood of student dropout. One such social risk factor was a lack of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). My study investigated how social engagement impacted the sense of belonging of first-generation college students. Therefore, it was essential for

me to determine what scholars had already concluded about belonging in college students, specifically first-generation college students.

Sense of belonging was a concept developed by Maslow (1943) in his famous work about needs. Maslow (1943) outlined the hierarchy of needs and included belonging as one of the basic needs of humankind. He concluded that people needed to feel like they belonged to feel safe to be themselves and grow as an individual (Maslow, 1943). This need to feel a sense of belonging to thrive extended to all parts of an individual's life, including their experiences in higher education. Scholars have researched how students have developed their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). They have examined how a student's race, first-generation student status, disability status, and year in school impacted their sense of belonging (Duenas & Gloria, 2020; Freeman et al., 2007; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Martinez, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Knowing that feeling a sense of belonging was essential to the human experience, college leaders have noticed how their students developed a sense of belonging during their time in higher education and addressed belonging intentionally.

Scholars have studied the impact of a sense of belonging on student success (Slaten et al., 2018). Through research, they determined that a student's sense of belonging, their ability to be successful in college, and the ability for the college to be successful at retaining and graduating students were all connected (Freeman et al., 2007; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Gopalan and Brady (2020) found that a sense of belonging was "positively and robustly associated with outcomes colleges cared deeply about, including persistence" (p. 136). Gopalan and Brady's (2020) research showed that a sense of belonging was something college leaders needed to address to support their students'

attempts at success. When students felt like they belonged at their school, they were more likely to persist to graduation (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Therefore, it was essential that I understood the connection between success and belonging when conducting my research.

Scholars have attempted to define belonging. Strayhorn (2019) found in his research that “college students stressed the importance of social acceptance, support, community, connection, and respect to their own identity, development, mental health, wellbeing, and academic success” (p. 6). Strayhorn (2019) explained that students noticed when they felt like they belonged. He stated that when they did not feel like they belonged, that lack of belonging impacted them negatively. The work of Strayhorn (2019) served as an essential piece of the three-pronged theoretical framework I used to conduct this study. His explanation of what it meant to have a sense of belonging served as a guide for the qualitative and mixed methods data collection and analysis procedures I used.

Developing belonging in college students. Scholars found that engagement with faculty and staff was a way for college students to develop their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Strayhorn (2019) concluded that a student’s sense of belonging was likely to change throughout their time in college, increasing and decreasing as challenges and opportunities arose. Knowing that a sense of belonging was necessary and that students could foster a sense of belonging through engagement, college leaders across the United States invested in encouraging their students to be socially engaged and encouraged their faculty to foster the students’ engagement (Ramos, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). Students developed their sense of belonging through faculty and student relationships (Ramos, 2019). These relationships allowed students to experience

care and support directly from individuals associated with the institution and whose goal was to help students succeed (Ramos, 2019). Students made connections through individuals they knew were a part of the institution, which supported the development of the students' senses that they belonged.

Scholars have found that faculty were crucial to the development of student belonging. Like Ramos (2019), the work of Levett-Jones et al. (2009) concluded that faculty and student relationships were vital in developing students' sense of belonging. Students interacted with faculty regularly during their time at higher education institutions, and positive experiences with faculty would increase students' senses of belonging. Negative experiences with faculty, including if faculty made the student feel like they were a nuisance or like the faculty expected too much of them, could hinder their development of a sense of belonging (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). Students looked to faculty to recognize them, challenge them, and support them in their interactions (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). College leaders who realized that student and faculty interactions impacted their students' sense of belonging could proactively prepare faculty to create positive experiences.

Students also experienced a deepened sense of belonging when supported by peers who shared common traits or interests (Doan, 2015; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017). According to Roberts (2018), students found common interest groups on almost every college campus, and college leaders had actively promoted student groups as a part of their campus student success plans. Students deepened their sense of belonging by engaging with peers outside of classes, especially with peers who shared commonalities (Masika & Jones, 2016). Scholars have shown that engaging with

peers in formal and informal learning environments was key to building student belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016). Colleges that offered opportunities for students to find common connections on campus demonstrated care for their students, which strengthened the students' senses of belonging.

Care and belonging. College leaders have displayed a commitment to their student's sense of belonging by being a caring community that has made dynamic changes to their colleges' operations (Kirp, 2019). Tinto (1975) reminded us that school was a social experience and that social integration was essential for success. Therefore, school leaders needed to actively engage in providing social experiences in which all students could feel as though they belonged. They also needed to make changes to the mindsets of their faculty and staff so that the experiences of all students were valued (Kirp, 2019). Sykes and Gachago (2018) examined the importance of care in teaching to the sense of belonging. Their research reminded educators in faculty and staff positions at higher education institutions that they must show respect for students' stories, experiences, and backgrounds to help them feel safe so they can begin to feel that they belong (Skyes & Gachago, 2018). The research indicated that students needed to feel respected to feel like they belonged.

In her writings on the ethics of care related to education, Noddings (2006) contended that schools needed to demonstrate that education was a partnership where the educators cared about each student's development. She further articulated that caring was a mutual experience and that those cared for also cared for those doing the caring (Noddings, 2012). Noddings (2012) stated that the caring relation needed to be reciprocal, and the student that felt cared for by the teacher, cared about the teacher.

Therefore, in higher education, leadership had to make adjustments to demonstrate that it valued the students before they felt the institutional commitment that Tinto (1975) discussed (Kirp, 2019). Noddings's (2012) research on the ethics of care was a part of the three-pronged theoretical framework I used to conduct this study. I used it to explore what it meant to feel cared for in the qualitative and mixed methods data collection and analysis portion of this problem of practice dissertation.

Scholars have studied the work of Noddings (2006, 2012) and the ethic of care in research related to student belonging and inclusive pedagogy in recent years (Goralnik et al., 2012; Persky, 2021). Persky (2021) specifically explored the importance of care and personalized teaching to support student belonging during a global pandemic in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Care and feeling cared for related to belonging, and therefore they were essential to explore when discussing how students developed a sense of belonging.

While many scholars have conducted recent studies on the development of a sense of belonging, some scholars noted that the research on college students' sense of belonging was limited, and more ways of measuring sense of belonging were needed (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Slaten et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, Gopalan and Brady (2020) concluded that the scholarly community needed to do more research to determine how higher education institutions could increase their students' chances of developing a sense of belonging. Gillen-O'Neel (2019) studied the connection between student sense of belonging and student engagement. Gillen-O'Neel (2019) found a difference between the need of first-generation college students to feel a sense of belonging or connection to their college daily than continuing-generation students. They

also suggested that more research was needed to assist college leaders in finding ways to foster first-generation college students' sense of belonging (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). I conducted this problem of practice dissertation to explore how a sense of belonging was connected to success and social engagement to contribute to the scholarly conversation on the importance of student sense of belonging in higher education.

Synthesis of Literature

This literature review examined the research on first-generation college student characteristics related to success and defined success as persistence from one semester to the next and sufficient progress toward graduation. It also explored how colleges have assisted first-generation college students in developing their sense of belonging. The section on first-generation college students explained that they are a subset of the college student population that needed to be studied separately from continuing-generation students because they had distinctive characteristics, and therefore different needs than continuing-generation students. That section also discussed that while efforts around increasing social engagement programs for first-generation students existed, much research was still needed to determine the impact of these programs and how first-generation college students benefitted from programs available to all students. The section on belonging examined the importance of belonging at their college to the college experience. It also explained that belonging was not simply being accepted into college and encouraged to attend classes, but it involved being respected and cared for as an individual. This literature review has argued that first-generation status, student social involvement, and sense of belonging impact a student's success. It concluded that the

conversation around first-generation student success needed a study that explored the connections between success, social integration, and belonging.

Scholars have researched first-generation college student attrition, but more research was needed on first-generation college student success. Since social engagement and sense of belonging were vital aspects of student success, a study exploring the types of social engagement experiences first-generation college students had and how these experiences impacted their persistence and sense of belonging was needed. The field needed more research on how first-generation college students engage socially at their chosen college and how their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging and ability to be successful. In the following section, I outlined the theoretical framework used to conduct this study. I also described the purpose of the study and outlined how I completed the study.

Theoretical Framework

This problem of practice explored the concepts of first-generation college students as a subset of the population of students enrolled at an institution of higher education, success, and sense of belonging. Because of this multi-faceted approach, one theory was not comprehensive enough to serve as the singular theoretical foundation. Instead, I used a three-pronged theoretical framework. First, I used Ishitani's (2003) work to define first-generation college students and established that first-generation college students graduated from college at lower rates than their peers who had at least one parent who graduated from college. Then, I used the work of Tinto (1975) to define how social engagement and its connection to the retention of first-generation college students. Finally, I used the work of Strayhorn (2019) to define what it meant for a college student

to have a sense of belonging at the school. I did this to explore how social engagement impacted belonging. I also used the work of Noddings (2012) to define further what it meant for a college student to feel cared for by their college. Table 1.1 shows each theory and the key concepts used to inform the study.

Table 1.1

Theoretical Framework

Theory	Key Concepts
Ishitani (2003)	Definition of first-generation college students. Social engagement opportunities impacted the success of first-generation college students differently than continuing-generation students.
Tinto (1975)	Social integration and institutional commitment fostered through (Tinto, 1975): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer groups 2. Extracurricular activities 3. Interactions with faculty and staff.
Strayhorn (2019)	College students' sense of belonging is multi-faceted and involves feeling connected, respected, cared about, and accepted (Strayhorn, 2019).
supported by Noddings (2012)	Feeling cared about is develop through the carer (school) and cared-for (student) relationship (Noddings, 2012).

The groundbreaking work of Ishitani (2003) served as the first theoretical foundation for this research study. The literature review outlined that the attrition rates of first-generation college students differed from that of continuing-generation students. As Ishitani (2003) stated, the attrition rates of first-generation students were higher, even when compared with continuing-generation students who were of the same race, ethnicity, or social class. The attrition rates for first-generation college students were higher even when controlling for levels of academic preparedness (Ishitani, 2003). By

controlling for many of the known potentially confounding variables, Ishitani (2003) demonstrated that there were other reasons first-generation college students elected to drop out of college. Further research, building on the work of Ishitani (2003), was needed to explore why first-generation college students dropped out of college at a higher rate than their continuing-generation peers. Alternatively, as was the purpose of this study, to explore why the first-generation students who chose to remain enrolled did so. The decision to ground this problem of practice in the work of Ishitani (2003) guaranteed that the voices and experiences of successful first-generation college students were the only data collected. It also allowed me to explore successful first-generation college students as a specialized group within the population of all first-generation college students.

The purpose of the problem of practice was to understand how social engagement impacted the success of first-generation college students. It was necessary to define success in college and ground the work in a theoretical framework that focused on student persistence. Tinto's (1975) work on student integration served as the foundation for exploring student success in this study. Though Tinto's (1975) study did not focus solely on first-generation students, I applied the more generalized model to this population as a subset of students enrolled in an institution of higher education.

Tinto (1975) discussed the importance of academic achievement and social integration to student success. Since first-generation college student attrition was often voluntary, scholars and college leaders could not assume attrition was always due to academic performance. Since Tinto (1975) showed how social integration was essential to success, social integration and institutional commitment formed the foundation for exploring success in this problem of practice. In his study, most social engagement

opportunities on a college campus came in peer-group interaction, extracurricular activities, or interactions with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1975). I used the categories Tinto (1975) uncovered to inform the creation of the quantitative instrument I used to assess student participation in social engagement opportunities. Additionally, Tinto (1975) found that social engagement helped students experience social communication, faculty support, friendship support, and collective affirmation. Therefore, I used the themes of social communication, faculty support, friendship support, and collective affirmation to explore how students felt their social engagement experiences affected their success in the qualitative portion of this problem of practice.

The literature review concluded that students who did not feel they belonged at their college were more likely to consider dropping out. A student's sense of belonging likely impacted the student's chances of success (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Martinez, 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). Therefore, this problem of practice explored how participation in social engagement opportunities affected belonging. The definition of a college student's sense of belonging developed by Strayhorn (2019) served as the theoretical foundation for the sense of belonging portion of this study. Strayhorn's (2019) definition allowed me to explain what it meant to have a sense of belonging. With his definition, I could explore if the successful first-generation college student participants felt their involvement in social engagement opportunities made them feel like they belonged at their school. As stated in the literature review, Strayhorn (2019) defined college student sense of belonging as a student feeling a "sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (p. 4). The themes of connectedness, feeling cared about, accepted,

and respected were therefore used in the qualitative data analysis of this problem of practice to examine how successful first-generation college students felt their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging.

I needed to define the concept of feeling cared about to identify it in the student participants' responses. To further clarify what it meant to feel cared about, I used Nodding's (2012) definition of the caring relation. The relationship between the carer, in this case, the school, and the cared-for, in this case, the student, needed to be fostered through thinking, listening, and creating a climate of care (Noddings, 2012). Therefore, I used the themes of thinking, listening, and creating a climate of care to analyze the qualitative data to understand how the students expressed if their involvement in social engagement opportunities made them feel as though their college leaders cared for them.

The work of Ishitani (2003), Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and Noddings (2012) created the three-pronged theoretical foundation for the study I conducted. The foundation provided by each of these scholars served a vital role in the data collection and analysis process of the study. The work of any one of these scholars could have been a theoretical framework for a research study on their own. They were each used individually in the data collection and analysis process and utilized as a unified three-pronged theoretical framework. Together, the works of these scholars provided a holistic theoretical framework that I used to examine how first-generation college student status, social engagement, success, and sense of belonging were all interconnected.

Conclusion: Purpose of the Study

Colleges have been places of academic study, social engagement, and personal growth for students. Scholars have determined that students who actively engaged in their

college's academic and social aspects were more likely to persist to graduation, that is, be successful (Tinto, 1975). I synthesized in the literature review what scholars have reported about how college leaders have offered academic services and social opportunities to their students. As college leaders have seen disparities in the rates of success of first-generation college students, they have encouraged their first-generation students to be active citizens of their campuses, and through opportunities for campus engagement, college leaders have hoped students developed a sense that they belonged at their institution (Inkelas et al., 2007; Page et al., 2019; Thomas & Hanson, 2014). Scholars have linked the success of college students and their sense of belonging fostered by social engagement (Strayhorn, 2019). To understand the real impact social engagement opportunities had on first-generation college student success and sense of belonging, a study that incorporated the voices of successful first-generation college students was needed. That is the study I conducted.

The purpose of this study was to address the retention of successful first-generation college students through an assessment of their involvement in institution-sponsored social engagement opportunities. I conducted the study to hear directly from successful first-generation college students about how their social engagement experiences impacted their success and sense of belonging at their school. I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, and it involved collecting quantitative data first and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data. In the first quantitative phase of the study, I collected data from a survey distributed to first-generation students who had earned at least fifty-four credits at Francis College. The purpose of the survey was to determine the types of social engagement opportunities

these students were engaging with and at what frequency. I also used the survey to determine if successful first-generation college students felt their social engagement impacted their success in college. I conducted the second qualitative phase to follow the quantitative results to help explain the quantitative results. In this explanatory follow-up, I interviewed four participants to understand if the social opportunities in which the students engaged contributed to their success and sense of belonging. I conducted one group interview and two individual interviews.

This study will be helpful to any institution interested in investing in the types of social programming that promote persistence and a sense of belonging among their first-generation students. It will inform them about which social engagement opportunities their successful first-generation college students will likely engage with most and what impact, if any, the students feel their social engagement has on their success and sense of belonging. It will help college leaders know if their investments in social engagement opportunities contributed to their students' sense of belonging on campus and ability to persist to graduation. It will also be helpful to any first-generation student who was interested in devoting their limited free time to the institution-sponsored social engagement opportunities that are most likely to support their goal of persistence to graduation. The following chapter details the research design methods I used to conduct this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Introduction: Research Questions

Considering the literature review presented in Chapter One, I conducted a research study to explore first-generation college student success and belonging. Through the literature review, I concluded that first-generation college students graduated and persisted through college at a lower rate than their continuing-generation peers (Ishitani, 2003). Also, that success in college was related to social integration and that a lack of social integration may have negatively impacted students' senses of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). So, I constructed a literature review that argued that social engagement was meaningful for first-generation college students because of its connection to their sense of belonging and chances of successfully reaching graduation. Therefore, my problem of practice focused on what social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students engaged with and that engagement's impact on the students' success and sense of belonging.

To explore how successful first-generation college students were engaged and their engagement's impact on their success and sense of belonging, I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. I asked three research questions. Research question one was a quantitative research question, question two was a qualitative research question, and question three was a mixed methods research question. They were:

RQ1: What are the social engagement opportunities in which successful first-generation students have engaged?

RQ 2: How have social engagement opportunities impacted the participants' senses of belonging?

RQ 3: How have social engagement opportunities impacted the participants' successes?

These questions guided the research design described in Chapter Two.

