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College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Randolph Connell Scott

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Supporting First-Generation College Student Counselors-in-Training to Overcome

Systemic Barriers: A Participatory Action Research Study

by

Randolph Connell Scott

MAEd, Seattle University, 2016

BA, George Fox University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

The need for mental health professionals is increasing rapidly, and the United States is facing a critical shortage of mental health counselors. Concurrently, one of the largest and fastest-growing graduate student populations is first-generation (FG) college students. But this marginalized population is less likely to persist to graduation than their continuing education peers. FG college students have many strengths that make them well-suited to become mental health counselors; however, counseling programs and counselor education and supervision (CES) faculty do not have the information about the challenges faced by these students or the supports that would help them persist to graduation. This qualitative participatory action research (PAR) study documented working alongside FG counselors-in-training to identify the systemic barriers they face and the supports that would help them persist to graduation. Data were collected and analyzed through the lens of qualitative PAR and rooted in Bourdieu's social capital theory and Tierney's cultural integrity model theoretical frameworks. From semistructured interviews analyzed using MAXQDA software to code for themes, overall, three themes emerged: (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational. The counseling field is mandated to center social justice and equity in the profession, and the information from this study will help counseling programs and CES faculty challenge systemic obstacles facing this marginalized population and the supports that would help them become counselors to meet the growing mental health crisis in the United States.

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Dedication

Growing up in poverty in a small Kansas town, college was never an option. Nobody in my family ever went to college. We did not have the financial resources or knowledge necessary for me to apply to college, let alone secure financial aid. My guidance counselor at my high school during my senior year told me something I will never forget: "You're just not the type of person who goes to college." It saddened, angered, and motivated me to prove him wrong. I did not know it then, but I was what would one day be called a first-generation college student.

It took me 30 years to complete my undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral education. I encountered many people over the years who echoed what my high school guidance counselor said. However, numerous people saw something in me that, most of the time, even I could not recognize. They encouraged me. They pushed me. They loved me. They held me accountable. They were like a beautiful group of fireflies lighting my path. I dedicate this dissertation to all of you fireflies who made it so I could see my way on this journey.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my two children, Tristan and Isabelle. You both have bright futures, and you can do whatever you want to do. And if anyone ever tells you that you are not "the type of person" who does what you want to do, I will be right there. Alongside you. Reminding you that you are the type of person who can do it. I will be the brightest firefly in your night sky, helping light the path you want to walk. I love you both.

And to all of the first-generation kids like me out there, you got this.

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First, I want to thank my family, who went through this process with me. Ananda, Tristan, Isabelle, Gracie, and Dulli, your encouragement, belief in me, and your love kept me going. I love you all. I also want to thank everyone who supported me on this journey. Alana, you deserve every degree I have because you were right next to me the whole time. Thank you for being my number one fan. Dr. Joy Goldsmith, Dr. Mary Olson, Dr. Alvin Sturdivant, Dr. Tim Wilson, Dr. Michele Murray, and all my colleagues in higher education, you helped light the fire in me to take on what seemed like an impossible task, and I am grateful to you all.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The need for mental health professionals in the United States is increasing faster on average than in nearly any other profession. To keep up with the projected demand, the counseling profession needs to expand close to 25% before 2031 (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in reports of depression, anxiety, grief, stress, and pandemic-related trauma, all of which the American Psychological Association (APA, 2022) projects will continue increasing (Dailey et al., 2022). Along with the increased need for mental health counselors, the U.S. faces an oncoming shortage of counselors because many practicing are nearing retirement age (Phillips, 2023).

There is also a significant need for trained counselors who are prepared to work with an increasingly diverse population of clients (Dailey et al., 2022; O'Hara et al., 2021). Counselors are increasingly called to address issues of social justice and change in their work and to consider the social location and environmental impacts unique to certain populations (Ratts et al., 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). As a result, the terms *multiculturalism* and *culture* have expanded, and the focus has shifted to the issues of privileged versus marginalized status (Loeb et al., 2021; Ratts et al., 2016), referring to those excluded due to race, gender, age, etc. (Sevelius et al., 2020). The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) and CACREP (2015) focus on diversifying the mental health profession to serve a growing multicultural population better.

Marginalized groups, including first-generation (FG) college students, are vital to the health of the counseling profession (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021). In addition to their social and educational marginalization, it is well-documented that FG college students typically hold other marginalized cultural, racial, and socioeconomic identities

and experience higher financial, emotional, social, and mental health challenges than their continuing-generation (CG) peers (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Hébert, 2017; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Roksa et al., 2018). Research has established that clients seeking mental health services are often drawn to clinicians who hold the same marginalized identities as themselves (Ertl et al., 2019; Greenaway, 2014; Meyer & Zane, 2013); similarity leads to effective communication and positive clinical outcomes (Ertl et al., 2019; Greenaway, 2014; Meyer & Zane, 2013). Shared identities include aspects such as racial or gender identity or sexual orientation as well as characteristics like educational attainment (Remley & Herlihy, 2020). In addition to these matching identities, holding a similar cultural identity or experiencing "cultural congruence" (Cabral & Smith, 2011, p. 537) between counselors and clients has been shown to help clients achieve higher rates of reported clinical success. This cultural congruence also includes shared socioeconomic background and acculturation process. One example is how FG college students adjust or fail to adjust to the higher education landscape without previous generational knowledge (Ertl et al., 2019; Cabral & Smith, 2011; Meyer & Zane, 2013).

In addition to cultural congruence, research has shown that FG students have many strengths that would make them efficient counselors, such as their resilience and openness to change (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Dumsch, 2016; Payne et al., 2023). FG college students have also been shown to be more self-reliant, emotionally tougher, and more mature than their CG counterparts (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Effective counselors hold many of these traits (Corey, 2012). Many clients enter counseling with the goal of becoming more equipped to deal with emotional challenges, another FG college student strength (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Walden University, n.d.). Further, FG college students are more likely to be drawn to professions where they can serve as professional helpers, such as mental health counseling (Havlik et al., 2017;

Simmons et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020). This desire to be a part of something bigger than themselves and help others is another shared characteristic between FG college students and effective mental health counselors (CACREP, n.d.; Corey, 2012; Havlik et al., 2017; Simmons et al., 2018).

Despite these strengths, previous research has shown the challenges faced by undergraduate FG college students entering college and the developmentally appropriate supports needed to persist to graduation (Eveland, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2016). Without information on the challenges they encounter and the supports they need to succeed, CES faculty cannot effectively serve as educators and mentors of this marginalized group of students. This failure to address systemic barriers by CES faculty and the lack of adequate support that FG college students need to persist to graduation contributes to the overall lack of counselors in the profession necessary to meet the growing mental health needs of society (APA, 2021; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; Fry, 2021; Scruth, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The potential social change implication of this study is that with the information provided by this research, CES faculty will be better equipped to adequately support and prepare FG college students studying to be counselors to enter the profession and serve the growing mental health crisis in the United States (APA, 2021; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; Fry, 2021; Scruth, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

This chapter summarizes the background of this study, including related research literature and the gap in the current knowledge on the lived experiences of FG college students who are also CIT. Additionally, this chapter introduces the problem statement, the purpose of this study, and the research questions (RQs) guiding it. This chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that serve as the foundation of this research and an explanation of the nature of the

study. Key concepts and constructs will be defined, and there will be an exploration of the assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

Previous research shows that over a third, and in some studies over half, of undergraduate students identify as FG college students (Gibbons et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2019). A growing segment of the overall college student population (Gibbons et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2019), FG college students are defined as individuals whose parents do not have a postsecondary degree (Klonowski, 2017). These students often hold additional marginalized racial, cultural, and socioeconomic identities, further complicating their educational pursuits and leading to higher attrition rates than their CG college peers (Brown et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

As a historically underserved population (McCarthy et al., 2023), FG college students, including those in graduate programs like counseling, are less likely to persist to graduation (Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021). Even for those who receive an undergraduate degree, FG students struggle to pursue a master's level education, such as the degree required to become a licensed mental health counselor. Graduate school represents a brand-new set of challenges for these students that their CG peers are more prepared to overcome (Seay et al., 2008). Research has shown that fewer FG college students with undergraduate degrees opt to pursue graduate degrees than CG college students with undergraduate degrees (Evans et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2017). Recent trends in higher education show that graduate school enrollment, particularly by underrepresented students, is projected to increase significantly (Redden, 2021). However, research suggests that in the case of FG college students, high enrollment does not lead to high graduation levels. Of those FG students who are admitted to graduate school, fewer FG college

students persist to graduation than their CG peers, leaving FG students underrepresented in all professional occupations requiring graduate degrees, such as counseling (Evans et al., Fry, 2021; Horowitz, 2017).

Without the information necessary for CES faculty to support this marginalized, vulnerable population (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), FG college students are more likely not to finish graduate school preventing them from becoming licensed mental health counselors (Chang & Wang, 2019). Training to be a counselor requires deep self-reflection and examination of the CIT identity (Adams et al., 2006; Slay & Smith, 2011). FG college students struggle with more self-doubt in their abilities than their CG peers, contributing to higher FG attrition levels (Evans et al., 2020; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Simmons et al., 2018). However, often regardless of the faculty's awareness of this challenge, FG college students continue to struggle academically and drop out of graduate counseling programs at higher rates than their CG peers (Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021). This study on the systemic barriers faced by FG college students training to be counselors will assist CES faculty, support staff, and administrators of counseling programs in offering the supports that will help these students persist to graduation and enter the mental health field.