Researcher Perspective and Positionality

I understood the importance of social engagement and sense of belonging to success in college because of the experiences I had while attending college. I had been academically successful in high school, but I struggled academically in college and did not feel belonging at my university. I considered dropping out, but thankfully, my parents, who had graduated from college, encouraged me to persist. They provided knowledge of college resources that would help me improve my academic performance and encouraged me to get involved in social engagement opportunities related to my interests. I joined clubs, made friends with similar interests, and engaged with a faculty mentor directly. The academic resources and sense of belonging found among peers and faculty members in academic clubs helped me persist to graduation.

Many first-generation college students who have dropped out of college encountered the same struggles as I did. However, their parents may not have had the experiential knowledge my parents had. The parents of first-generation college students may not have been able to give the same advice as my parents did because they did not have previous knowledge from their own college experiences to share.

My husband was a first-generation college student, and his experiences informed my study. He, too, had been successful in high school. He attended the same university as me but was not able to persist through college to graduation. As a college student my

husband struggled academically and did not feel a sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, he did not participate in any social engagement opportunities on campus. Had my husband been socially engaged and had more opportunities to develop his sense of belonging, he may have persisted. My husband's experience, in contrast to mine, contributed to my interest in studying how social engagement has affected the success and sense of belonging of first-generation college students.

I conducted the study at Francis College (a pseudonym). Francis College was my employer at the time of the study, and my interest in the success of the students enrolled there informed my decision to use Francis College as the site of my research. I had worked for Francis College and completed my master's degree there. As an alumna and employee, I was invested in the success of the college and its students. I cared about the financial well-being and reputation of the college.

Graduation rates were a publicly reported statistic, and the college was actively interested in cultivating a solid graduation rate. Additionally, the cost of college rose in recent years, and the number of students leaving college with debt and no degree had become an issue debated in public and by politicians. High costs and low graduation rates presented Francis College, and other colleges like it, with an ethical dilemma they needed to solve. Leaders at Francis College, myself included, understood that a strong graduation rate could improve the college's reputation and better position the college to attract new students. Higher enrollment numbers increased revenue that college leaders could use to offer additional student success programming. Therefore, when I chose to conduct my study at Francis College, I understood that increasing the graduation rates of first-generation students would positively impact the finances and reputation of the college.

about which I cared. Also, it would mean that more of the students I was working to support could be successful.

I was invested in Francis' students and wanted to find ways to help them succeed. When I worked in the Office of Alumnae Engagement at Francis College, I often spoke to graduates who expressed how being a first-generation college student made their college journey different from their continuing-generation peers. I also taught a course at the college and frequently heard first-generation college students express a lack of involvement and sense of belonging. While conducting this research study, I took a role in the Office of Academic Affairs. I became directly involved in crafting academic programs that would graduate all demographics of students, including adult students and first-generation college students. I cared deeply about these students and the alumnae and knew my research would benefit students like them.

Being an employee of Francis College at the time of conducting this research allowed me direct access to participants. I requested a list of students from the Office of Institutional Research immediately after receiving approval from the Francis College internal institutional review board. I was also able to email the students participants from my work email address, which may have helped with trust and email open rates. It also allowed me access to campus staff influencers who could share my survey directly with students and help me recruit participants for my interviews. This kind of direct access to students did, however, require me to be sure that students knew I had a role at the college outside of being a researcher. I needed to inform them clearly that I could not require them to answer any questions or answer in a certain way because of my connection to the

college. I included language about my role as an employee and a student researcher in all participant recruitment materials.

I approached this explanatory sequential mixed methods research study with a pragmatic worldview. Many past studies focused on first-generation college students, a portion of the studies quantitative, aimed at uncovering the unique characteristics of first-generation college students or finding relationships between various first-generation college student characteristics and outcomes (e.g., Rosales, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013). There have also been many qualitative studies done to describe the experiences of first-generation college students (e.g., Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Jehangir, 2010). A pragmatic approach allowed me to combine quantitative and qualitative methods to robustly approach the hypothesis and research questions. My worldview aligned best with the explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods best suited my needs as a researcher. The use of explanatory sequential as the research design allowed me to explain the quantitative results further with qualitative research. In the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, researchers often started with a postpositivist worldview for the quantitative portion of their research. They then moved to a constructivist worldview as they entered the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The pragmatic approach allowed me to combine these worldviews and approach the work with the belief that it was appropriate to apply what worked best to each portion of the research as it changed. The issue of first-generation college student persistence did not have a clear answer. Therefore, it was best to work with a pragmatic worldview to consider multiple approaches and utilize objective and subjective knowledge (Creswell &

Plano Clark, 2018). Because no one solution would reduce college dropout rates among first-generation college students, it was essential to be flexible, creative, and approach the subject from multiple perspectives.

Theoretical Framework Application

The theoretical framework I used was three-pronged. No one theory encompassed my need to consider first-generation college students as a sub-group of college students, define social engagement and success, and define sense of belonging. Therefore, I used three different frameworks, each serving a specific purpose. I described the application of each framework in this section and in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Theoretical Framework Applied to Methodology

Theory	Method	Theme	Sub-Themes
Ishitani (2003)	quan	n/a	n/a
Tinto (1975)	quan and QUAL	Social Integration (Success)	Social Communication Friendship Support Faculty Support Collective Affirmation
Strayhorn (2019)	QUAL	Sense of Belonging	Connectedness Cared About Respected Accepted
supported by Noddings (2012)	QUAL	Caring	Thinking Listening Creating a Climate of Care

I grounded my study in Ishitani's (2003) work, which called for the study of first-generation college students as a group separate from their continuing-generation peers. Ishitani (2003) revealed that first-generation college students dropped out of college at a higher rate than their continuing-generation peers even when controlling for other potentially relevant variables. Therefore, all student participants in this research study, the quantitative and qualitative portions, were first-generation college students. Basing the study in Ishitani's (2003) work allowed me to assert that the findings were relevant to first-generation college students as a unique demographic of students whose needs differed from others. This theory formed the foundation for the quantitative research because it allowed me to explore the kinds of social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students engage in without considering data from the continuing-generation students at the same college.

I built my research on student success in the work of Tinto (1975). Tinto's (1975) work concluded that students' successes were related to their social integration and academic commitment. Tinto (1975) used the term "social integration" to describe students' commitment to graduating from their selected institution because of their social connection to the school. Knowing that student success was affected by social engagement, in this research study I examined how successful students engaged socially at their institution and how they felt this engagement impacted their success. Tinto (1975) stated that students who experienced social integration were more likely to remain enrolled and graduate. Therefore, students who experienced social integration were more likely to be successful. The theory informed the decision to conduct interviews of socially engaged first-generation college students to explore the themes of social communication,

friendship support, faculty support, and collective affirmation, which Tinto's (1975) work outlined. Tinto (1975) had done qualitative work proving that there was a connection between success and engagement. Tinto's (1975) theory allowed me to ground my qualitative and mixed methods work in his approach to explore how successful first-generation college students felt their social engagement impacted their success.

The definition of student sense of belonging used by Strayhorn (2019) and the theory of care relations discussed by Noddings (2012) were the foundations for how I explored sense of belonging in successful first-generation college students. Social engagement developed the students' senses of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Therefore, I designed the research to examine how first-generation college students felt their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging. I collected the data in interviews of successful first-generation college students. I analyzed it using Strayhorn's (2019) definition of college students' senses of belonging as well as Noddings's (2012) description of what the carer and cared-for relationship required. The themes I used to explore a sense of belonging were connectedness, feeling cared about, respected, and accepted (Strayhorn, 2019). Students and the leaders at their college developed the carer and the cared-for relationship through thinking, listening, and creating a climate of care, according to Noddings (2012), so I also used those themes in data analysis. Strayhorn's (2019) work demonstrated that sense of belonging and student engagement were related. Strayhorn's (2019) theory of college students' senses of belonging allowed me to base my qualitative work in his theory and explore how successful first-generation college students felt their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging.

I chose an explanatory sequential mixed methods study design to align with the three-pronged theoretical framework. I decided on a three-pronged theoretical framework to explore first-generation college students' social integration, success, and sense of belonging. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design allowed me to apply the theoretical framework to quantitative data collection and then explain that data further with qualitative follow-up. I needed a mixed methods research design to explore the three-pronged theoretical framework because it called for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research questions. Additionally, it required that the qualitative portion of the research explain the quantitative part. This multi-step approach was needed to get the depth of information necessary to explore the data through the lens of the multi-pronged theoretical framework.

The first research question was quantitative. With it, I wondered what social engagement opportunities in which successful first-generation students engaged. I followed this with a qualitative research question to better understand how have social engagement opportunities in which the participants engaged impacted the participants' senses of belonging. Finally, I queried a mixed methods research question to use qualitative data to explain the quantitative data findings, namely how the social engagement opportunities in which the participants engaged impacted the participants' successes.

The three-pronged theoretical framework informed my data collection process. Table 2.2 below displays how I used the theoretical framework to determine the data collection method. Ishitani's (2003) definition of first-generation college students informed the demographics of the sample. All were first-generation college students.

Isitani's (2003) work also informed the need to collect quantitative data about how college leaders engaged first-generation students socially. Ishitani (2003) stated that first-generation college students have different retention and persistence habits than their continuing-generation peers. Following up with qualitative research allowed me to explain the quantitative data by asking questions about the students' perceptions of the impact of social engagement on their success and sense of belonging. I used Tinto's (1975) theory of social integration to ask students on the survey about their perceptions of how their social engagement impacted their success and I also used it to inform the questions about success asked during the qualitative portion of data collection. I used the work of Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012) to inform my qualitative data collection related to sense of belonging. These components of the theoretical framework each informed a different research question and a portion of the data analysis process. Still, they worked together to capture data related to first-generation college students' social engagement, success, and sense of belonging.

I used the three-pronged theoretical framework in the creation of the data analysis procedures. I used the work of Ishitani (2003) and Tinto (1975) in the quantitative data analysis process to inform who the participants were and gather data about how first-generation college students engaged socially at Francis College. I used the work of Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and Noddings (2012) in the qualitative data analysis process and the mixed methods data analysis process. I used themes from those foundational articles as the themes searched for when I conducted the initial coding. I utilized all portions of the three-pronged theoretical framework in mixed methods data analysis to

explain the quantitative data using the qualitative data. I have described this process further later in this chapter, in the data analysis procedures section.

Table 2.2

Theoretical Framework Application to Research Questions and Data Collection

Theoretical Framework	Research Question	Key Concepts	Data Sources
Ishitani (2003)	RQ1	First-generation college students drop out and stop out of college at a higher rate than their continuing-generation peers (Ishitani, 2003).	quan: Survey
Tinto (1975)	RQ3	Social integration and institution commitment are achieved through peer groups, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty (Tinto, 1975).	quan: survey QUAL: Interviews
Strayhorn (2019) supported by Noddings (2012)	RQ2	College Student sense of belonging is multi-faceted (Strayhorn, 2019). The student is the cared-for and the institution is the carer (Noddings, 2012).	QUAL: Interviews

Research Design and Rationale

I selected an explanatory sequential mixed methods design as the research method for this study. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was the best method to answer research questions that required a design that collected quantitative data first and then followed up with a qualitative explanation for the quantitative results. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design allowed for a deeper examination of first-generation college student social engagement habits. Through this design I could examine if students participated in social engagement opportunities and felt their social engagement impacted their success. The design then

allowed me to go further and determine how the students felt their social engagement impacted their success. Finally, it permitted me to explore how sense of belonging also impacted success and if social engagement impacted sense of belonging. It would not have been possible to understand the connections between social engagement, success, and sense of belonging in the robust manner I desired with another type of research design.

The process used to conduct this explanatory sequential mixed methods study (quan → QUAL) is outlined in Figure 1.1, the research design diagram. I collected and analyzed the quantitative data (quan) first. Then I collected and analyzed the qualitative data (QUAL). I then integrated the quan and QUAL data analyses to follow the requirements of an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

I designed the quantitative portion of the study so that, in the end, I would understand which social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students engaged with and if they believed their social engagement had an impact on their success. I utilized a survey to ask participants to share if they had participated in social engagement opportunities at Francis College, in which, and how often. I also chose a survey to ask students to share their perceptions of how their social engagement impacted their successes. The explanatory sequential mixed methods design was ideal because I could conduct quantitative research as the first step in this design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

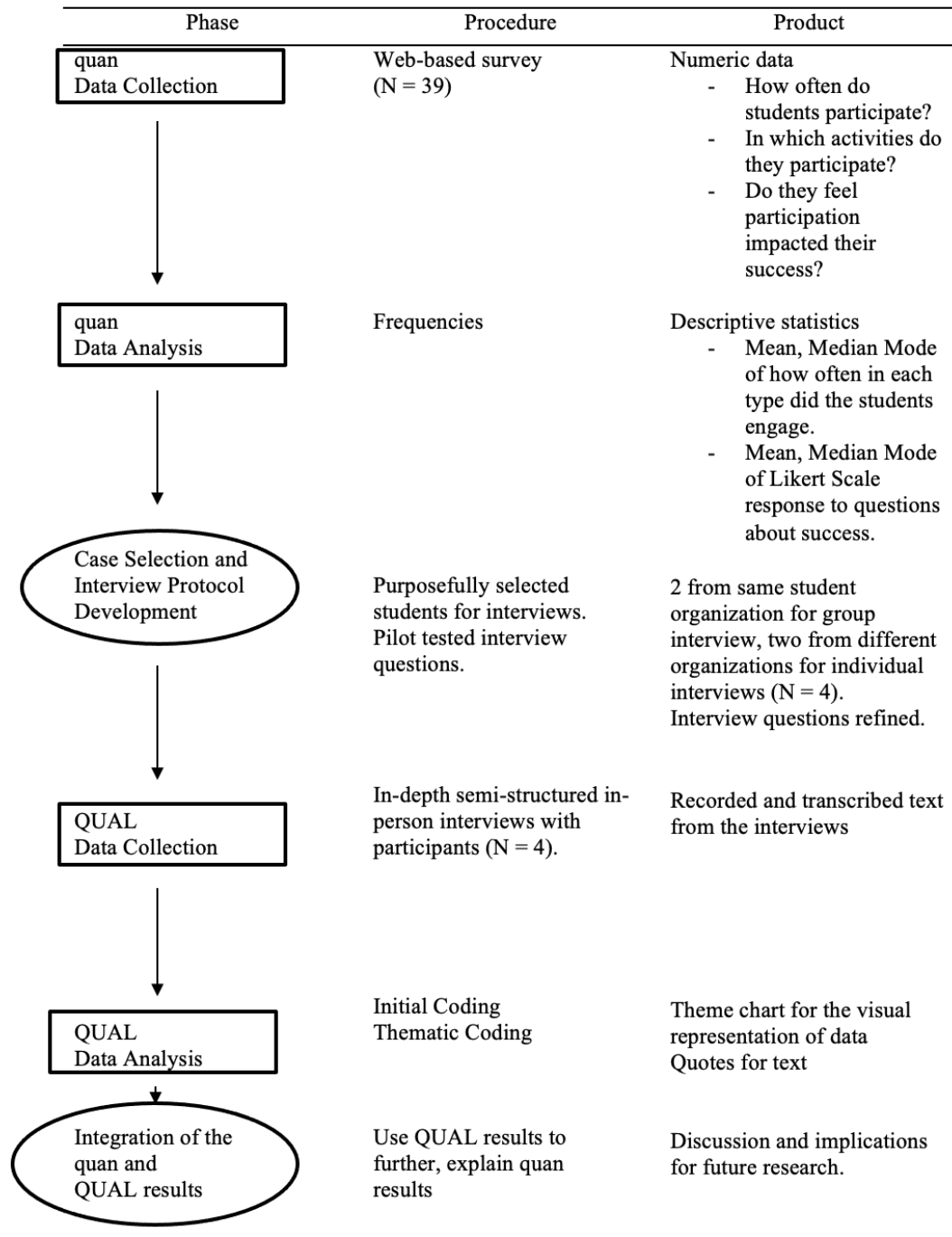


Figure 1.1: Research design diagram

Performing the quantitative portion of the study first provided me with valuable data, informed the qualitative portion of the study by assisting me in purposively selecting the

participants for the interviews, and demonstrated a need to be explained by the qualitative follow-up (Creswell & Poth, 2018). If I did not conduct qualitative follow-up, I could not have described how the students felt their social engagement affected their successes.

In the qualitative part of the study, I explored the impact of social engagement opportunities on successful first-generation college students' successes and senses of belonging. I chose to conduct three full interviews with four total participants. The first was a group interview of two students, and the third and fourth interviews were individual. The four participants' responses provided thick, rich, qualitative data about how their participation in social engagement opportunities impacted their success and sense of belonging. I could not have obtained the information with quantitative methods alone. I utilized the explanatory sequential mixed methods design so that the qualitative data explained the quantitative results further (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative follow-up via the interviews supplied a narrative from each participant, which I analyzed using qualitative and mixed methods data analysis procedures.