Problem Statement

There is a call for the CES profession to serve an increasingly diverse population of students and advocate for social justice issues (ACES, 2020; CACREP, n.d.; Ratts et al., 2016). However, despite this mandate, a group that is often neglected in discussions of educational diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) is FG college students (Williams & Ash, 2021). FG college students experience higher stress levels and academic struggles due to their marginalized educational status (Schuyler et al., 2021). FG college students also typically hold

other marginalized cultural, racial, and socioeconomic identities and experience higher financial, emotional, social, and mental health challenges than their continuing-generation (CG) peers, making them additionally vulnerable to high levels of attrition (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Hébert, 2017; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Roksa et al., 2018). Because of the multiple, intersectional identities that they hold, FG students, as a marginalized group (Brown et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), are likely have unique needs that need to be further investigated (Schuyler et al., 2021). For instance, when it comes to graduate school, FG college students are more likely than their CG peers to leave school with higher debt and no graduate degree, the latter of which is a requirement of the counseling profession (Fry, 2021).

Since fewer FG college students pursue graduate degrees than CG students, and even fewer persist to graduation at the master's level (Evans et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2017), this group is underrepresented in all professional occupations, including counseling (Fry, 2021). But marginalized groups such as FG college students are vital to the health of the counseling profession because shared identities between counselor and client have been shown to result in more positive clinical outcomes (Meyer & Zane, 2013). Previous research has illustrated the challenges faced by undergraduate FG college students entering college and the developmentally appropriate supports needed to persist to graduation (Eveland, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2016). However, a lack of research exists about the experiences of FG college students training to be counselors. Without this information, CES faculty cannot adequately assist FG college CIT to persist to graduation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative PAR study was to work alongside FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them persist to graduation. FG college students are a marginalized group with unique challenges that their CG peers do not have (Brown et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Hutson et al., 2022; Wilcox et al., 2021; Wofford et al., 2021). As CIT, these FG students continue to face high attrition related to their FG identity (Evans et al., 2020; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Simmons et al., 2018). But if FG college students are not graduating from counseling programs, the counseling profession has fewer FG counselors to meet FG clients' needs better. Research has shown that cultural match between counselors and clients improves clinical outcomes (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Ertl et al., 2019; Greenaway, 2014; Meyer & Zane, 2013). The cultural identity a person presents to others is shaped by social factors and personal experience (Curtis & Eby, 2010). A counselor with a similar cultural identity is often seen as more empathetic, credible, and trustworthy by clients (Meyer & Zane, 2013; Toriello & Strohmer, 2004). For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) clients are more likely to seek out counselors with the same sexual minority cultural background, which often leads to a stronger therapeutic alliance (Bishop & Scholz, 2021).

Research Questions

Using Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM, the two research questions informing this study were:

RQ 1: What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face?

RQ 2: What supports would help FG college students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM. Bourdieu's SCT is one of the most established theoretical approaches implemented in research involving higher education and FG college students (Ivana, 2016; Mikiewicz, 2021; Negura & Asiminei, 2021). Further examined in Chapter 2, the basic tenets of SCT center around Bourdieu's idea that when a member of a person's family has previous experience with higher education as a student, referred to as social capital, the current student is more likely to succeed due to the intergenerational knowledge they bring with them to college (LeBouef& Dworkin, 2021; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Holding social capital helps CG students more easily navigate the process of applying for financial aid and college admission and navigate the academic, financial, social, and emotional hurdles that come with being a college student (Miner, 2021). SCT suggests that CG students have a sort of map that helps them navigate the higher education landscape that FG college students do not have that lasts their entire college academic career (Tierney, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2021). The FG college student identity and all the inequities that come with it are not things that are overcome and left behind after receiving an undergraduate degree (Simmons et al., 2018).

Tierney's CIM also established the theoretical foundation for this study. According to Kolluri and Tierney (2019), CIM puts the onus on institutions and stakeholders like faculty to adjust to students' cultural backgrounds and identities rather than the traditional idea that students should assimilate into higher education settings. As a marginalized population (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), FG college students often experience microaggressions and hurdles that their CG peers do not (Ellis et al., 2019), often starting in college and carried into their professional identities (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Bettencourt et al.,

2020). While higher education often espouses a desire to support FG college students, colleges and universities still promote “a survival of the fittest, competitive academic culture where naiveté is weakness and historical academic privilege is the social and political capital that must be obtained for first-generation faculty to effectively navigate toward tenure, reputable scholarship, and professorial success” (Bechard & Gragg, 2020, p. 141). This series of microaggressions by the structures of higher education further marginalize FG college students, even when they overcome obstacles to joining academia. However, the CIM framework suggests that when marginalized groups (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), such as FG college students, are given adequate and specific supports that build on their strengths, they are more capable of academic success (Tierney, 2013). The CIM suggests that higher education structures such as college and university counseling programs and CES faculty are responsible for providing unique supports for FG college students; this study aimed to discover what these supports are.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative PAR informed the nature of this study. Since FG college students are a marginalized group (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), PAR was chosen over other forms of qualitative research approaches because it focuses on empowering those oppressed by systemic barriers (Fine & Torre, 2021; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The purpose of this qualitative PAR study was to work alongside FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them persist to graduation.