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design was the right choice given my data collection and analysis needs. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), explanatory sequential mixed methods was the right design for a researcher who "knows the important variables" and "can return to participants for a second round of qualitative data collection" (p. 78). Because previous scholars had done extensive research on first-generation college students, student success, and student sense of belonging, I had a solid theoretical foundation and knew which data to collect (Ishitani, 2003; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Additionally, because the school where I worked was the study site, access to student participants for qualitative follow-up was possible. Therefore, the explanatory

sequential mixed methods design was the best to answer the research questions and suited my data collection and analysis needs.

Site Selection and Participant Sampling

I selected the site and participants for this study in alignment with the purpose of the study and the research questions. I also chose the location and participants to fit the study's needs supported by the theoretical framework. Also, I recruited the participants to best fit with the explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The following section outlines the site selection and recruitment process.

Site

I conducted my research study at Francis College. Francis College was a small, Catholic, liberal arts, women's college in the Midwest (Francis College, 2020). I selected this school as the site for this research study because of the characteristics of its student population. In 2020 Francis College had an undergraduate population of 1,091 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Of the incoming first-year students, 64% were first-generation college students (Francis College, 2020). The school had a six-year graduation rate that had not been above 50% in recent years. The six-year graduation rate was 45% in 2017, 41% in 2018, 49% in 2019, and 42% in 2020 (Francis College, 2020). The large population of first-generation college students and graduation rates below 50% made increasing first-generation college student graduation rates a priority for Francis College. I knew the college leaders would benefit from learning of the results of my study. Also, Francis College was my employer while I was conducting the research. I selected Francis College as the research site because I knew the staff members I needed to recruit to help me recruit student participants would be accessible. Additionally, after

the study, I intended to present my research to the leaders of Francis College to aid in their attempts to increase the graduation rates of their first-generation college students.

All undergraduate students eligible for this research study were women because Francis College was a women's college. I found no research by other scholars to suggest gender was a confounding factor in first-generation college student success. Ishitani (2003) controlled for gender in his work exploring first-generation student voluntary attrition and concluded that high rates of first-generation student voluntary attrition were a phenomenon regardless of gender. Because previous studies did not find gender a differentiator in first-generation college student success or sense of belonging, I concluded that including male students would not have impacted the study's results.

The racial and ethnic demographics of students at Francis College closely resembled the racial and ethnic demographics of first-generation college students nationwide. Table 2.3 displays the demographic make-up of all Francis College students, the participants in this study, and first-generation college students in the United States (Francis College, 2019; RTI International, 2019). Ishitani (2003) controlled for racial and ethnic differences like he did gender. He concluded that first-generation college students graduated at a lower rate than continuing generation students regardless of race. However, many scholars have incorporated race and ethnicity into their first-generation college student work (e.g., Doan, 2015; Duenas & Gloria, 2020; Martinez, 2020; Ramos, 2019; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, I determined it was essential to select a site that offered a racially diverse and ethnically representative student population.

Table 2.3

Francis College and National First-Generation Student Demographics

Population	Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
United States (RTI International, 2019)	White	46%
	Black/African American	18%
	Hispanic/Latinx/a/o	25%
	Asian	6%
	American Indian/Alaska Native	1%
	Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	.5%
Francis College (Francis College, 2019)	White	51%
	Black or African American	14%
	Hispanic or Latino	25%
	Asian	4%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Participants	White	46%
	Black or African American	13%
	Hispanic or Latino	38%
	Asian	3%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	n/a
	Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	n/a

Participants

I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. Therefore, I needed quantitative and qualitative participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I selected these two participant groups from the same population of successful first-generation college students at Francis College. I sent the quantitative data collection instrument to all members of the sample population. I chose the qualitative participants from those who completed the survey. I have outlined the specific participant selection methods for each phase of the study in this section.

Quantitative participant selection. I selected the participants for the quantitative portion of the study from the population of students enrolled at Francis College. The study explored the experiences of first-generation college students, so all participants

selected met the criteria of having no parents who graduated from college (Ishitani, 2003). I selected this purposeful sample because I designed the study to explore first-generation college students' social engagement and success.

After ensuring all participants were first-generation college students, I needed to ensure they could comment on social engagement, success, and sense of belonging. I defined success in the literature review as persistence from one semester to the next and being on track to graduate in four to six years. Therefore, I selected participants who had completed at least fifty-four credits at Francis College without stopping or dropping out. Selecting students with fifty-four or more credits who had not dropped out or stopped out meant selecting students that were on track to graduate in four to six years and had been persistent from one semester to the next. Additionally, because they needed to complete at least 54 credits at Francis College, all students in the study had been enrolled for at least three semesters in a row and had access to the social engagement opportunities on campus and time to develop a sense of belonging.

The criteria of first-generation college students who had completed at least 54 credits at Francis College resulted in 213 students ($N = 213$) eligible to participate in the survey. I needed this large sample size to ensure participation would be high enough to result in statistical significance. According to Field (2018), at least thirty participants must complete a survey for the data analysis to produce statistical significance. Thirty-nine ($n = 39$) students completed the survey for this study. They were all full-time undergraduate students when they completed the survey, and they had completed an average of 88.3 credits, which was considered a junior standing at Francis College.

I recruited students to participate in the study via emails sent directly to their Francis College email address. I sent the emails to students directly from my Francis College email. I also recruited another staff member of Francis College, the Administrative Director of the Center for Academic Excellence, to send one email on my behalf to elicit more responses. Table 2.4 outlines the recruitment timeline for the quantitative participants.

Table 2.4

QUAN: Participant Recruitment Timeline

Date	Action	Result
April 30, 2021	Recruitment email sent to students set to graduate as pilot N = 63	n = 5 Survey adjusted based on responses
May 11, 2021	Recruitment email sent to all eligible students N = 213	n = 12
June 7, 2021	Reminder email sent to all students who had not yet responded N = 201	n = 1
July 16, 2021	Ask Administrative Director of Center for Academic Excellence to send to students N = 50	n = 5
August 18, 2021	Final recruitment email sent	n = 28
September 30, 2021	Data Cleaning	n = 39

Qualitative participant selection. The qualitative part of the study was a multiple case study that included four participants. I conducted a multiple case study to analyze each participant's responses individually and compare responses to uncover shared themes (Yin, 2018). I collected the qualitative data via three total interviews, one group interview, and two individuals. I designed the data collection and analysis procedures of this study based on the theories of Ishitani (2003), Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and

Noddings (2012) to ensure that my research was grounded in existing theory (Yin 2018).

I conducted purposeful sampling to ensure the participants met essential criteria that allowed them to discuss being a first-generation college student, social engagement, success as defined in the literature review, and their sense of belonging.

I selected four students for this part of the study ($N = 4$). I used purposive sampling to select the participants from the larger population that responded to the survey ($N = 39$). I have displayed the demographics of the four participants in Table 2.5. I selected the students from the quantitative population because they needed to meet the same criteria: first-generation college students who had completed at least fifty-four credits at Francis College without stopping out. Using the same population of participants in the quantitative and qualitative portions was essential to this explanatory sequential mixed methods study because I designed the qualitative piece to explain further the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Table 2.5

QUAL: Survey Participant Information

Student	Race/Ethnicity	Credits Completed
1) Luna	Hispanic	94
2) Sol	Hispanic	76
3) Elsa	White	58
4) Rose	White	62

I used the quantitative data to select the qualitative participants because that ensured the participants had participated in the quantitative portion of the study and met all the necessary criteria (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I selected the specific four

participants for either a group interview or individual interviews. Luna and Sol were selected for a group interview because they had participated in the same student organization. Selecting students who had taken part in the same social engagement opportunity ensured that the participants had interacted before, which allowed them to feel comfortable speaking to the group. They were able to draw from a collective experience and add insights to the other participants' responses. I interviewed Rose and Elsa individually because they had also participated in a student organization, but not the same organization as any of the other selected participants. The differences in how the students engaged allowed me to gather the individual perspectives of students who chose to participate in a student organization separate from the experiences or opinions of their peers.

Purposefully selecting students allowed me to feel confident that their responses to questions about the social engagement opportunity, success, and sense of belonging would be based on their personal experiences and would therefore be credible (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I recruited the students who participated in the interviews by emailing their Francis College email address from my Francis College email address. Table 2.6 displays the interview recruitment timeline.

Table 2.6

QUAL: Participant Recruitment Timeline

Date	Action	Result
September 1, 2021	Recruitment email sent to purposefully selected students $N = 7$	Responses from 5 students confirming. 3 for group interviews, 2 individuals
September 11, 2021	Group and individual interviews conducted	$N = 4$

Data Collection Procedures

I collected data for this explanatory sequential mixed methods study in two phases aligned with the explanatory sequential mixed methods design I selected. The first was quantitative data collection, and the second was qualitative data collection. I did not collect the data simultaneously because I used the qualitative data as the explanatory follow-up to the quantitative data and used the quantitative data to inform the qualitative sampling per the explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This section first outlines the quantitative data collection I conducted and how I used the survey I developed to collect the quantitative data needed. Then, this section describes the interviews I conducted, detailing how I collected the qualitative data I used to explain the quantitative data.

Quantitative Data Collection

Phase one of the data collection process was quantitative. I designed phase one to answer RQ1. I intended the quantitative portion of the study to explore the types of social engagement opportunities the successful first-generation college students engaged in and to ask the students quantitatively if they felt their social engagement impacted their decision to remain enrolled and persist from one semester to the next. I did this by creating, pilot testing, and then administering a survey. The questions asked are in Appendix C, and a chart explaining how each question mapped to a data collection is in Appendix E.

I used the questions to ask about twelve different types of social engagement opportunities. These twelve opportunities were identified by examining the offerings of the Francis College Office of Student Activities (Francis College, 2021). There were

seven short answer questions, two multiple-choice questions, one checkbox to confirm they consented to me collecting and using their data, and twenty-four Likert scale questions. Each question mapped to a research requirement such as consent, a research question, or a component of the theoretical framework.

To collect data, I requested participant information from the Francis College Office of the Registrar. I submitted a formal request. In this submission, I included Internal Review Board approval from Francis College. I asked the registrar to provide me with a list of all first-generation college students who had earned at least fifty-four credits at Francis College without stopping out or dropping out. The data I requested include the first names, last names, email addresses, start dates, expected graduation dates, ethnicity, and the number of credits earned for each eligible student. I stored the data in SPSS v5. I removed all identifying information from this problem of practice document and before entering data into SPSS to ensure student anonymity.

For my quantitative data collection procedure, I built a survey that had 34 questions. I distributed the survey using Google Forms, a web-based survey tool. I collected the students' email addresses to identify which answers belonged to which student. I did not place identifying information into SPSS v5 but instead assigned each response an identification number. I pilot tested the survey by having senior students who were graduating in the spring, therefore not eligible to be a part of the interviews in the fall, take the draft survey and provide feedback. I then adjusted the survey according to their input and analysis of the results. In response to their feedback, I changed the survey, so not all questions were required because they could not answer some questions depending on their level of engagement. Additionally, I added the following note before

the Likert scale questions to clarify: The following questions require you to consider how your social engagement has impacted your success at Francis College. Please select one of the social engagement opportunities (long-term or short-term) in which you have participated for each set of questions below. I have put the final survey in Appendix C.

Pilot testing was an essential component of survey development, as it added to the instrument's internal validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). No previously developed instrument would have provided the data I needed to conduct my study. Because I had to create the instrument, I needed to pilot test to establish validity. After I developed the survey, I pilot tested and adjusted it. Then, I emailed it to all potentially eligible participants ($N = 213$). I needed to use a digital data collection tool because students were not allowed on campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I chose to use Google Forms because of the ease of use for the students, the ability to lock the form so only I had access to the data, and the guarantee that each participant could only submit one response because of an email capture checkpoint.

After collecting quantitative data, I analyzed it and selected participants for the qualitative follow-up. I needed to collect the data in this order to adhere to the explanatory sequential mixed methods study design. Through the survey, I collected data to answer RQ1 and began to explore RQ3.

Qualitative Data Collection

Phase two of data collection was qualitative. I collected and analyzed the quantitative data. Then I used the quantitative data to select participants for the qualitative portion of the study based on the criteria outlined in the site selection and sampling section. Additionally, I developed an interview protocol for the interviews and

pilot tested the interview protocol. I conducted this pilot testing to enhance the credibility of the interview protocol (Yin, 2018). I have listed the final interview protocol in Appendix D.

The qualitative portion of the study explored how participating in social engagement opportunities impacted the successful first-generation college students' success and sense of belonging. I conducted three interviews with four ($N = 4$) students who participated in student organizations. I decided to conduct a group interview of two students who engaged in the same activity to allow me and the students to focus on one unique shared experience and how it affected their success sense of belonging. I conducted two individual interviews to capture the unique experiences of those students since they had not taken part in the same student organizations as the other interview participants.

I used a semi-structured interview of all participants as my interview method. I used this interview protocol to create confirmability and ensure the qualitative portion of this study could be replicated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I modified the semi-structured method to fit the needs of the group interview. I used the group interview method to “moderate a discussion” about the students’ experiences that I designed to “deliberately surface the views of each person in the group” (Yin, 2018, p. 120). The semi-structured interview design allowed me to ask specific questions about success and sense of belonging without limiting myself to an overly rigid structure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This structure meant I asked prepared questions related to the research questions and asked follow-up questions that I had not planned when necessary to get more information

from the participants related to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured model allowed for robust conversation.

I held the group interview and the individual interviews via Zoom. I conducted the interviews in Zoom because it was impossible to meet in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the Zoom transcription feature allowed me to save time transcribing the interviews before data analysis.

I asked interview questions designed to help me answer RQ2 and RQ3. I have placed the full interview protocol in Appendix D, and a table showing how each question mapped to the theoretical framework and a research question is in Appendix F.

The data collection processes I outlined in this section provided me with the data I needed to explore all three of my research questions. I crafted my data collection procedures specifically to meet the needs of my study, and they also helped create my data analysis procedures. The intentional design also affected the validity of my study, and the detailed description I provided in this section will assist anyone who wishes to replicate it.

Data Analysis Procedures

In this explanatory sequential mixed methods study, I analyzed the quantitative data first, followed by the qualitative data. I then conducted mixed methods data analysis. I analyzed the quantitative data first to examine RQ1. I also analyzed the quantitative data first to aid me in selecting the right participants for the interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The purpose of conducting an explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to explain the quantitative data with qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), so I analyzed the qualitative data to address RQ2. Finally, I integrated the quantitative

and qualitative data to answer RQ3. I outlined the process of these steps of analysis in the following sections.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Before I began quantitative data analysis, I engaged in data cleaning. I entered all data in SPSS v5. Before doing so, I exported all data from the Google Form to Microsoft Excel. I removed duplicate data and the data from the participants who had taken the pilot survey. I created the Google Form to require answers to questions essential to the data collection process, so I did not have missing essential data. I cleared the cells where I was missing non-essential data. I only required the participants to answer the questions about social integration once. If they chose not to answer a second time, that data was missing but not essential.

In the first step of data analysis, I examined the descriptive statistics. I put the data into SPSS v5 and used the frequencies test. The software provided me with the mean, median, mode, kurtosis, and skew of that data set.

I used descriptive statistics to answer RQ1 and the quantitative portion of RQ3. I used the first set of descriptive statistics to determine which social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students participated in and the frequency at which they participated in each opportunity. Then, I used the second set of descriptive statistics to explore how the participants felt their social engagement opportunities contributed to their successes. I used this data in the integration of quantitative (quan) and qualitative (QUAL) data analysis. I also used descriptive statistics to inform which students to invite to be participants in the interviews. Table 2.7 displays how the descriptive statistics related to the research questions.

Table 2.7

QUAN: Descriptive Statistics

Question	Variables	Results
RQ1	(1) Types of Social Engagement Opportunities offered at Francis College (12 Identified) (2) Number of times students participated per semester	Total N, Mean, Median, Mode, Standard Deviation
RQ3	Likert Scale responses to questions about social integration	Total N, Mean, Median, Mode, Standard Deviation

For RQ1, each participant responded to the question: How many times on average per semester do you participate in the following social engagement opportunities? I chose the social engagement opportunities asked about because the Francis College Office of Student Activities had offered them during the previous academic year. The participants responded to the question with a numerical answer that they selected from the multiple-choice options provided. They could choose from never/not applicable, 1 to 2, 3 to 4, 5 to 6, 7 to 8, or 9+. I applied the following code to the selections to aid in calculating the descriptive statistics: not applicable = 0, 1 to 2 = 1, 3 to 4 = 2, 5 to 6 = 3, 7 to 8 = 4, and 9+ = 5.