Stemming from social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s groundbreaking action research paradigm shift of the 1950s, PAR stresses minimizing power differentials between the researcher

and the participants in the study (Lawson et al., 2015). PAR was well-suited for this study because, as a methodology, it aligns with Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM, which both emphasize centering discourse around issues of education, power, class, and socioeconomic marginalization to enact social change (Kolluri & Tierney, 2019; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Tierney, 1999). Bourdieu also put forth that social capital is a way for those in power to remain in power and expand their power through cultural inheritance (such as how CG college students can), continuing to leave those (such as FG college students) further marginalized (Ovink & Veazey, 2010; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016; Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Almeida, 2015).

This study sought to contribute to the existing literature on FG college students training to be counselors by working alongside FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them graduate and become counselors. Information was collected through semistructured interviews about the lived experiences of FG college students training to be counselors in CACREP-accredited programs. Due to the democratic nature of PAR, once transcribed, these interview transcripts were shared and reviewed with the participants for accuracy.

The semistructured interviews collected for this study were conducted via Zoom with CIT who met the criteria detailed in the Definitions section of this paper. Along with being FG college CIT, the participants were enrolled in CACREP-affiliated programs in the United States. In addition to established qualitative data collection, analysis, and procedures such as semistructured interviewing, this study also used researcher journaling to create an audit trail in keeping with PAR best practices (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Patton, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Definitions

This section defines the following terms for this study:

Continuing-generation (CG) college student: A college student who has a parent or guardian who completed a bachelor's degree (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Manzoni & Streib, 2018).

First-generation (FG) college students: Individuals "pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree" (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017, p. 635).

Marginalized population(s): Sevelius et al., (2020) defined this population as

> those excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, and/or cultural life. Examples of marginalized populations include, but are not limited to, groups excluded due to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, and/or immigration status. Marginalization occurs due to unequal power relationships between social groups. (p. 2009).

Participatory action research (PAR): A qualitative, democratic approach to research that seeks to partner with participants to "find solutions and to promote social and political transformation" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 1).

Assumptions

This section addresses this study's critical and meaningful assumptions; these assumptions are aspects of the study that I, as the researcher, believed but that I could not verify. The first assumption was that the participants in the study accurately identified themselves as FG college students as defined for this research and as a CIT actively enrolled in their identified CACREP counseling program. The second assumption of this study was that the information the participants provided in the semistructured interviews about their FG college student experiences

was thoughtful, honest, and thorough. Third, there was an assumption that from a social constructivist view of PAR, the information for this study was co-constructed democratically between me as the researcher and the participants (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This co-construction was operationalized by checking in with participants at every data analysis stage as a best practice in PAR (Fine & Torre, 2021; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). A final assumption was that in the role of the researcher and as a future CES professional, I held a bias that addressing the needs of FG college students is a social justice issue that requires systemic change. According to Herr and Anderson (2014), researcher bias and subjectivity are acceptable in PAR if the researcher critically examines their bias as part of the process. The topic of researcher bias will be further addressed in Chapter 3.

Scope and Delimitations

This section describes the specific aspects of the research problem addressed in this study, the reason for focusing on the population studied, and issues with transferability. Participants in this study were CIT at CACREP-accredited colleges and universities who identified as FG college students. The first delimitation in this study was the choice to interview only FG college student CIT participants at CACREP-affiliated institutions. The choice was made only to interview participants in CACREP programs because accreditation suggests that the programs the participants are enrolled in meet criteria set by the counseling profession and that the students in the study face similar learning standards and rigor by faculty employed there (CACREP, 2022). Helping to control for consistency in the student experience helped to address issues of trustworthiness and transferability in this study. A second delimitation was that the definition presented earlier for FG college students excluded CIT with parents who may have

started college and did not finish or possibly earned a professional certification but did not earn a bachelor's degree. This decision was made to limit the possible criteria for the sample because including all possible scenarios would overly complicate the study.

Transferability in qualitative research, such as PAR, refers to the extent that a study's results can be applied elsewhere (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014b). In PAR, a researcher's primary concern is not with generalization but with the transfer of knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This study aimed to transfer knowledge and specific suggestions from the FG college CIT participants about systemic barriers they face and the supports necessary to help them persist to graduation to CES faculty and other stakeholders.

Limitations

This section describes the limitations of this study, biases that could influence study outcomes, and measures taken to mitigate limitations. This study's most significant limitation was the potential for researcher bias to influence the study's outcome. As an FG college student who was previously a CIT, I, as the researcher, have firsthand knowledge of many of the experiences that participants addressed. PAR holds that researcher "bias and subjectivity are natural and acceptable … as long as they are critically examined rather than ignored" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 73). Researchers use tools such as journaling, field notes, member checking, and validation meetings to address subjectivity and bias in PAR to avoid misrepresenting findings (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Patton, 2014). These mechanisms were all used in this study to mitigate researcher bias. They are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Significance

As U.S. society continues to become more diverse, the counseling profession is ethically mandated to evolve to meet the mental health needs of traditionally marginalized groups (ACA,

2014; Ratts et al., 2016). Additionally, counseling professionals are called to be social justice activists who advocate for those without power or adequate resources (Fortuna et al., 2020; Marshall-Lee et al., 2019; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Though conversations addressing DEIA often center on race and gender identity, social justice-focused counseling professionals supporting equity must also attend to issues related to educational accessibility and socioeconomic status (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2021).