For RQ3, I asked each student to consider two separate social engagement opportunities in which they chose to engage and answer the same set of questions twice, once about each selected type of social engagement. For each question, I asked that participant to use a Likert Scale of one to five with five being strongly agreed, four being agreed, three being neutral, two being disagreed, and one being strongly disagreed. Each question started with “participating in this activity” to ensure I asked the students about their participation rather than their general experiences at Francis College. Asking each

student to answer the same question twice but about different social engagement opportunities increased the number of responses to 72 ($N = 72$) because 6 participants ($n = 6$) chose only to answer the question set one time about one social engagement opportunity.

After running the descriptive statistics, I provided an analysis of the results. I used the quantitative results to answer RQ1 and supply the quantitative data necessary to do a mixed methods analysis for RQ3. I conducted this analysis in Chapter Three.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I conducted the qualitative data analysis second. I first conducted qualitative data analysis to answer RQ2 and then supplied the qualitative data analysis necessary to conduct mixed methods data analysis to answer RQ3. I chose to conduct qualitative data analysis as a multiple case study to explore each case individually and compare them (Yin, 2018). I analyzed the results of the group interview together and the results of the individual interviews individually.

Table 2.8 below displays how the theoretical framework informed my qualitative data analysis. Tinto (1975) outlined the themes of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and collective affirmation as characteristics developed in successful students who were socially engaged and institutionally committed. Therefore, I used the themes of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and collective affirmation to analyze the interview data. Strayhorn (2019) described the themes of connectedness, feeling cared about, respected, and accepted as the characteristics of college students' senses of belonging, so I used those themes to analyze the qualitative data from the interviews. Additionally, I used the themes of thinking,

listening, and developing a climate of care that came from Noddings (2012) to analyze further data related to what it meant to feel cared about.

Table 2.8

Theoretical Framework Application to Qualitative Data Analysis

Theoretical Framework	Research Question	Key Concepts	Themes	Sub-Themes
Tinto (1975)	RQ3	Social integration and institution commitment are achieved through peer groups, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty (Tinto, 1975).	Social integration fosters success	Social Communication Friendship Support Faculty Support Collective Affirmation
Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012)	RQ2	College Student sense of belonging is multi-faceted (Strayhorn, 2019). The student is the cared-for and the institution is the carer (Noddings, 2012).	Sense of Belonging	Connectedness Cared About <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thinking - Listening - Developing a climate of care Respected Accepted

In the first phase of my data analysis procedure, I organized the data. I began by transcribing each individual interview and then the group interview, and I sorted the responses by question and individual responses. I then read through each transcript to begin to understand the participants' responses and make available connections.

The next phase was memoing. Memoing required me to review the transcription of the interviews and memo the emergent themes. I conducted memoing independent of the theoretical framework to get an unbiased sense of the participants' answers. I noted memos by hand in the margins of the printed transcriptions. I then created a document in which I sorted the responses first by interview, then by memo.

After memoing, I coded the data. I used the themes identified in the theoretical framework. I reviewed the individual and group interview transcripts grouped by question and by participant to identify quotes in which students expressed ideas related to the relevant themes. I first analyzed the data for themes related to success and the work of Tinto (1975). I then analyzed the data for themes related to sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and care (Noddings, 2012). Using the memoing word document I created, I created an additional Microsoft Word document in which I organized the responses by theme.

Next, I conducted a second in-depth round of thematic coding called pattern matching. I correlated themes from the interview data with the themes grounded in the theoretical framework in this pattern matching. I identified themes in the participant's responses. According to Yin (2018), "if the empirical and predicted patterns appear to be similar, the results can help a case study to strengthen its internal validity" (p. 175). Therefore, comparing the students' answers to the theoretical foundation's themes added strength to the analysis. I pulled quotes from the transcripts to aid in the interpretation of the data. I incorporated these quotes into the written discussion of the results for the individual interviews and group interview. I also created tables for the group interview. I followed the data analysis process to thoroughly analyze the thick, rich, and descriptive data collected from the individual and group interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I created one table for RQ2 and one table for RQ3 in which I identified quotes from the group interview participants that correlated to each theme.

I followed the data analysis process outlined in this section to ensure that I could integrate the qualitative data with the quantitative data, as was the aim of conducting an

explanatory sequential mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I analyzed the quantitative data first, then the qualitative data. This process helped me to answer RQ1 using quantitative data, then RQ2 using qualitative data. Next, I will explain integrating the data that I used to conduct my mixed methods analysis and answer RQ3.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis

The final phase in data analysis for this study was the integration of quantitative and qualitative results. Integrating the results was essential in the explanatory sequential mixed methods study because I used the qualitative data to directly explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I used mixed methods data analysis to answer RQ3. I chose to apply cross-case analysis to examine each student's responses to the survey and interview questions (Yin, 2018). I designed the data collected in the qualitative phase to follow up on and provide a "strong explanation of specific results from the initial quantitative phase" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 234). I used the cross-case analysis method to analyze each participant's responses individually and compare them to one another to conduct a robust analysis of the data (Yin, 2018).

To conduct this data analysis, I looked at data provided by each of the individual participants. I analyzed how each of the four interview participants had responded to the survey and the interview questions. I integrated the quantitative and qualitative data analysis by directly linking their survey responses to their interview responses.

I designed my explanatory sequential mixed methods study to answer my three research questions. One question was quantitative, one qualitative, and one was mixed methods. The design of the study incorporated the three-pronged theoretical framework that consisted of the work of Ishitani (2003), Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and

Noddings (2012). I collected and analyzed data according to the procedures outlined in this chapter. I have described the results of the data collection and analysis in Chapter Three of this document.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

I founded the study outlined in this chapter on the three-pronged theoretical framework that applied the work of Ishitani (2003), Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and Noddings (2012). Earlier scholars have peer-reviewed the work used to form my theoretical framework, and I discussed many articles that cited them in the literature review. I grounded this study's data collection and analysis procedures in the three-pronged theoretical framework to add credibility to the process. Using the definitions of success and sense of belonging reported by Tinto (1975) and Strayhorn (2019), I have placed the results of this study in the continued scholarly dialogue around first-generation college students, success, and sense of belonging.

I created a survey for this study. There were no existing instruments that addressed the research questions I asked in the manner I needed them addressed. To add validity to the survey, I did conduct a pilot of the survey and adjusted based on participant feedback and responses. The results of this study are not generalizable beyond the sample population that participated in this study.

I conducted interviews as the qualitative data collection instruments for this study. The results of this part of the study are not generalizable beyond the sample population of four who participated in the interviews. I conducted member checking to bolster the study's validity by asking two participants to review and confirm that I represented what they said in the interviews accurately.

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design was a well-established research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design added reliability to the study because any researchers who wished to recreate it would be able to do so using the step-by-step descriptions outlined in this chapter. I utilized triangulation of the quantitative data and qualitative data to answer the mixed methods research questions. Triangulation is a requirement of the explanatory sequential mixed methods design. I did this to ensure I adhered to the established and tested procedures of an explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

Ethical Considerations

Student privacy and data security were essential ethical considerations. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) governed whom school leaders could share student data with and for what purposes. To ensure compliance with FERPA, I obtained permission to gather student data from the research site (Francis College) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Francis College. Baylor University informed me that IRB approval from Francis College was sufficient, and I did not need additional IRB approval from Baylor University's IRB. To further ensure student privacy, I removed all names and other identifying factors of students from the study. When the study referenced student names, they were aliases selected by the students. I stored all student data on a separate, password-protected hard drive, and I never entered the students' real identities or identifiers into SPSS.

My position as an employee of Francis College was an important ethical consideration. I made the student participants of the study aware of my role at the college. I informed them that participation in any aspect of the study was not mandatory

and that they could leave the study at any time. I presented each student with information about the study, its purpose, and the students' ability to have their information withdrawn from the study at any time before they participated in the survey and again before each interview. Each participant confirmed that they had read and agreed to the consent form before completing the survey and participating in the interviews. I have provided a copy of the privacy information provided to the students and the release form in Appendix A.

I incentivized students to participate in the survey to recruit more participants. I entered all students who completed the surveys into a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card to a restaurant or store of their choosing. I purchased the gift card and awarded it to a student whom I randomly selected. I also gave each interview participant a \$10 Visa gift card to thank them for their time. The students were aware that they would be receiving the gift card, so I did use it as an incentive to participate.

First-generation college students were a population of students at a higher risk of dropping out of college than their peers. I demonstrated that first-generation college students had a higher risk of dropping out of college in the problem statement in the introduction and the literature review. Because I was dealing with a population that was vulnerable to drop out, like first-generation college students, I needed to consider the emotional impact questions about college experience could have had on the students. To address this ethical consideration, I allowed students to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, I made sure the students were aware of the mental health resources offered by Francis College.

Limitations and Delimitations

I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to conduct this study. I selected this design to align with the stated research questions and the purpose of the study. Choosing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design meant that I did not explore research questions that were purely quantitative or qualitative to focus on questions that I could best serve by the framework of mixed methods.

I chose to use a survey that I wrote as the quantitative instrument for this study. I decided to write the survey to ensure that I could capture the data I needed to capture to answer my research questions. There was not a previously developed and tested instrument that met these needs. In choosing to create my instrument, I could not use an instrument that another researcher had previously determined to be valid and reliable. To add validity and reliability, I used a pilot survey.

I conducted a group interview and two individual interviews as the qualitative data collection procedures for this study. Deciding to do a group interview meant I could not complete an entire narrative of each participant's individual experiences. I chose to conduct a group interview so the student participants could discuss collective experiences in their responses. I also chose to do individual interviews to capture the individual experiences of some participants, even though I could not be capturing individual interview data for all students. I used member checking to add validity to the interview data.

There existed COVID-19 pandemic-imposed limitations on the study. The level of social engagement typically offered by Francis College had not returned to its pre-pandemic state by the time I conducted the study. Due to social distancing requirements, the students had not had the opportunity to engage in in-person social engagement

opportunities in the fall semester of 2020 or the spring semester of 2021. Francis College leaders had canceled in-person social programs, but many had continued virtually. As such, their recent experiences with social engagement opportunities were different than they likely would have been following and during an in-person semester. I had participants complete the survey and the interviews online due to the requirement of social distance for the safety of the students and research. The response rate to the survey was lower than anticipated. The low response rate may have been due to the additional stress students felt due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and personal concerns. Also, I was not able to provide the survey in person to student groups as planned.

Francis College, the location of the study, was a women's college located in the Midwest. All participants in this study were women as a result of this limitation. I found no research to suggest that gender was a known factor that differentiated the persistence of first-generation students. I demonstrated that there was no evidence that gender would influence the results of my study in the site and participant sampling section.

Additionally, all students were attending a small, Catholic, liberal arts college in the Midwest, and therefore students at other types of schools were not represented. A multiple case study incorporating successful first-generation college students from different schools might have been beneficial if I had more time and resources. In my literature review, I included a section on first-generation college student performance by institution size and time to demonstrate that first-generation college student success and sense of belonging were relevant issues to small, private, not-for-profit colleges like Francis College.

I chose to focus this study on successful first-generation college students, and I defined success in the literature review as students who were on track to graduate in four to six years and who had not stopped or dropped out at any point. I could not explore how social engagement impacted unsuccessful students by choosing this population, but I noted that this population warranted attention in a future study. Because of the limitations outlined in this section, the study is not generalizable beyond the participants.

Conclusion

The explanatory sequential mixed methods study outlined in this chapter examined the social engagement habits of successful first-generation college students and the importance of social engagement to success and sense of belonging. Knowing that first-generation college students were more likely than continuing-generation students to drop out of college and never return, it was imperative to conduct a study to uncover ways to decrease that proven graduation rate gap.

The study will assist college leadership in understanding what social engagement opportunities successful first-generation college students participate in, so they can ensure essential social engagement opportunities are available for their students. It will also help the college leaders see the connections between social engagement, student success, and sense of belonging to ensure first-generation college students feel supported in their social engagement participation. If college leaders can increase the sense of belonging, social engagement, and institutional commitment of first-generation college students, their persistence and graduation rates will also increase.

I used the explanatory sequential mixed methods design to conduct this study. Because I used the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, I examined the

research questions using quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The survey provided data about the social engagement habits of successful first-generation college students and their perception of their engagement's impact on their success. The interviews allowed me to explain the quantitative results with thick, rich, descriptive data about how success and sense of belonging are impacted by the social engagement of successful first-generation college students. To that end, the following chapter examines the results and discusses the implications of the research findings.

CHAPTER THREE

Results and Implications

Introduction

I designed the study described in Chapter Two to explore how first-generation college students engaged socially at Francis College in order to better understand how their social engagement impacted their success and sense of belonging. With the study, I explored three research questions. I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design and applied the three-pronged theoretical framework I outlined in Chapter One.

I used the explanatory sequential mixed methods design to conduct this study. I organized this chapter to address each aspect of the study design and my research questions. First, I analyzed the quantitative data to address RQ1. Next, I analyzed the qualitative follow-up data to address RQ2. Finally, I conducted a mixed methods analysis of the quantitative data and qualitative data. The mixed methods analysis I conducted addressed RQ3.

First, I explored RQ 1, which asked: what are the social engagement opportunities in which first-generation college students have engaged? I explored this question with quantitative data collection and analysis. In this chapter, I have analyzed descriptive statistics related to the participants' social engagement and I describe the social engagement opportunities first-generation college students stated they engaged in to answer the first research question.

Second, I investigated the second research question (RQ2) regarding how social engagement impacted the students' sense of belonging. I coded the qualitative data

collected as a part of the interviews. In this chapter I provide a case study analysis of the data.

Finally, I examined RQ3. It asked: how does social engagement affect the participants' success? I studied this question both quantitatively and qualitatively. I analyzed the descriptive statistics of the data collected from the survey that asked how students felt their social engagement impacted their success. Then I investigated the results further with qualitative follow-up by coding the responses to questions asked in a group interview of selected participants and one-on-one interviews with additional participants. Once I had completed that step, I conducted a cross-case analysis to explore further how each student participant responded to the survey and explained their responses with qualitative data.

The data analysis I conducted in this chapter revealed that the participants in the study did engage socially on campus and felt that their social engagement affected their success. The qualitative data further described how the first-generation college student participants felt their social engagement affected their successes and impacted their senses of belonging. The data analysis revealed that the participants had many reasons for taking part in social engagement opportunities on their campus. I connected their responses to questions about social engagement to many of the aspects of success described by Tinto (1975). I also connected their responses to questions about social engagement to the elements of sense of belonging described by Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012). Overall, the results of the data analysis that I examined in this chapter suggest that the first-generation college student participants engaged in a myriad of types

of social engagement opportunities on campus and that their engagement had fostered their social integration and senses of belonging.

Assumption Checking and Data Cleaning

The first step in the data analysis process was to clean the quantitative data that I collected. I collected the data via a digital survey using a Google Form I created. The survey instrument used is in Appendix C. Initially, 46 participants completed the survey. After data cleaning, the results of 39 participants remained, and I analyzed those results in this study ($n = 39$). I removed one participant from the study. She indicated that her parents had received a bachelor's degree, making her ineligible to participate because she did not qualify as a first-generation college student by my previously established definition. I removed six participants because they had completed the pilot version of the survey and were therefore not eligible to participate.

The next step was to prepare the data for analysis. I pulled the data from the Google Form and added it to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Once in Excel, I assigned each participant a unique number for identification. Then, I assigned each question a code and checked each cell for errors. I removed "n/a" or "not applicable" answers for open-ended response questions and changed them to blank so I would not consider them in my analysis. I computed the Likert scale values to a numerical scale of one to five, one representing strongly disagree and five representing strongly agree. I then entered the data into SPSS (v26) and analyzed the data according to the protocol outlined in Chapter Two. I used descriptive statistics to analyze my quantitative findings. Therefore, I checked for normality of the distribution of the data as part of my analysis. I have described that analysis and the results in the next section.

Quantitative Data Findings

I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, so I analyzed the quantitative data first (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative research question I asked was: what are the social engagement opportunities in which successful first-generation college students have engaged? I examined the descriptive statistics generated from the participants' answers to the survey to answer the research question. First, I calculated the percentage of participants who reported participating in a social engagement opportunity on campus. Second, I explored the number of times participants reported engaging in specific types of social engagement opportunities per semester. The results of this analysis revealed that most participants had engaged in social engagement opportunities on campus, but the number of times in which they participated varied by type of social engagement opportunity.

Most of the participants reported that they had participated in social engagement opportunities at Francis College. Of the 39 respondents, 30 responded “yes” to the question: have you participated in any extra-curricular social engagement opportunities while attending Francis College. A response of 30 out of 39 meant that 76.9% of the participants, all of whom were successful first-generation colleges students, stated that they had engaged in social engagement opportunities at Francis College. Figure 2.1 displays these results.

After I established that most of the participants had engaged socially on campus, I explored the types of social engagement opportunities in which they engaged. I analyzed the descriptive statistics to uncover how often they chose to participate in the various types of social engagement opportunities offered at Francis College. On the Google Form I asked the participants to indicate the number of times they participated in 12 different

social engagement opportunities at Francis College. The descriptive statistics for each type of social engagement opportunity asked about in the survey can be seen in Table 3.1.