This PAR study adds to the literature about the experiences of FG college student CIT. It provides CES faculty, institutions of higher education, and organizations such as the ACA and CACREP with vital information about ways to support FG college students wanting to enter and complete graduate school and eventually join the counseling profession. This study aimed to aid in helping the counseling profession live up to its aspirational goals of being as diverse as the population it serves (ACA, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016).

Summary

This chapter provided background detailing a research plan to study the lived experiences of FG college student CIT alongside the study's participants to determine the systemic barriers they face. Additionally, this study aimed to discover the supports necessary for FG college student CIT to persist to graduation and enter the counseling profession. This process included presenting this research's problem statement, purpose, and RQs.

Additionally, this chapter presented SCT and CIM as this study's theoretical framework that guided the research, a discussion of the nature of the study, and definitions of key terms and assumptions. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the scope, delimitations, and limitations facing the researcher, as well as the significance of this study to CES professionals and other higher education stakeholders. Chapter 2 describes this study's key word and database

search strategy, a further exploration of SCT and CIM, and an extensive literature review of previous FG college student CIT research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a rising societal need for more mental health counselors (APA, 2021; Scruth, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2022), especially those who hold marginalized identities, such as FG college students from oppressed educational backgrounds (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), to join the field (Meyers, 2017; Thacker & Minton, 2021). However, FG college students are less likely than their CG peers to graduate (Hutson et al., 2022; Redford & Hoyer, 2020; Wagner et al., 2020). A study addressing the systemic barriers faced by FG CIT was needed to help diversify the counseling profession and serve the growing needs of its clients. This study into the obstacles preventing this marginalized population from completing a master's degree in counseling was needed to give CES faculty the information they need to help FG CIT persist to graduation.

Previous research into the undergraduate FG college student experience showed that these students encounter more systemic barriers than their CG peers and are less likely to complete a degree (Brown et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2020). Limited studies have focused on FG graduate students. However, research into the FG college student experience suggests that graduate students likely encounter many, if not more, of the same social, emotional, and socioeconomic challenges as they did when they were FG undergraduate students (Hutson et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2020). Moreover, it is unknown what systemic barriers prevent FG college students from persisting to graduation in graduate programs training them to become mental health counselors. This qualitative PAR study aimed to work alongside FG college students enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them graduate and become counselors.

This chapter presents a case for using Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM as this study's theoretical foundation. After outlining the databases used and the search strategies implemented in preparation for this study, this chapter also includes a comprehensive review of pertinent FG college student and counselor/counseling literature that underlines this study's importance. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the significant themes discovered and an explanation of how this study will fill a gap in higher education literature that, if addressed, would help FG college student CIT persist to graduation and contribute to the growing needs in the counseling profession.

Literature Search Strategy

This study began with a search for peer-reviewed articles in the Walden University Library and the University of Washington Library website search engines to comprehensively understand previous research into the FG college student population from the past several years. The Walden University Library was chosen as the primary search vehicle because I am a doctoral student enrolled there. However, the Walden University Library search engine often provided broken links to articles or did not have access to articles. As an employee of the University of Washington, I had the benefit of having access to its library database and was able to find the articles I could not find via the Walden University Library. The following databases contributed to the collection of scholarly research to aid this study: Academic Search Complete, APA PsychInfo, SocINDEX with Full Text, SAGE Journals, and the U.S. Department of Education's ERIC database. The keywords used in researching this topic include *action research, attrition, Bourdieu, CACREP, CES, counselor education and supervision, cultural integrity, FG college students, FGCS, first-gen, first-generation college students, college, continuing-generation, counseling, counselor identity, cultural capital, graduate, higher*

education, inequity, low-income, marginalization, master's, poverty, psychotherapy, socioeconomic status, systemic barriers, therapy, therapists, university, participatory action research, and *Tierney.* Searches yielded 688 peer-reviewed articles for this study's literature review. Due to the limited previous research on FG graduate counseling students, the search was expanded to include non-peer-reviewed sources related to higher education, academic success, and counselor identity, such as the publications *Counseling Today, Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Educatio*n, and information from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Center for First-Generation Student Success. Not all articles were synthesized for inclusion. The articles were chosen based on several criteria, including but not limited to the recency of the publication date, the country in which the research was conducted, and how closely the author's discipline aligned with the counseling profession.

Theoretical Foundation

This study's theoretical foundation was built on Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM. One of the most employed and well-established theories used in social science research, SCT was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s and 1980s (Ivana, 2016; Mikiewicz, 2021; Negura & Asiminei, 2021; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). According to SCT, educational inequality is an internalized, generationally reproducing concept (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016) based on social class that shapes an individual's "thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions" (Wofford et al., 2021, pp. 1015–1026). Bourdieu put forth that socioeconomic status, cultural, and generational knowledge serve as currency in higher education; those with more social and cultural capital, such as CG students, are more likely to succeed than those without it (Ardoin, 2018, as cited in Ricks & Warren, 2021; Bentley, 2018; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). A lack of social capital, or connections with institutional knowledge and other individuals, especially hurts

students with marginalized identities (Bentley, 2018; Fox, 2016). FG college students have less social capital and institutional knowledge than their CG peers, contributing to their educational marginalization (Brown et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Hébert, 2017; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Martinez, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2023; Roksa et al., 2018; Schuyler et al., 2021).