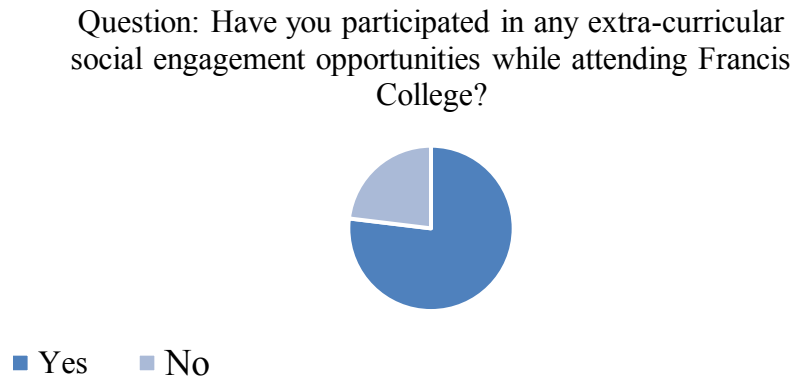


Figure 2.1. Participants that reported engaging socially at Francis College.

I asked the students to share the number of times in which they participated in 12 different types of social engagement opportunities offered by Francis College. The number of times in which the students participated in these opportunities varied greatly. The highest mean participation was in meetings and events hosted as part of the first-generation college student group on campus with an average of 1.64 ($M = 1.64$) and a standard deviation of 0.90 ($SD = 0.90$). The lowest mean level of participation was in student government meetings with an average of 0.54 ($M = 0.54$) and a standard deviation of 1.05 ($SD = 1.05$). The student government meetings had a strong positive skew (3.08) because 25 students had not attended any student government meetings. The highest frequency of participation was in service, or volunteer opportunities, hosted by the college.

Table 3.1

Social Engagement Types Descriptive Statistics

Type	Participants (n = 39)	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
On-campus performance	33	1.41	1.00	1.00	1.14	1.36	2.10
On-campus lecture or guest speaker	34	1.18	1.00	1.00	0.64	-0.18	-0.53
Student organization meeting as a member	30	1.38	1.00	1.00	1.23	0.91	0.04
Student organization meeting as a leader	13	0.82	0.00	0.00	1.56	2.00	2.74
Event as the organizer	19	1.05	0.00	0.00	1.52	1.52	1.17
Student government meeting	14	0.54	0.00	0.00	1.05	3.08	10.64
First-generation group meeting or event	23	1.54	1.00	0.00	1.70	0.71	-0.97
Sporting event as a spectator	23	1.15	1.00	0.00	1.51	1.60	1.61
Sporting event as an athlete	15	1.10	0.00	0.00	1.90	1.63	1.06
Service Opportunity	36	1.64	2.00	1.00	0.90	0.12	-0.84
Residence life event	22	1.23	1.00	0.00	1.50	1.07	0.15
Off-campus excursion	24	1.15	1.00	0.00	1.24	1.15	1.21

In summary, 36 of the 39 participants (92.3%) attended at least one service or volunteer event per semester, and 30 of the 39 participants (76.9%) had participated in at least one student organization meeting as a member, with 13 (43.3%) participating at least three times per semester.

The results also showed that some students did not consider their participation to be social engagement. While only 30 students stated that they had participated socially on campus, 36 students stated that they had engaged in volunteer service through the college. Additionally, 34 stated that they had attended a lecture or guest speaker. While I considered those activities social engagement for this study, these results suggested that the students did not think of those activities as social engagement. Perhaps that was because a faculty member or college leader required the students to participate in those activities for a class, a scholarship, or an internship. To determine the participants' reasons for stating they did not participate but then noting participating in service or attending a guest speaker's talk, I would need to conduct additional research.

The participants' levels of engagement varied by offering and by the individual. There were no types of social engagement opportunities explored in which all students engaged and no types where none of the students had engaged. The successful first-generation college student participants did not display a homogenous pattern of social engagement, and instead, each participant chose to participate in different ways. Therefore, college leaders that want to provide successful first-generation college students with opportunities to engage socially on-campus must ensure their college offers a wide variety of social events. Francis College offered the 12 different types of social engagement opportunities that I identified. From the data results, I have concluded that

because there was a broad array of opportunities, many first-generation college students found a way to participate that interested them or fit their schedule.

After understanding the number of times and ways successful first-generation college students were engaging socially at Francis College, I examined how they felt their social engagement impacted their success to answer my third research question (RQ3). I used the work of Tinto (1975), outlined in my theoretical framework, to craft survey questions that asked participants about themes identified as being correlated with student success through social integration (Tinto, 1975). I report the descriptive statistics correlated to each question in Table 3.2. The analysis showed how the participants interpreted their experiences. Each question began with the phrase, “Participating in this activity has,” to ensure students considered their participation when answering the question.

Overall, the results of the descriptive statistics demonstrated that the participants felt their social engagement impacted their success at Francis College. I considered a response of agree (4) or strongly agree (5) to indicate that the participant felt their social engagement impacted the identified aspect of success explored by the question. The highest mean of the question set was in response to the question, “participating in this activity made me feel connected to the other students participating with me” ($m = 4.36$, $SD = -0.92$). Specifically, 54.2% of the valid responses to that question ($n = 39$) were “strongly agree,” and 29.2% ($n = 21$) were “agree,” which meant that 83.4% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their participation in the social engagement event made them feel connected to the students that participated with them.

Table 3.2

Social Engagement Impact on Success Descriptive Statistics

Helped me feel connected to Francis College	Collective Affirmation	72	4.31	4.50	5.00	0.80	-0.79	-0.43
Helped me feel connected to the other students participating with me	Collective Affirmation	72	4.36	5.00	5.00	0.80	-0.92	-0.19
Helped me form meaningful friendships	Friendship Support	72	3.88	4.00	3.00	0.96	-0.04	-1.42
Has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members	Faculty Support	72	3.90	4.00	5.00	1.00	-0.24	-1.25
Has helped me develop my communication skills	Social Communication	72	4.12	4.00	5.00	0.84	-0.47	-1.01
Has helped me be successful in my academic courses	Academic Success	72	3.83	4.00	3.00	1.00	-0.28	-0.67

The lowest mean of the question set was in response to the question “participating in this activity has helped me be successful in my academic courses” ($m = 3.83$, $SD = 1.00$).

Only 56.9% of participants selected that they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

I then analyzed the quantitative data to select participants for the qualitative portion of my explanatory sequential mixed methods study. I needed to collect qualitative data to examine further how students felt their engagement impacted their success to

answer my mixed methods research question (RQ3) and how they felt their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging to answer my qualitative research question (RQ2). From the quantitative data, 18 of the 39 participants (46.2%) indicated that they participated as student organization members. I chose to focus my qualitative follow-up on these students because being a student organization member required commitment to attending multiple meetings or events each semester.

I was interested in exploring how the students felt that their commitment to social engagement impacted their success and sense of belonging. Using the purposeful sampling technique described in Chapter Two, I selected two students who were members of the same student organization for a group interview. Then, I interviewed two additional students individually. These students had participated in other student organizations, but not the same organizations. I analyzed the qualitative data collected with the quantitative data collected in the following section in the mixed methods data findings sections.

The quantitative data analysis I conducted resulted in three key findings. First, the analysis revealed that the successful first-generation college student participants did engage socially at Francis College. Second, through further analysis, I discovered that the participants did not have homogenous social engagement habits and chose to engage in all types of opportunities at different rates. Finally, I learned that the participants did feel their social engagement helped them become socially integrated. The qualitative follow-up research I conducted in the next section builds upon these findings to further reveal the impact social engagement had on the participants.

Qualitative Data Findings

I conducted the qualitative follow-up as a multiple-case study and analyzed the data using a case-based approach (Yin, 2018). This section provides an overview of each interview and my findings individually. It also compares the responses of each student participant to the other participants' responses. I did this using coding, analyzing the participants' responses using the themes found in the three-pronged theoretical framework outlined earlier. I used the data to explore RQ2, to ask how social engagement affected the participants' sense of belonging.

I purposefully selected each participant from the full list of students who had completed the survey. I interviewed a total of four participants. Two participants had participated as members of the same student organization, a club for business majors to network and learn from business leaders connected to Francis College. I interviewed those two students together in a group interview format to explore their shared experiences. The remaining two participants had engaged in unique student organizations. They had not been members of the same organization as any of the other participants. I interviewed each of them individually so that I could explore their unique perspectives. I specifically asked students about their engagement with Francis College sponsored social engagement opportunities. I did not explore ways in which the students engaged socially separate from official college offerings.

Sol and Luna

I chose to interview Sol and Luna together because they had participated in the same student organization and knew each other through their interactions with that group. At the time of the interview, the group had been on hiatus for a semester due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Still, both students expressed excitement at having just received an email that the group would be having its first meeting of the semester soon. Sol and Luna shared many demographic similarities. Both students were first-generation college students who identified as female and as Hispanic. Both students were attending Francis College as first-time, full-time undergraduate students, and both had first enrolled at Francis College in the fall of 2018.

The two participants differed in the number of social engagement opportunities in which they chose to participate. On the survey, Luna indicated that she attended on-campus or virtual performances hosted by Francis College nine or more times per semester and attended student organization meetings over nine times each semester. Luna described herself as being “highly involved on campus.” At the same time, Sol shared that the business student organization she was a member of with Luna was the only way she engaged socially on campus. On the survey, she indicated that attending student organization meetings was the only way she participated socially at Francis College and participated one to two times a semester. However, in the interview, she shared that she had previously been a part of the boxing club that no longer existed.

Success. Luna and Sol both expressed many themes Tinto (1975) found correlated to the types of social integration that impacted success. Tinto (1975) found that students were more likely to be successful if they were socially integrated at their college. Therefore, I interviewed the participants about their social engagement and then coded their responses, identifying how their engagement impacted their social integration. In Table 3.3, I have listed the themes and codes I used to identify aspects of social integration in their responses. Each student shared experiencing opportunities for social

communication, feeling supported by friends and faculty, and feeling like they were an essential part of the collective population of Francis College. They described experiences that made them think that they were a part of the “social systems of the college” and that they experienced “congruency” between their social involvement at the college and their personal goals (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Their social engagement had cultivated these feelings, which fostered the social integration Tinto (1975) argued was likely to support student success.

Table 3.3

Success: Social Integration Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Social Communication	Meeting new people Communication Meeting needs of other students
Friendship Support	Shared interests Shared needs Comfort Being yourself Non-academic relationship
Faculty Support	Non-academic support Going above and beyond Recognizing potential
Collective Affirmation	Pride in being associated with Francis College Being a part of something

Luna and Sol were both successful by the definition I outlined in Chapter One. They were first-time, full-time students who had not dropped out and were on track to graduate within four to six years. At the time of the interview, Luna had completed 94 credits at Francis College and was considered a senior. A faculty member had just asked her to be the student representative for the business program, and she described herself as

having “grit,” a term with which she became familiar during her high school tenure. At the time of the interview, Sol had completed 76 credits and was considered a junior. She described herself as being on academic probation because she had some academic struggles due to isolation and illness during the mandatory quarantines and campus shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. She was excited to be back learning in person and shared that she was getting support from her faculty and taking advantage of campus resources like the tutoring center to ensure she was academically successful in the upcoming semester. Through the interview, they each described their social engagement experiences. In Table 3.4, I have listed examples of how each participant’s comments correlated to each theme identified in Tinto (1975).

Through the quotes highlighted in Table 3.3 and other statements they made, the participants demonstrated that they experienced the social integration that Tinto (1975) described as correlating to success. Sol depicted how her experiences with the student business major group helped her develop a relationship with a faculty member, which, in turn, led to crucial support during a period of academic struggle:

She was so amazing for me. I explained to her what was happening, and she was so gracious to be like “hey, if you need to step away and then come back, I could show you what happened in class and re-teach you everything.”

Sol felt that her engagement with the professor through the student organization strengthened their relationship. The professor genuinely conveyed willingness to help because she knew Sol as a person and wanted to offer support during a challenging time. Through their relationship Sol experienced faculty support. That support connected Sol’s social integration directly to her involvement and her decision to remain enrolled, even when faced with hardship.

Table 3.4

Success Qualitative Data Analysis: Quotes Related to Social Integration

Themes	Luna	Sol
Social Communication	"We have some exciting events that we're hoping to host this semester."	"I'm really, really shy. So, I wanted to do something to get out of my comfort zone."
Friendship Support	"I did notice that I want to have friends that are equally as ambitious as I am, and I think that has to do with the root of what my values are and what their values are."	"I feel like it's fun! Even if we're not in the same major, we understand each other."
Faculty Support	"She made it like, her duty to be there for students in any way she possibly could."	"She was very engaging; she was so nice about everything. Honestly, she loves our group."
Collective Affirmation	"So I feel like in a way, I'm an ambassador for Francis College everywhere I go."	"I would bring my family members to workout with me and to have them see what I was doing here. To see why I was spending my 5:30–8:30 there."

In addition to correlating to the themes identified by Tinto (1975), the students' responses indicated to me that they felt their social engagement at Francis College impacted their success not only as students, but also as future professionals. The participants mentioned that social engagement helped them to build their professional network. Luna stated:

I definitely feel like networking is really a big aspect of college. I mean, there's more to it than just putting it on a resume for me and saying that I know certain people, it's really like building that connection and, like, continuing to stay connected to that person in whatever way.

Luna felt that it was important for her to expand her professional network while in college because of her personal goals. She believed being an active participant in social opportunities, including in student organizations, could help her develop her network.

She also sought to participate in student organizations because of her status as a first-generation college student. She felt that she needed to be connected to ensure she was noticed. She shared:

For me, the reason why I get involved with organizations is that I'm trying to stay highly involved around campus, due to the fact that I'm first-generation. That's something that, specifically I mean, I never have conversations with my family or parents about certain topics when it comes to my college experience and that can be a little difficult. Sometimes I'm trying to get my name out there. Specifically, for people to start recognizing me. So, that's one of the biggest reasons why I do it. Just to make sure that I'm building my network as I go through my experiences in life.

Luna believed that her status as a first-generation college student meant it was important for her to be involved on campus. She was seeking the social integration that Tinto (1975) described because she wanted to remain enrolled and graduate as a professional woman with a developed brand and network. She shared: "I think at the root of it, it has to do with me building my brand. I want to make sure that people know me as someone that stays highly involved and continues to believe in what they do." With these comments Luna demonstrated an understanding that her ability to remain enrolled and progress toward graduation, that is her ability to succeed in college, was connected to her social integration.

Both Luna and Sol wanted to be seen as professional, dedicated people. Luna was hoping to develop her reputation that through social engagement. Sol shared a similar sentiment when she stated: "I'm a businesswoman. I have to keep thinking of that. This organization is a part of that mindset." The students connected their involvement to their future lives as professionals. They saw engagement as a way to build experience, make connections, and develop a good reputation.

Sol and Luna experienced Francis College individually but were socially integrated because of their involvement in the same professional organization. Without the organization, they may not have ever known each other outside of the classroom setting, and therefore, may not have seen the other as a professional connection. The two students understood each other to share an experience as students at Francis College and as future professional contacts for each other once they entered the workforce. Sol chose to limit her engagement in college-sponsored social opportunities to her involvement with the professional organization. She did not spend much time getting involved in college-sponsored events, but she did value her time with the professional organization. Luna engaged actively on campus, and she connected the majority of the engagement she chose to discuss to her identity as a professional. She described working for the campus career center and human resources department. She also shared her experiences serving as the president of two separate professional student organizations.

With their answers to my interview questions about their social engagement, the participants demonstrated an understanding of the importance of involvement, networking, and building a system of support. They indicated that they felt their social engagement would impact them beyond graduation and into their future careers. They remained enrolled because they wanted to graduate and become professionals, and their social integration helped them see themselves as professionals. Success in college for these students correlated directly to their ability to become professionals in their chosen fields upon graduation. They connected to the opportunities presented at Francis College, the faculty, and their peers through social engagement. Social integration was key to the

participants' success, and their social engagement helped them become socially integrated at Francis College.

Sense of belonging. I also explored themes related to sense of belonging in Luna and Sol's responses to the interview questions. The participant's responses included themes related to Strayhorn's (2019) definition of sense of belonging in college students. Specifically, the participants' responses reflected times when, through social engagement, they felt connected to their college or each other, respected by their peers or faculty members, and accepted by their peers. They also shared times when they felt cared for by their college or peers. In Table 3.5, I listed the themes and codes I used to identify how the participants' social engagement impacted their development of a sense of belonging at Francis College.