SCT has been the cornerstone of multiple studies into the FG college student undergraduate experience in higher education. In these previous studies, it has been established that these students often struggle in college because they do not have the generational or professional guidance necessary to navigate a complicated, unfamiliar academic landscape (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). For example, Brookover et al. (2022) used SCT to examine ways school counselors can support rising first-year FG college students. Many studies pointed out that higher education institutions and faculty often view FG college students through a deficit lens (Coronella, 2018; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Martin et al., 2020; Olcoń et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020). Colleges and universities should increase their acknowledgment of FG college students' existing social capital, such as strong familial relationships and previous lived experiences (Martin et al., 2020).

Few studies have been conducted on the experiences of FG college students in graduate programs. Still, some, such as the one by Fussell-Ware (2021) that used SCT to study social work doctoral students, were consistent with previous findings into the FG college student undergraduate experience, such as taking "longer to finish their degrees and leav(ing) their programs with higher levels of graduate school debt than other graduates" (p. 299). For instance, FG graduate students studying to be nurses are more likely to be immigrants, veterans, people of color, and are slightly older than their CG peers, in addition to holding less social capital, making

it more challenging to complete a degree on time with a minimal amount of debt (Wagner et al., 2020). Wilcox et al. (2021) also found that FG psychology graduate students held significantly higher credit card debt and more financial stressors than CG students in the same program.

SCT was chosen as part of the theoretical foundation for this study because it helped to establish some reasons for FG college students' high levels of attrition. SCT suggests that because their parents did not complete a college degree due to factors such as financial hardship and lack of generational knowledge, FG college students are more likely to struggle in college as well (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Of particular importance to this study was how two of the most significant contributors to FG college students' low social capital are their parents' inability to offer emotional and monetary support because of a lack of parental education and financial resources (Ricks & Warren, 2021).

CIM

Building upon Bourdieu's SCT, Tierney's (1999) CIM served as an additional aspect of this study's theoretical framework. This model suggests that rather than seeing a student's minoritized cultural background, such as being an FG college student, as a hindrance to their education, colleges and universities, including faculty, should adjust their policies and pedagogy to meet the strengths and needs of these students (Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Traditionally, institutions of higher learning expect students to assimilate into the existing culture of colleges and universities (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). However, when colleges and universities research the specific needs of FG undergraduate students and subsequently adjust their campus culture to support them, these students are more likely to persist to graduation. Implementing programs such as the First-Gen Forward institution designation by the Center for First-Generation Student Success (n.d.), which trains faculty in

recognizing FG undergraduate students and offering additional mentoring, have been shown to significantly assist FG undergraduate students in completing their education.

University faculty, staff, and administration often assume accountability for academic success or failure rests almost exclusively on the student, which creates an inequitable burden on FG college students (Tierney & Almeida, 2015). FG college students hold less conventional social capital than their CG peers, who have what amounts to an inherited roadmap of how to be successful in college (Tierney, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2021). When colleges and universities ignore cultural integrity and expect marginalized students to leave their culture in their communities of origin, these students "will not respond either because the programs do not meet their specific needs, or because they do not feel the programs are actually designed for them" (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002, p. 6).

Previous research has shown that FG college students often enter college carrying a sense of otherness with them and a lack of belonging and support that contributes to higher levels of attrition than their CG peers (Brown et al., 2020; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Orme, 2021). FG college students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, take longer to complete degrees, and when they do persist to graduation, leave college with significantly more debt than their CG peers (McDonald et al., 2020). A significant factor in college students' ability to successfully enter their chosen career is by having a fully developed sense of professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

First-Generation College Students

The term *FG college student* was introduced into higher education discourse by the Council for Opportunity in Education in 1980 (Chronicle Intelligence, 2021), yet there are still

struggles to find a consistent definition (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Peralta and Klonowski (2017) conducted a metanalysis of peer-reviewed literature related to FG college students since 2006. They found that half of the articles studied did not provide a conceptual definition and that the remaining articles that did define FG college students used nine different definitions. The authors suggested that the following definition be used by future researchers: “an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree” (p. 635). This is the definition of FG college student that was also selected for this research study.

FG college students are a growing population in higher education. As many as 56% of current college students in the United States are first-generation (Watts et al., 2022), which is projected to continue to grow (Miner, 2021). This finding is consistent with the research that found that between 46% and 57% of students at U.S. colleges are FG college students (Brown et al., 2020). Because of the large population of FG students currently enrolled in college and the significant projected growth of this population of students, NASPA created the Center for First-Generation Student Success to help educate higher education faculty and staff about this educationally vulnerable population (NASPA, 2020). However, most of NASPA’s FG research has centered on the FG undergraduate experience. This focus is consistent with other research into the FG college student population that primarily focuses on the challenges faced by FG undergraduates (Eveland, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2016).

FG college students are a diverse group and are more likely than their CG peers to be people of color (Gibbons et al., 2016; Hinz et al., n.d.). FG college students also tend to be older than their CG peers. FG students, on average, take longer than their CG peers to complete a degree, which could account for them being older than CG students (Ricks & Warren, 2021).

Other research suggests that familial obligations and lack of financial means may delay an FG student's start in college, making them older than their CG peers (Longwell-Grice, 2016).

Research has shown that FG college students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their CG peers (Payne et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021). FG college students are often drawn to college in an effort to end generational financial struggles (Brown et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). FG college students are more likely than their CG peers to take out student loans to pay for school, and since they take longer to complete their degrees, they incur more debt (Brown et al., 2020; Eveland, 2019; Fry, 2021; McDonald et al., 2020). Additionally, FG college students are more likely to be financially independent of their parents. They are more likely to work full-time while in college than CG students, which from a time constraint standpoint, often contributes to having more academic struggles (Evans et al., 2020).

Academically, FG college students typically enter college less academically prepared than their CG peers for the rigors of higher education (Evans et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2016). Ricks and Warren (2021) found that while in school, FG college students spend less time studying than their CG peers due to having to work, and this often results in FG students having lower grade point averages. Because of their academic struggles, attrition rates for FG college students between their first and second year of college are suspected to be as high as 50%; these attrition risk rates continue to rise with each subsequent year an FG student is in college (Ricks & Warren, 2021). When undergraduate FG college student does persist to graduation, they are less likely than their CG peers to attempt a graduate degree and are more likely to leave graduate school without completing their degree (Seay et al., 2008).

From a mental health perspective, FG college students are more likely to struggle while in college than their CG peers (Evans et al., 2020; Hammermeister et al., 2020). Though college is often an emotional challenge for many students, LeBouf & Dworkin (2021) pointed out that FG college students struggle more emotionally than their CG peers and report higher levels of mental health distress. Hammermeister et al. (2020) found that FG college students are more likely than CG students to judge their own abilities negatively. Additionally, unlike their CG peers, FG college students are less likely to receive emotional support from their family members who have never navigated the complex higher education landscape creating an intensified feeling of loneliness and isolation (Brown et al., 2020; Swanbrow et al., 2017). Compounding this distress is the fact that FG college students often report higher levels of guilt associated with being in college because they feel as if they are rejecting their cultural background or family of origin expectations (Covarrubias et al., 208; Evans et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2022). Ellis et al. (2019) pointed out how as a marginalized group, FG college students are at times the target of microaggressions such as microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations by other students, faculty, and staff based on their FG educational identity.

Despite the host of challenges facing them, FG college students bring with them many strengths to college and university campuses that, if identified by faculty, can be nurtured (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021; Havlik et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Havlik et al. (2017) found that FG college students often have the desire to be a part of work that is bigger than themselves and do work that is for the "greater good" (p. 130). Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) found that FG students tend to be "prosocial academic learners – meaning students who want to learn in community, and want their learning to be connected to and beneficial for their home communities" (p. 157). Additionally, many FG college students exhibit attributes such as

drive and independence and are "often more adept at managing the ambiguity of unknown environments than their non-first-generation peers" (Wick et al., 2019, p. 65).

FG college students tend to deeply value relationships, especially with those in positions of power such as faculty but are often reticent to reach out to faculty and have fewer interactions with faculty than their CG peers (Havlik et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Faculty support has been shown to be one of the most substantial mitigating factors to prevent FG college student attrition (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). However, Schademan et al. (2015) and Hutson et al. (2022) pointed out that even when they are aware that they have FG students in their classrooms, faculty are often unsure how to adjust or adapt their teaching style to meet the academic learning needs of FG college students.

As previously mentioned, most FG college student research has focused on the undergraduate experience, with little attention paid to the FG graduate student experience (Wofford et al., 2021). Hutson et al. (2022) found that FG graduate students continue to struggle with all of the same challenges related to academic performance, mental health, and financial insecurity that they did as undergraduates, but as graduate students face even more challenges. FG graduate students typically enter graduate school later than their CG peers, making them older, which can contribute to an exacerbated sense of otherness and isolation (Wilcox et al., 2021). Additionally, FG graduate students are more likely than their CG peers to work full-time, have less emotional and social support, be parents, and struggle more financially while enrolled in school (Hutson et al., 2022; Simmons et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2021).

Counselor Professional Identity

Outside of learning about ethics, honing counseling skills, and familiarity with diagnosis, a fundamental aspect of counselor education is developing an understanding of counselor

identity (Dong et al., 2017; Lile, 2017). Helping students develop their counselor professional identity is also an expectation set forth by CACREP (2016; Christensen et al., 2018). Degges-White and Stoltz (2015) wrote that the development of counselor identity "is continuous and lifelong, and it reflects a deeper shift in personal identity, awareness, and behaviors than other careers" (pp. 49-50). In addition to the academic requirements that come with graduate school, Dong et al. (2017) detailed the many other struggles CIT have in professional identity development, including "contradictory or ambiguous experiences triggering self-questioning and identity reshaping and a tendency to be self-critical and evaluate oneself primarily based upon external standards" (p. 306).