Strayhorn (2019) wrote that feeling cared about was essential to belonging. I was interested in understanding what it meant to feel cared about in an education setting, specifically in higher education for first-generation college students. I used the work of Noddings (2006, 2012) to explore further the themes related to feeling cared about in the students' responses. In her work on the ethics of care and care in teaching and learning, Noddings (2006, 2012) discussed the themes of thinking, listening, and experiencing a climate of care. I chose to apply these themes when coding the interview responses. In coding the students' responses for those themes, I identified when they expressed that their social engagement helped them feel cared for at Francis College. I listed the codes I used in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5

Sense of Belonging Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Connected	Commitment Engagement Identity
Respected	Accommodation Support Representation
Accepted	Involvement Welcomed Whole person
Cared About	Helping Responsive
- Thinking	Understanding Growth Opportunity
- Listening	Feeling heard Understanding
- Climate of Care	Active support Awareness of student needs Responsibility for student well-being

Sol and Luna made many statements that revealed that they had developed a sense of belonging through social engagement at Francis College. I recognized Strayhorn's (2019) and Nodding's (2006, 2012) themes in their responses to the interview questions. It became apparent in coding their responses that although the two chose to engage in campus-sponsored social engagement opportunities in different ways and at different rates, their social engagement impacted their ability to feel as though they belonged at Francis College. I listed one of each participants' responses that I correlated to each theme in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

Qualitative Data Analysis: Sense of Belonging

Themes, Sub-Themes	Luna	Sol
Connected	"I am definitely a person that would like to say that as soon as I get involved with something I am determined to complete it."	"My sister just started here...so I said "I think you should sign-up and do something, you know you're going to meet lots of people in college"
Accepted	"I am creating an impact, specifically being first-generation and being a Latina woman and Francis College. I would like to say that I represent the Hispanic women of Francis College."	"I feel like Francis College does that, they say "we know you're busy, but here us out, we have these things here for you"
Respected	"If you're able to, stay involved with whatever interests you around the campus. I think it's important to have those activities and build relationships from an early start."	"Francis College does such a good job of having their faculty keep students involved."
Cared About	"It was like, a good energy that was coming out of Francis College."	"We were helping each other out."
- Thinking	"I definitely feel like, at Francis College, I have fostered into a leader."	"We all understand each other."
- Listening	"The faculty I've met, they make it their obligation to hear the students out."	"It doesn't always feel like homework to talk about it, if that makes sense."
- Climate of Care	"I feel like it is Francis College's responsibility to make sure that we're engaged as students."	"As an education system, please be out there, please make your students more engaged. It shows what you represent, and it shows you love your students, and you are putting your students first."

Sol and Luna made numerous statements that correlated to the themes identified in the theoretical framework. They had a sense that they belonged at Francis College, and the development of that sense of belonging was evident in their answers to questions about their social engagement. Sol stated:

Francis College for me creates that sort of empowerment link. Everybody is here for each other, and everybody is going to support each other no matter what ... I know I'm first-generation and I have to help my parents out, no matter what happens and as much as they understand school comes first, I feel Francis does that. They are like "hey, we know you're busy but hear us out. We have these things here for you and we have these events planned for you" and I feel like taking that chance with boxing helped me out in such a way. Like, it kept reminding me that, yeah, Francis College was here for me.

In her response, she expressed that she felt the college understood that she had other obligations but worked hard to make space for her and ensure she had opportunities to explore her interests. In that statement, she expressed feeling connected and cared for, which are themes present in Strayhorn's (2019) and Nodding's (2012) works about belonging.

The participants also exhibited a pride in who they had become as leaders through their social engagement at Francis College. Through her leadership in the Hispanic professionals' group on campus, participation in a group for honors students (Honors Scholars), and the business majors' organization, Luna was proud to have developed a brand of being a dependable leader who was true to her word. She shared:

I made it my obligation to try as hard as I possibly could since my first semester, and to still be highly involved on campus. I was able to get off that list (academic probation) and now I'm actually an Honors Scholar at Francis College so, yeah, I've come a long way and I feel like from the start Francis College has left a mark on me and believed in like me from a young age.

With these comments, Luna confirmed that she was able to develop as an individual through her involvement. She became a stronger student academically and developed into

the leader she was proud to be. Luna credited Francis College with helping her with that development and felt connected to the college. With her remarks, she demonstrated belonging at Francis College because it was helping her become the type of person she knew she could be.

Sol and Luna were socially integrated at Francis College, and their responses to the interview questions showed they had developed a sense of belonging through their engagement. I interviewed them together because they had shared experiences, but their answers also proved their engagement had different effects. Each of them participated at different levels and had different reasons for engaging. Their social integration did not have to be identical to each other for it to be impactful.

Elsa

Elsa was the first student I interviewed, and I interviewed her as an individual. Elsa identified as a first-generation college student and a White woman. She began taking classes at Francis College in the Fall of 2018 and, at the time of the interview, had completed 58 credits making her a sophomore. She highlighted her experiences as a member of Cru, a group for Christian students on campus, but mentioned that she had also been a part of the Film Club and the Gay-Straight Alliance in the past. The Film Club and Gay-Straight Alliance had not been meeting recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Cru had. Elsa shared that she was likely to rejoin the other groups if they restarted again.

Success. Like Luna and Sol, Elsa shared experiences in which she achieved social integration through social engagement at Francis College, and this social integration helped her decide to remain enrolled. Elsa recently joined student government

because she felt it was essential to be engaged on campus and wanted to “help those in the Francis College community from a different perspective” and ensure that she was helping others feel the collective affirmation she felt at Francis College.

Elsa expressed that she had formed meaningful friendships through her social engagement and expressed that she felt like “everyone is there for each other.” She felt that through social engagement opportunities, she was able to experience social communication because “people from different backgrounds can hang out and get to know each other.” In her final remarks, Elsa shared that she wished more student organizations existed at Francis College because she wanted to see a more diverse variety and have more opportunities to be engaged.

Overall, although Elsa did not comment on every theme related to success in the theoretical framework, she expressed that she developed social integration that supported her ability to remain enrolled. She shared statements that related to social communication, friendship support, and collective affirmation. Her social engagement was intentional, and she knew that being engaged was critical to her whole college experience.

Sense of belonging. Elsa’s interview also revealed themes related to sense of belonging. She shared that at Cru meetings, she felt a part of a “supportive community” and that when she was attending Cru events, she felt like she could “just kind of relax.” Feeling supported and comfortable enough to relax were related to feeling accepted and cared for, which were themes that I identified as correlating to sense of belonging in the theoretical framework.

Like Sol and Luna, Elsa expressed that she had found belonging and social integration at Francis College through her social engagement. She had a range of experiences in campus organizations and valued them as an essential part of her college experiences. I could clearly understand that her engagement affected her ability to remain enrolled at Francis College.

Rose

I interviewed Rose individually. She identified as a first-generation college student and a White woman. Rose began attending Francis College in the Fall of 2018 and was a psychology major. She had completed 62 credits and was therefore a junior. She described her experiences as a member of Psych Forum, a group for psychology majors and students interested in psychology who would host fundraisers for local non-profits. She also shared about events the group would host to bring awareness to mental health issues and allow for engagement between the students and working professionals in the psychology field.

Success. Rose's interview revealed that she, too, felt her social engagement affected her social integration and decision to remain enrolled at Francis College. Rose shared experiences connected to the theme of friendships support. Rose's responses indicated that she had experienced feeling like she had shared interests and was comfortable having a non-academic relationship with people she met as a result of her social engagement. She stated that she met people she can "talk to for more than just class or for questions about homework." Rose's experience in Psych Forum allowed her to make friends within her major and form what she described as "very meaningful

relationships.” She expressed that she felt it was “important to stick around” to maintain the friendships she had developed.

Rose also explained that she chose to be involved in Psych Forum because she wanted to connect her social engagement on campus to her future professional career. Like Sol and Luna, Rose shared that she felt her social engagement would be an essential way to build her network and learn about professional opportunities. She referred to the network she built through Psych Forum as her “colleagues” and people she would work with again in her “future job.”

Sense of belonging. Rose also expressed themes related to her sense of belonging. First, Rose articulated that she appreciated that Francis College offered social engagement opportunities because they made her feel cared for. She shared the social excursions the school hosted helped her “get a fresh break from studying and just some relaxation time.” She liked that not everything had to be related to academics; it could instead connect her to her interests or fill a need for personal care. Second, Rose expressed that her engagement allowed her to feel connected to her school and fellow students. She shared that the school hosted “a lot of great experiences if you take advantage of them.” She said that through these experiences, she developed relationships that made her feel connected to her fellow students. She stated:

It helps, like I said, to make relationships with new people ... maybe they are going to achieve the same things you’re trying to achieve and they can help you get resources. You know, with things like homework or test studying. They even help with random stuff, like going to the store. Maybe you don’t drive but they can help with stuff like that.

The social engagement experiences Rose has had at Francis College have deepened her sense that she belonged at Francis College.

Rose valued her social engagement, and her responses showed that her involvement had impacted her decision to persist at Francis College. In her responses, Rose established that she had developed relationships that mattered to her as a student through social engagement, which is social integration. These relationships also mattered to her as an individual, which connected to her sense of belonging.

Qualitative Data Summary Social Engagement and Sense of Belonging

Through the qualitative data outlined in this section, I explored RQ2, which was my qualitative research question. It asked how social engagement impacted the sense of belonging of successful first-generation college students. I uncovered that, while the participants shared experiences that connected to all the themes identified in the works of Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012), the three themes that emerged most dominantly were those of feeling cared about, connected, and respected.

The participants each shared an experience in which they described that they felt Francis College cared about them through their social engagement. Each student attended Francis College because of her desire to graduate and become a professional in her chosen field. They did, however, express that they felt it was the responsibility of the leaders of Francis College to offer them social engagement opportunities that were not solely for academic success. The participants described participating so they could take a break, feel relaxed, and explore non-academic interests. Rose described attending trips to local farmers' markets, museums, and evening boat cruises hosted by the student activities team. These activities did not correlate directly to her desire to be a psychologist. Still, they showed the students that Francis College cared about their needs

as a whole person and wanted them to get a full college experience. The participants' social engagement helped them to feel cared for, which fostered their sense of belonging.

The participants also described feeling that their social engagement helped them feel connectedness. They felt the connection to the other students, their faculty, and Francis College. Sol described feeling connected to the other girls in the boxing club with her. She loved working out with them and missed the connection when the club ended. She explained that she would bring her family to the boxing club to show them her friends, her school, and the skills she was building because she felt connected to what she was doing. She also shared a story about a professor who knew she was in the boxing club and would ask her about it and make jokes about her "being his bodyguard." That connection helped her feel seen by the professor, and she appreciated that he remembered something specific about her. Through this unique social engagement opportunity, Sol developed a sense that she belonged at Francis College, fostering her sense of connectedness.

The participants described feeling respected because of being socially engaged. Luna explained taking on a leadership role in the Hispanic professional group she was a member of since freshman year. She was excited to share about the events they had planned and was proud to have been recognized by her peers as a leader. Faculty had asked her to be the "face of the business program" and speak to incoming freshmen about business as a major because she was a leader in the Hispanic professionals' group and the business major's group she participated in with Sol. Luna felt that it was because of social engagement that she cultivated the respect of her peers and faculty. This respect

made her feel a sense of belonging at Francis College, and she fostered that sense of belonging through social engagement.

Social engagement impacted the sense of belonging of the successful first-generation college student participants I interviewed. It allowed them to develop relationships with peers that made them feel cared for and accepted. It allowed them to explore extra-curricular interests. They could develop professionally through those opportunities, so they felt a deeper connection to their school. Social engagement also allowed them to cultivate reputations that they were proud of and wanted to build upon during their time at Francis College. Through their engagement, they felt respected. Social engagement opportunities offered by Francis College allowed the students to cultivate their senses of belonging.

Mixed Methods Data Findings

RQ3 was the mixed methods question I asked to learn how social engagement impacted the participants' success. In the quantitative portion of the study, I asked the participants to respond to questions about their perception of the impact of their social engagement on their success. The participants responded using a Likert Scale. On the scale, one meant they "strongly disagreed" with the statement, and five meant they "strongly agreed" with it. I asked survey questions about faculty support, friendship support, social communication, and collective affirmation.

For the qualitative portion of the study, I asked students questions about their social engagement. I then coded their responses for themes related to social integration supporting their success. Those themes were also faculty support, friendship support,

social communication, and collective affirmation and the codes I used were displayed in Table 3.3.

Table 3.7

Mixed Methods Results: Luna

Question	Theme	Quan Response	Qual Response
1 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to Francis College.	Collective Affirmation	4	"I just like to stay involved and do many things around the community"
2 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	Friendship Support, Social Communication	5	"I'm the president of the Hispanic Professionals Group"
3 Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	Friendship Support	4	"I have noticed that my circle of friends is usually people that are also highly involved"
4 Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	Faculty Support	4	"They make it their obligation to hear the students out"
5 Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	Social Communication	5	"It's about building my brand"

In Tables 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, and 3.10, I created a visual representation for each participant's responses to conduct a cross-case analysis. I first list their responses to the survey and then highlight words or phrases in their qualitative responses that correlated to the same theme asked about in the survey. Not every participant commented on each theme found in Tinto's (1975) theory of social integration, but the correlation of their survey responses with the qualitative responses resulted in interesting analysis.

The participants shared that different kinds of social interactions fostered different opportunities to form meaningful friendships. On the survey, Luna indicated that she agreed that her social engagement helped her form meaningful friendships, and Elsa strongly agreed (see Tables 3.7 and 3.9). Rose and Sol, however, neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that social engagement had helped them form meaningful friendships (see Table 3.8 and 3.10). Sol shared that through social engagement, she could make friends outside of her major, while Rose specifically joined Psych Forum so she could get to know people in her major. Elsa's responses focused on finding people to relax with and with whom she felt comfortable taking a break (see Table 3.9). Luna was interested in finding friends who shared the same values she had and could add to her network (see Table 3.7). Each student had different perspectives on what it meant to make friends through social engagement, which was apparent in the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The students' responses generally indicated that they felt their social engagement impacted their social communication. Sol talked about being naturally shy, but finding social engagement helped pushed her to be more outgoing (see Table 3.8). Rose shared an example of when her group participated in a public speaking event with a local organization (see Table 3.10). She was excited that her peers had the opportunity to get public speaking experience in that way. Elsa shared that she felt she fostered her communication skills at a s'mores-making event hosted by Cru (see Table 3.9). At that event, she and her peers were able to connect over personal stories, and she liked being able to develop her communication skills in that way. While those two experiences were very different, both fostered the students' comfort with social communication.

Table 3.8

Mixed Methods Results: Sol

Question	Theme	Quan Response	Qual Response
1 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to Francis College.	Collective Affirmation	4	"I have some knowledge on what to do"
2 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	Friendship Support, Social Communication	4	"Get out there, try to make friends, nobody knows each other"
3 Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	Friendship Support	3	"I have more nursing friends than business friends"
4 Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	Faculty Support	3	"I think that made more of an impact than anything, that he tells people about me"
5 Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	Social Communication	3	"I'm really shy, so I just wanted to get out of my comfort zone"

Three of the interview participants, all except Luna, felt neutral or did not feel that their social engagement impacted their relationships with faculty. Table 3.9 shows that Elsa felt she had not engaged with faculty in a way that made her feel social integration. I did not code any of her responses to faculty support. In contrast, Luna agreed that her social engagement helped her form meaningful relationships with faculty. She shared the example of the campus minister whom she felt "made it her duty" to support students.

The interview participants did not all discuss faculty support, but when they did, they provided meaningful examples. Rose was neutral about the faculty support she received on the survey and I did not code any faculty support comments in her responses (see Table 3.10). Although Sol was neutral about the impact of social engagement on her

relationships with faculty, she described relationships she had developed with a business faculty member and her academic advisor (see Table 3.8). The social engagement had enhanced the relationships she had with these faculty members. Additionally, the qualitative follow-up revealed that her neutral response might have been related to two crucial reasons. First, Sol was a member of a boxing club that no longer existed. Her experiences with her faculty advisor were through that club and losing it likely impacted her response to the survey. Second, Sol was a member of the business group that had been on hiatus due to the pandemic. She developed a relationship with her business faculty member through the group. These breaks in social engagement opportunities that were meaningful to Sol may have changed her responses to the survey.

Table 3.9

Mixed Methods Results: Elsa

Question	Theme	Quan Response	Qual Response
1 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to Francis College.	Collective Affirmation	3	“Help those in the Francis College community”
2 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	Friendship Support, Social Communication	4	“Everyone is there for each other”
3 Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	Friendship Support	5	“Supportive community”
4 Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	Faculty Support	2	
5 Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	Social Communication	4	“We can comfortably ask each other”

Table 3.10

Mixed Methods Results: Rose

Question	Theme	Quan Response	Qual Response
1 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to Francis College.	Collective Affirmation	5	"They offer different experiences, especially for people who aren't from here"
2 Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	Friendship Support, Social Communication	5	"I definitely have made friendships"
3 Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	Friendship Support	3	"We have great relationships and they are very meaningful"
4 Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	Faculty Support	3	
5 Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	Social Communication	4	"Students got the opportunity to speak in front of "wrap around" and be a part of the event"

The students' responses to the interview questions added a qualitative description to their quantitative answers. The students' responses highlighted their experiences with social engagement and how they became socially integrated through their engagement. Tinto (1975) proved that social integration was essential to support students to remain enrolled. I verified that the participants felt their social engagement supported their social integration through this mixed methods analysis. They were able to explain how that social integration looked for them specifically. Their quantitative responses showed their perceptions of the impact of their social engagement on their success, and their

qualitative responses highlighted what their social integration looked like for them as successful first-generation college students.

Discussion

In this chapter, I analyzed the data collected for my study. I grounded the study in the three-pronged theoretical framework built on the works of Ishitani (2003), Tinto (1975), Strayhorn (2019), and Noddings (2012). I also conducted this study after the thorough review of the literature on first-generation college students, success, and sense of belonging that I presented in Chapter One. Therefore, in this section I discuss how my study contributes to the scholarly literature on first-generation college student success and sense of belonging in this section.

First-Generation College Student Social Engagement

First-generation college students are not a homogeneous group, and this study concluded that the successful first-generation college student participants did not engage socially in a homogeneous manner. Many schools have created special social or academic integration programs for first-generation college students (Inkelas et al., 2007; Oliver & King, 2018; Stephens et al, 2014; Swanbrow et al., 2017). These programs had positive results, but through my data analysis process, I demonstrated that first-generation students engaged socially in all types of programs offered at their schools, not just the specialized first-generation student programs. Therefore, college leaders with first-generation college students enrolled at their school must pay special attention to assuring that well-rounded slates of social integration offerings exist. They must allow the students to find opportunities that best fit their social integration needs.

Scholars have often studied first-generation college students as a group because they experienced different attrition rates and habits than their continuing-generation peers (Ishitani, 2006; Ishitani, 2003). I, too, studied first-generation college students as a group, using the work of Ishitani (2006) as one of the key components of my theoretical framework. However, scholars such as Wildhagen (2015) have noted that grouping first-generation college students together was a decision made by college leaders, not by the students. The quantitative results of my study concluded that first-generation college student social engagement varied among my participants. The results confirmed that while studying first-generation students as a group is helpful for understanding attrition habits, it has limits, and additional student needs and characteristics have relevance to their decisions to remain enrolled or leave college.

This study aimed to understand how successful first-generation college students, those who have remained enrolled, engaged socially at Francis College. The participants in this study did not conform to one predictable pattern. The students who completed the survey had participated in every type of social engagement offering at Francis College. No one student had participated in all of them, and there were no activities in which all students who responded to the survey participated. There were only three students (7.7% of respondents) who had not participated at all. This study did not reveal a pattern of social engagement that can be applied to other populations. Still, it did confirm that successful first-generation college students at Francis College chose to participate in social engagement opportunities offered by the college leadership. These results suggested that Tinto's (1975) theory that social integration is crucial for persistence was correct. All the participants in this study had persisted in their efforts to remain enrolled

in college, and most of them were actively engaged socially. That suggests a connection between persistence and engagement among the participants in this study.

Social Engagement Fosters a Sense of Belonging

Social engagement fostered a sense of belonging for successful first-generation college students at Francis College. Scholars have determined that students who felt a sense of belonging at their college used college resources to a greater extent (Strayhorn, 2019). They have also noted that “belonging was positively associated with persistence, use of campus services, and mental health” (Gopalan & Brady, 2020, p. 135). Therefore, college leaders have important reasons to help students foster their sense of belonging.

I asked successful first-generation college students how social engagement fostered their sense of belonging at Francis College. Strayhorn (2019) concluded that belonging was an essential factor that contributed to college student persistence. The results of this study suggested that Strayhorn’s (2019) work was correct and belonging mattered to student persistence. Further, it suggested that social engagement helped the participants develop their sense of belonging. Other scholars have stressed the importance of developing belonging in first-generation college students (Duenas & Gloria, 2020; Gillen-O’Neel, 2019). This study contributed to the body of research on first-generation students’ senses of belonging by focusing on developing senses of belonging in successful and highly engaged first-generation college students. The data analysis revealed connections between belonging and persistence in their responses. They developed belonging through social engagement, and that helped them remain enrolled.

In the qualitative responses to interview questions, the students shared that they were able to experience feeling cared about, develop connections to their school and their

peers, gain respect, and earn acceptance through social engagement. These were essential elements of belonging, according to Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012). I chose to use the work of Noddings (2012) to uncover further what it meant for a student to develop a sense of belonging. This study connected Noddings's (2012) work with Strayhorn's (2019) to broaden the definition of belonging. It also applied both theories to first-generation college students and how they engaged socially at their school. The study I conducted revealed that students who engaged socially on campus had experiences that helped them develop their important senses of belonging. Having a sense of belonging helped the students persist to graduation. Therefore, college leaders need to recognize belonging as essential and provide opportunities for their students to develop it.

Social Engagement Fosters Social Integration

Tinto (1975) identified that social integration was an essential aspect of a successful college student's journey. I concluded that first-generation college students developed social integration through social engagement at Francis College through my data analysis. They noted that they developed social integration through their quantitative survey responses and described elements of social integration in their qualitative responses. Being the first in their families to attend college, the participants in this study sought opportunities to develop friendships and develop social communication in social organizations. Through these experiences, they also forged meaningful relationships with faculty and collective affirmation associated with Francis College. The results of my study suggest that Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration was relevant to the first-generation college students at Francis College.

In this study, I drew connections between the work of Ishitani (2006), Tinto (1975), and Strayhorn (2019). Earlier scholars have studied the social engagement, social integration, and belonging of first-generation college students. To build on their work, I conducted a study that specifically looked at successful first-generation college students and explored the relationship between social engagement and social integration, as well as social engagement and belonging. I furthered the conversation about belonging by using the work of Noddings (2012) as a part of my theoretical framework. In my study, Noddings (2012) was used to further define what it meant to feel cared for when describing college students' senses of belonging. Noddings (2012) specifically talked about caring in action in education. By incorporating the themes of thinking, listening, and a climate of care into my research I was able to interview the students about what it meant for them to feel cared about by their college. Incorporating Noddings (2006, 2012) allowed me to add further definition to what it really meant to feel cared about in relation to feeling a sense of belonging.

I designed a study grounded in the work of four scholars that explored how social engagement impacted the success and sense of belonging of first-generation college students at Francis College. By conducting a thorough review of earlier literature, I conducted a study that contributes to the scholarly study of first-generation college students. The results of this study will support the work of college leaders, and I will suggest some of the ways the work will be beneficial in the next section.

Implications

First-generation college students are looking for a fulfilling college experience. The students in this study described personal experiences and possessed many of the

first-generation college student characteristics explored by other scholars. The participants mentioned not being able to speak to their families about certain aspects of college, needing to work to support their families, and sometimes prioritizing family needs over social engagement. However, the participants also recognized that their social engagement connected them to their learning and future goals. As a result, even if they were not always able to attend, they appreciated knowing that Francis College was making an effort to provide them opportunities to engage. College leaders that want to retain first-generation students need to offer a variety of social engagement opportunities. The participants in this study recognized the importance of social engagement and expected Francis College to supply opportunities to them. As questions about how to best meet the needs of all students, including first-generation college students, arise at small liberal arts colleges like Francis College, the leaders need to be aware of the importance of social engagement opportunities.

Offering a robust suite of social engagement opportunities is one way to build a campus culture that supports belonging and success. Through social engagement the participants in this study developed positive feelings about their affiliation with Francis College. A few of them described it as a place where everyone smiles and says hello to each other. Luna discussed feeling an “energy” at Francis College that made her feel like she belonged there. College leaders that want to foster a student-centered campus culture must provide opportunities for students to connect outside of their academic classes. It is essential for college leaders who serve student populations with many commuters, online students, or adult learners in addition to first-generation college students to remember that student engagement is also vital to the success of these groups. The social

engagement opportunities offered to those populations may not be the same as those provided to the traditional residential students. Still, offering college-sponsored engagement opportunities that meet the needs of non-traditional and first-generation students may help increase their sense of belonging and chances of success.

I completed this study in 2021, just after Francis College had restarted in-person classes and activities. College leaders had suspended social engagement opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had disrupted opportunities for students to engage socially. Student success professionals had canceled some events while they moved others to a virtual platform. The participants were eager to re-engage in social opportunities. Sol expressed that she felt she “wasted a year” on COVID-19 isolation. She commented that part of what she was paying for at Francis College was engagement, and she did not want to miss any future opportunities. College leaders need to consider the social expectations of their students in times of crisis. Additionally, future research should involve repeating this study with a similar population at a time that is not so closely following a period of cancellations and mandatory social distancing to see if the results may be different if the students had been consistently able to engage in person.

Summary and Conclusion

First-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation college students to drop out of college. According to Ishitani (2003), first-generation college students are more likely to drop out at any time during their college career than continuing-generation students, meaning that the risk of drop-out does not disappear for first-generation students. Scholars have suggested that social integration and a sense of belonging are critical factors in a first-generation student’s decision to remain enrolled at

their college and persist to graduation (Tinto, 1975; Strayhorn, 2008). This study explored the social engagement experiences of successful first-generation college students at a small, liberal arts college to understand the impact these experiences have on their success and sense of belonging.

This explanatory sequential mixed methods study explored the social engagement experiences of successful first-generation college students. I conducted the quantitative portion of the study first, analyzing the results of a survey sent to successful first-generation college students. I then conducted a qualitative follow-up to explore further the impact of social engagement on the participants' successes and senses of belonging. Existing literature proved that social integration was essential for success, and this study added to that by showing that social engagement was a way to develop a sense of belonging. By examining social engagement through the lens of first-generation college student success and sense of belonging, I have highlighted the importance of social engagement to the ability of the participants to remain enrolled and persist to graduation. Their social engagement made them feel connected to their school and their fellow students and helped them progress toward their future professional goals.

Small, liberal arts colleges across the United States have a duty to provide an excellent education to their students, and social engagement opportunities are an essential part of that education. While leaders determine the services they need to deliver to students in a post-pandemic higher education landscape, this study shows that re-investing in social engagement is worthwhile. College leaders should also do what they can to encourage first-generation college students to be engaged in social opportunities. Making this opportunity accessible in price, timing, and variety is essential to ensure

students have access to the kinds of engagement that will foster their social integration and senses of belonging.

CHAPTER FOUR

Distribution of Findings

Executive Summary

I designed the research study to address the problem of first-generation college student attrition. The number of students who were the first in their families to attend college or who would be the first to graduate with a bachelor's degree has grown in recent years (RTI International, 2019). Although more first-generation college students have enrolled in college, they are also more likely than continuing-generation college students to drop out and not complete their degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). According to Ishitani (2003, 2006), first-generation college students were more likely to drop-out no matter the size or type of college. I conducted my research at a small, private, Catholic, all women's college in the Midwest that served a high population of first-generation students. Scholars have identified many reasons for this voluntary attrition, and Tinto (1975) summarized it as stemming from a lack of academic or social integration. I decided to study social integration further and research how engagement in extra-curricular activities aided students in becoming integrated socially and developing a sense of belonging at their college.

Before designing the study, I found two primary gaps in the literature that I wanted to address. The first was a lack of studies that examined how first-generation college students chose to participate socially across the myriad of opportunities offered by their school. I found studies exploring how specific interventions or offerings for first-generation college students helped deepen their social integration (Demetriou et al., 2017;

Inkelas et al., 2007; Malmgren & Galvin, 2008; Metzger, 2006; Ramos, 2019; Thomas & Hanson, 2014). However, my study was different because I did not examine one social engagement offering or broad categories of offerings but instead examined all available types of extra-curricular activities offered at one school. This lens allowed me to ask the students to respond to their personal experiences and relate them to their decision to remain enrolled at their chosen institution.

The second gap in the literature was a lack of studies that related social integration to sense of belonging. I read studies that examined how students developed their sense of belonging and why student sense of belonging was important (Duenas & Gloria, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn 2019). I was specifically interested in understanding the role social engagement had on first-generation college students' senses of belonging. Therefore, I designed my study to understand better how social engagement was connected to the social integration of first-generation college students. How the students chose to participate outside of academics on their campus was their social engagement. Social integration, that is, being connected to the campus community through relationships and reputation, was fostered through the social engagement of the participants. Social integration is important to belonging.

To address the problem and gaps in the literature, I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. The purpose of the study was to examine how successful first-generation college students engaged socially at their college to find the impact their engagement had on their social integration and sense of belonging. I asked three research questions:

RQ1: What are the social engagement opportunities in which successful first-generation students have engaged?

RQ 2: How have social engagement opportunities impacted the participants' senses of belonging?

RQ 3: How have social engagement opportunities impacted the participants' successes?

I used quantitative methods to answer RQ1, qualitative methods to answer RQ2, and mixed methods for RQ3. Because it was an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, I first collected quantitative data, followed by qualitative data.

I collected the quantitative data to understand better how successful first-generation college students took part in the social engagement offerings at Francis College and how they felt that engagement impacted their success. I collected data via a survey distributed to all first-generation college students at Francis College who had completed at least fifty-four credits without stopping out. The survey first asked students about their social engagement habits. Specifically, it asked which kinds of social engagement activities they participated in and how often. Then, the second part of the survey asked participants to rate how much their social engagement influenced factors connected to their social integration using a Likert scale.

I analyzed the quantitative data from both sections of the survey using descriptive statistics. I used the data to uncover how first-generation college students were engaging socially at Francis College. I also used the data to select the participants for the qualitative portion of my mixed methods study and reveal how the participants felt their social engagement impacted their social integration so I could explore that further with qualitative research.

I collected qualitative follow-up data by asking the students to describe how their social engagement had affected their successes and senses of belonging at Francis

College. To collect that data, I led a group interview with two students who had taken part in the same social engagement opportunity. I also conducted two individual interviews with students who had engaged socially but not in the same activities as the other interview participants. With the interview questions, I asked students how their decision to be actively engaged in extra-curricular activities affected their college experience. They discussed how they formed friendships, developed as future professionals, interacted with faculty, and formed connections within the college community and beyond.

I conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data and a cross-case analysis incorporating the quantitative data for my mixed methods analysis. I found themes correlated to social integration and belonging within the students' responses to the interview questions. I used their responses to show how the students felt their social engagement impacted their sense of belonging. I then conducted a cross-case analysis. I integrated the quantitative data about social integration with the qualitative responses that correlated to social integration. This analysis allowed me to reveal what the students meant when they said their social engagement had helped them develop social integration.

Through the research methods outlined above, I uncovered important findings about how first-generation college students at Francis College experienced social engagement and the role their engagement played in their lives as college students. Based on my research, I noticed three key observations on social engagement:

1. Most of the participants in this study, all successful first-generation college students, engaged in extra-curricular offerings at Francis College. Of those that completed the survey, 76.95% had taken part in one or more of the social engagement opportunities listed on the survey.

2. The students' engagement habits were not uniform. The participants had engaged in all types of extra-curricular offerings at Francis College, and they all had taken part in different activities a varied number of times.
3. The survey results revealed that their social engagement helped them become socially integrated at Francis College.

One indicator of this social integration was that 83.4% of the participants stated they agreed or strongly agreed that participation in a social engagement opportunity had helped them feel connected to the students participating with them. I then explored these quantitative findings further with qualitative follow-up to better understand how the students' engagement had affected their retention and belonging.

The critical qualitative findings were related to the participants' sense of belonging. Students that took part in social engagement opportunities at Francis College had developed a sense of belonging through them. In qualitative interviews, the students made many remarks correlated to the themes of belonging found in the works of Strayhorn (2019) and Noddings (2012). Through their social engagement, the students reported feeling connected, respected, and cared for by their fellow students, faculty, and Francis College's whole community. This study showed that social engagement helped to develop the students' sense of belonging.

The key findings of the mixed methods part of the study related to the students' success through social integration. The students indicated that their social engagement had impacted essential areas for the development of social integration on the survey, and their responses to the interview questions elaborated on that data. The students connected their social engagement to developing friendships and relationships with faculty members and their personal development as a professional. The social opportunities offered at Francis College mattered to them as a student whose goal was graduation. The

connection of social engagement to professional achievement helped them see how their involvement would aid in achieving their goals.

The participants in this study were engaged socially at Francis College, and they encouraged others to be involved. The students interviewed expressed that they were not always able to engage with every opportunity offered by Francis College but that they appreciated knowing the college leaders were offering them and that they could make a choice to be involved when they could. The participants shared that they would, and some actively did, encourage any new Francis College student to be involved. Their encouragement showed that they found value in the experiences offered to them through social engagement. Being an engaged student helped them be socially integrated, and therefore, helped them be successful.

In my research study, I displayed how the successful first-generation college students at Francis College engaged socially and felt their social engagement impacted their success and sense of belonging. There were many colleges with similar populations to Francis College or with rising numbers of first-generation undergraduate students interested in improving their first-generation students' retention and graduation rates. Therefore, although the results were not generalizable beyond the participant population, there were implications for a professional practice that leaders outside of Francis College could apply.

College leaders that intend to devote resources to the support of their first-generation college student population need to consider the following recommendations:

1. Invest in a variety of campus-sponsored social engagement opportunities. The students in this study did not engage socially in a homogeneous manner. Therefore, there is no way to predict what offerings will foster social

integration and a sense of belonging for a particular student or group of students.

2. Students expressed that their social engagement helped them to think about their lives post-graduation as a professional. First-generation college students need support building professional networks and connections. Therefore, leaders need to offer programming that connects to students' professional goals.
3. The participants felt it was the responsibility of Francis College to offer social opportunities that allowed them to relax. In addition to professional or volunteer events, college leaders need to see the importance of offering events designed to foster connections through fun.

Leaders at colleges that serve first-generation college students need to consider success and belonging in developing their social engagement offerings. College leaders can use this study to help them build their social engagement programming with intention.

Applying the knowledge shared in this document will allow them to meet the needs of their first-generation college students resulting in smaller numbers of voluntary student attrition.

In the following section I outline how I intend to make college leaders aware of the findings of my study. I need to disseminate my results so that those in the position to influence the college experience of first-generation students understand the important role social engagement opportunities play in developing social integration and a sense of belonging. Knowing how to best design programs to support first-generation college students will be critical to any student retention program.

Findings Distribution Proposal

The primary audience for the findings of this study is college leaders who work for schools or systems that serve first-generation college students. The number of first-generation college students enrolling at every type of institution has grown across the

United States. Therefore, this study should resonate with private, public, small, large, and community colleges.

I intend to share my findings with student activities and student success professionals. I want to be sure that my research reaches those who are responsible for designing student retention programs. Leaders of the offices of student success, deans of students, or student activities directors would benefit from understanding how the students in this study described deepening their social integration, developing a sense of belonging, and progressing toward their professional goals. The results of this study may help them build student success programs that incorporate student activities and advocate for the resources they need to continue to serve students.

I will start by distributing my findings to the leaders at Francis College. I conducted the study at Francis College and am currently employed there. I want the leaders at Francis College to have access to the findings to make strategic decisions about the Office of Student Success and the kinds of investments they make in student activities. Because student success and activities are often not revenue-generating offices, it can be challenging to make a case for resources. Understanding that first-generation college students at Francis College participate, value their participation, and make connections directly from their involvement to their decision to remain enrolled at Francis College will help leaders prioritize student social integration through extra-curricular activities.

I will distribute my findings at Francis College by delivering a professional presentation to the Administrative Council. The President created the council, and it includes the Vice Presidents and Deans at Francis College. They make decisions about

college-wide programs and policies. They also have oversight of the budget. I will also present to the Board of Trustees because they set the budget and high-level goals. I will create a slide deck to deliver the presentation with a PowerPoint as a visual aid.

I will distribute my findings to interested college leaders nationally by writing an article that summarizes the results of this study. I will submit this article to the Center for First-generation Student Success. The Center supplies resources about first-generation college students, advocates for first-generation students, and publishes the Journal of First-Generation Student Success.

I will also distribute my findings by presenting them at conferences. I will apply to present at the First-generation Student Success Conference hosted by the Center for First-generation student success. I will also investigate and apply to present at other conferences dedicated to student success and retention. I will need a physical and virtual version of a poster summarizing my study for these conference presentations.

To successfully distribute my findings to the identified audiences, I will need to create distribution materials. I will need to create a PowerPoint slide deck to present to leaders at Francis College. I will need to write an article summarizing my results for the Center for First-generation Student Success. Also, I will need to create a poster for conference presentations.

Conclusion

I have now concluded this research study. In this final chapter, I created an executive summary of my study and shared my distribution plan. Throughout this document, I have named a problem, reviewed literature related to the problem, outlined my study, and reported the findings.

The study I conducted and described in this document contributes to the literature on first-generation college student success, and it explicitly addresses social integration and sense of belonging. Higher education professionals can use the findings of this study to inform their work. It is imperative that the percentage of first-generation college students dropping out of college decreases. Toward that end, college leaders must help students become socially integrated to develop a strong sense of belonging and choose to remain enrolled.

I conducted this study because I was interested in understanding how the social aspects of college can influence a first-generation college student's decision to remain enrolled and persist to graduation. My data has revealed that college leaders cannot underestimate the importance of the social aspects of college to the success of their first-generation college students. Academic success is vital, but it is only one aspect of the college experience. College leaders need to invest in social opportunities for their students to become socially integrated and feel like their college is a place where they belong.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Baylor University
Education: EdD in Learning and Organizational Change

Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: How Social Engagement Opportunities Impact the Sense of Belonging of Successful First-Generation College Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Research Study

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Meghan Walsh

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

Purpose of the research: The purpose of this study is to address the retention of successful first-generation college students through an assessment of your involvement in institution-sponsored social engagement opportunities. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to hear directly from successful first-generation college students about how your social engagement experiences have impacted your success and sense of belonging at your school. We are asking you to take part in this study because you are a first generation college student who has completed at least 54 – 86 credits at ██████████ College without stopping out.

Study activities: If you choose to be in the study, you will

- Complete a questionnaire about your involvement as a student at ██████████ College and your feelings about how your involvement impacts your decision to remain enrolled and your sense of belonging on campus.
- After completing the survey you may be selected to participate in a focus group to further explore how your involvement has impacted your decision to remain enrolled and your sense of belonging on campus. This focus group will be conducted via zoom and will be recorded.

Risks and Benefits:

Questionnaire/Survey Risks

You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask about. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Focus Groups

The researchers will ask you and the other people in the group to use only pseudonyms during the group session. They will also ask you not to tell anyone outside the group what any particular person said in the group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that everyone will keep the discussions private.

You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. Tell the interviewer at any time if you want to take a break or stop the focus group.

Benefits

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research.

The results of the study will benefit future first-generation college students and the schools they attend.

Statement of Privacy

All data collected in this study, including items that could be used to identify an individual, will be kept confidential. The data will be stored securely and accessible only by the researcher. The data will not be made publicly available at any time.

Questions or concerns about this research study

You can call us with any concerns or questions about the research. Our telephone numbers are listed below:

Principal Investigator: Meghan Walsh – [REDACTED]

Contact anytime between 8am and 9pm seven days a week.

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sarah Pratt – [REDACTED]

Contact between 9am and 5pm Monday through Friday.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher, you may contact the [REDACTED] College IRB by emailing [REDACTED] or Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at [REDACTED] or irb@baylor.edu

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing consent.

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Emails

April 30, 2021

Recruitment email to graduating seniors

Subject: Congrats Grad! First-Generation Student Survey Responses Needed

Dear NAME,

Congratulations on your upcoming graduation! Before you go, I am hoping you will consider one more favor as an [REDACTED] student! I am writing to request your participation in a voluntary research study about first-generation college students. This study is being conducted by me, Meghan Walsh. I am a student at Baylor University pursuing my Doctorate in Education and I am an employee of [REDACTED] working in the Office of Academic Affairs.

All I need is for you to complete the following questionnaire. It should take less than 5 minutes to complete. [CLICK HERE](#).

Participants in the study must be first-generation college students enrolled at [REDACTED] who have completed at least 54 credits at [REDACTED]. You are being contacted directly because you meet that criteria.

The consent form can be accessed [HERE](#) and must be read before completing the survey. I [REDACTED]

Thank you for your consideration and for completing the survey. Once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Meghan Walsh
Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate- Baylor University
Dean, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

May 11, 2021

Recruitment email to all eligible participants

Subject: First-Generation College Student Participants Needed

Dear NAME,

I am writing to request your participation in a voluntary research study about first-generation college students. This study is being conducted by me, Meghan Walsh. I am a student at Baylor University pursuing my Doctorate in Education and I am an employee of [REDACTED] working in the Office of Academic Affairs.

Participation in this study would include:

- ☐ Completion of the following questionnaire. It should take about 5 minutes to complete. [CLICK HERE.](#)
- ☐ The potential to be invited to a focus group conducted via zoom. This would be a one-hour commitment if selected.

Participants in the study must be first-generation college students enrolled at [REDACTED] who have completed at least 54 credits at [REDACTED]. You are being contacted directly because you meet that criteria.

The consent form can be accessed [HERE](#) and must be read before completing the survey. I am also happy to email it to you directly. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact me at Meghan_walsh1@baylor.edu or [Meghan.walsh@\[REDACTED\]](mailto:Meghan.walsh@[REDACTED]). My phone number is [REDACTED] if you prefer to text or call.

Thank you for your consideration and for completing the survey. Once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Meghan Walsh
Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate- Baylor University
Dean, [REDACTED]

June 7, 2021

Reminder email to all eligible participants

Subject: Doctoral Research Survey – Meghan Walsh

Hello NAME,

I hope you're enjoying the start to summer! Please consider taking **5 minutes** to complete the research survey I emailed you about earlier this spring.

As a reminder: I am a student at Baylor University pursuing my Doctorate in Education and I am an employee of [REDACTED] working in the Office of Academic Affairs. The consent form can be accessed [HERE](#) and must be read before completing the survey. I do have permission from [REDACTED] to contact you, and I am also happy to answer any questions about the study.

All I need is for you to complete of the following questionnaire. It should take less than 5 minutes to complete. [CLICK HERE.](#)

I sincerely appreciate your help!
Meghan

Meghan_walsh1@baylor.edu or [Meghan.walsh@\[REDACTED\]](mailto:Meghan.walsh@[REDACTED])
My phone number is [REDACTED] if you prefer to text or call.

Meghan Walsh
Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate- Baylor University
Dean, [REDACTED]

August 18, 2021

Reminder email to all eligible participants

Subject: [REDACTED] First Gen Survey – Win a Gift Card

Dear NAME,

Welcome back! As you prepare to return for your next semester at [REDACTED], wouldn't it be nice to do so with a \$25 gift card to a store or restaurant of your choosing? Get ready for study sessions with a GrubHub Gift card or buy a new beautiful study calendar with an Amazon or Target gift card?

I am writing as a current doctoral student to ask for your help! I need 20-30 more students to help me by taking a short 5 minute survey that will inform my dissertation. This study is being conducted by me, Meghan Walsh. I am an employee of [REDACTED] College working in the Office of Academic Affairs and a student at Baylor University pursuing my Doctorate in Education. Completion of the survey should take no more than five minutes, and when you complete it you will be entered into a drawing for a \$25 gift card to a store or restaurant of your choosing.

[CLICK HERE TO COMPLETE THE SURVEY AND BE ENTERED INTO THE DRAWING!](#)

The consent form can be accessed [HERE](#) and must be read before completing the survey. I am also happy to email it to you directly. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact me at Meghan_walsh1@baylor.edu or [Meghan.walsh@\[REDACTED\]](mailto:Meghan.walsh@[REDACTED]) My phone number is [REDACTED] if you prefer to text or call.

Thank you for your consideration and for completing the survey. Once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Meghan Walsh
Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate- Baylor University
Dean, [REDACTED]

APPENDIX C

Survey

8/28/2021

██████████ Social Engagement for First-Generation College Students

██████████ Social Engagement for First-Generation College Students

Research conducted by Doctoral Candidate Meghan Walsh

* Required

1. Please enter your ██████████ Email Address *

2. Do either of your parents have bachelor's degrees? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. Please check here to indicate that you have read the consent form and give consent for your answers to be collected. *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes

4. Have you participated in any extra-curricular social engagement opportunities while attending ██████████? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No



1/5

5. How many times on average per semester do you participate in the following social engagement opportunities: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9+	Never or Not Applicable
Attending an [X] hosted performance on-campus or virtually	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending an [X] hosted lecture or guest speaker on-campus or virtually	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending a student organization meeting as a member	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending a student organization meeting as the leader	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Planning and leading an event as the leader of a student organization or for a campus job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending a student government meeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending a Promise Scholars event	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending an [X] Athletics event as a spectator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attending an [X] Athletics event as a student athlete participating in the game	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in Community Day or an [X] hosted service opportunity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Attending a residence life event ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Attending an [redacted]-hosted off-campus social event ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

6. If you are an [redacted] student athlete, please list your sport.

7. If you are in a student organization, please list the organization(s).

8. If you lead a student org or are a member of student government please list your role(s).

9. If you are a member of a student success or leadership group like [redacted]

[redacted]

Impact of Social Engagement Questions

The following questions require you to consider how your social engagement has impacted your success at [redacted]. Please select one of the social engagement opportunities (long-term or short-term) in which you have participated for each set of questions below.

10. Please read the paragraph before this question. Which activity will you be considering as you answer this question?

[redacted]

11. For each of the following questions please answer while considering the activity you selected.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral (hasn't helped or hurt)	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to [REDACTED]	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me be successful in my academic courses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. Please select another activity and answer the same questions below. Which activity did you select for the second set of questions?

13. For each of the following questions please answer while considering the activity you selected.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral (hasn't helped or hurt)	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to XXXXXX	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me develop my communication skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in this activity has helped me be successful in my academic courses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Google Forms

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Research Study: How Social Engagement Opportunities Impact the Sense of Belonging and Success of Successful First-Generation College Students: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Study

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Schedule:

Welcome

Overview of purpose of research study

Restatement of information in consent form and request for verbal reiterated consent from each participant.

Focus group questions asked

Conclude questions.

Thank participants and remind of ways to contact the researchers with questions or concerns.

Questions:
1. Why did you choose to participate in NAME OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY?
2. Why do you choose to remain involved with NAME OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY?
3. Would you encourage future [REDACTED] students to get involved in campus social engagement opportunities? Why or why not?
4. Have you formed friendships as a result of being involved on campus? If so, how have these relationships impacted your experience at [REDACTED]?
5. Do you think it is important for [REDACTED] to offer social engagement opportunities? Why or why not?
6. What impact do you think participating in a social engagement opportunity has on your success as a student?
7. How would you describe your experiences participating in NAME OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY with your faculty advisor?
8. How do you know you [REDACTED] is the right school for you and what impact does your involvement in social activities have on that decision?

This is a semi-structured interview. The researcher will allow for follow-up questions to student responses and may omit questions that are redundant based on student responses.

APPENDIX E

Quantitative Question Mapping

Survey Question	Theoretical Framework Connection	Purpose	Research Question
Please Enter Your Email Address	n/a	Identification	n/a
Do either of your parents have bachelor's degrees?	Ishitani (2003) – definition of first-generation college student.	Eligibility to participate in study	n/a
Please check that you have read the consent form and give consent for your answers to be collected?	n/a	Consent	n/a
Have you participated in any extra-curricular social engagement opportunities while attending Francis College?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Descriptive Statistics	RQ1
How many times on average per semester do you participate in the following social engagement opportunities?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Descriptive Statistics	RQ1
If you are a student athlete, please list your sport.	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Qualitative Follow-Up Purposeful Sampling	RQ2
If you are in a student organization, please list the organization (s).	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Qualitative Follow-Up Purposeful Sampling	RQ2
If you lead a student org or are a member of student government, please list your role(s).	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Qualitative Follow-Up Purposeful Sampling	RQ2

Survey Question	Theoretical Framework Connection	Purpose	Research Question
If you are a member of a student success or leadership group, please list which one(s).	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	Qualitative Follow-Up Purposeful Sampling	RQ2
Which activity will you be considering as you answer the next question?	n/a	Qualitative Follow-Up Purposeful Sampling	RQ2
<p>For each of the following questions please answer while considering the activity you selected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to Francis College - Participating in this activity makes me feel connected to the other students participating with me - Participating in this activity has helped me form meaningful friendships - Participating in this activity has helped me develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty members - Participating this activity has helped me develop communication skills - Participating in this activity has helped me be successful in my academic courses 	Tinto (1975) – success	Descriptive Statistics	RQ2

APPENDIX F

Qualitative Interview Question Mapping

Question	Theoretical Framework	Research Question
Why did you choose to participate in this social engagement opportunity?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement	RQ3
Why did you choose to remain involved with this social engagement opportunity?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success Strayhorn (2019) – Belonging	RQ2, RQ3
Would you encourage future Francis College students to get involved in campus social engagement opportunities? Why or why not?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success Strayhorn (2019) – Belonging	RQ2, RQ3
Have you formed friendships as a result of being involved on campus? If so, how have these relationships impacted our experience at Francis College?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement Strayhorn (2019) – Belonging Noddings (2012) - Care	RQ2, RQ3
Do you think it is important for Francis College to offer social engagement opportunities? Why or why not?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success Strayhorn (2019) – Belonging Noddings (2012) - Care	RQ2, RQ3
What impact do you think participating in this social engagement opportunity has had on your success as a student?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success	RQ3
How would you describe your experiences participating in social engagement opportunities with faculty advisors?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success	RQ3
How do you know Francis College is the right school for you? Is it? What impact do your involvement in social activities have on that decision?	Tinto (1975) – social engagement, success Strayhorn (2019) – Belonging Noddings (2012) - Care	RQ2, RQ3

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