FG college students have been shown to experience higher levels of stress, struggle more financially to fund their education, are less prepared for the academic rigor of graduate school and receive less social and emotional support than their CG peers (Hutson et al., 2022; Schuman et al., 2021). Neumeister and Rinker (2006) wrote that the "primary influence on achievement" (p. 305) of even academically gifted FG college students is feeling as if they have an emerging professional identity. With less social capital, FG graduate students experience higher levels of self-doubt and efficacy than their CG peers, leading to more intense struggles with professional counselor identity development, which the development of is a CACREP requirement (Christensen et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2020; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Simmons et al., 2018).

Key Concepts

FG college students are considered students who are "pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree" (Peralta and Klonowski, 2017, p. 635). FG college student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities is growing, yet so are their levels of attrition (Kim et al., 2021; Orme, 2021; Ricks & Warren, 2021). Previous

studies show that FG college students have "historically and systemically been excluded from higher education" (Beckett et al., 2022, p. 21). In addition to their marginalized academic identity (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), FG college students often also hold other marginalized identities related to their race and socioeconomic status (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Quinn et al., 2019; Whittinghill et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021).

Estimates are that 23% of FG college graduates with bachelor's degrees enroll in graduate programs, and 36% of them begin their master's program assuming that they will not finish (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2021). Those FG college students who persist to graduation leave school with significantly more debt than CG college students (McDonald et al., 2020). It has long been known that people with college degrees earn more than those without (Brown et al., 2020). However, since FG college students take longer to complete their degrees than their CG peers, FG college students incur more debt, experience higher financial stress, and remain unable to close the wealth gap they often sought out education for in the first place (Brookover et al., 2022; Fry, 2021; Manzoni & Streib, 2018; Potter et al., 2020).

It is generally accepted that a master's degree is required to be a licensed professional counselor (Walden University, n.d.). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), the median income nationally for counselors is $43,390. The ACA pointed out that the average salary for a licensed mental health counselor with a master's degree is less, $35,642, whereas the average salary for other non-counseling master's degrees is $77,844 (Lee, 2022). FG college students who are studying to be counselors graduate with more debt and make less money than students with other master's degrees. Essentially, if an FG college student wishes to

be a counselor, a graduate degree is a requirement that leads to more educational debt and may ultimately result in them making less money than in other professions.

Extensive research has shown that undergraduate FG college students struggle more academically, financially, emotionally, and socially than their CG peers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2020; Hammermeister et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2019). It has been theorized that a primary reason FG college students struggle more than their CG peers is that they lack the social and cultural capital necessary to be successful in higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; Hutson et al., 2022; Rice et al., 2016). However, FG college students also often hold unrecognized social capital assets such as "diverse strengths and perspectives, perseverance and resourcefulness" (Bechard & Gragg, 2020, p. 142; Wick et al., 2019). These characteristics, also seen as strengths of counselors, are beneficial to clients (Shallcross, 2012), which is an additional reason why FG counselors are drawn to and are needed in the counseling profession.

Even after persisting to graduation, Ma and Shea (2019) found that FG college students often face more barriers than CG students when it comes to entering their preferred careers. Research has shown that FG college students are primarily drawn to the social sciences and applied majors, motivating them to pursue careers in the helping professions (Chen & Carroll, 2020; Havlik et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2021). Chen and Carroll (2020) hypothesized that FG students might be drawn to the social sciences because they feel less academically prepared than their CG peers to pursue "high-skill fields, such as mathematics and science" (p. v).

Wright et al. (2021) put forth that since most FG students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their CG peers, they often are drawn to programs of study that have high needs, such as social work, nursing, and mental health, that allow them to secure

employment relatively quickly after graduation. Additionally, FG college students are more likely to take jobs in nonprofit organizations that pay less than the jobs their CG peers take in the for-profit industries and other professions that typically pay more than entities such as nonprofit counseling centers (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2021). Havlik et al. (2020) suggested that often FG college students are more drawn to the helping professions motivated by a desire to work for "the greater good" (p. 130) of society. Though they are serving a vital societal need, FG students in the helping professions make less money than their CG peers in other more profitable professions, carry with them more debt and take longer to become financially stable after graduation (Chen & Carroll, 2020; Havlik et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021).

Without the "historical academic privilege" (Bechard & Gragg, 2020, p. 141) that comes with being a CG student, FG college students often do not take advantage of academic and social resources available to them on campuses due to their other nonacademic responsibilities and commitments (Beckett et al., 2022; Hutson et al., 2022; Wilcox et al., 2021). For instance, NASPA (2019) found that FG students are less likely to use resources available to them, such as campus health services, academic advising, academic support services, and career services, than their CG peers. This underutilization is likely due to a myriad of reasons including, but not limited to, a lack of knowledge about the services available to them on their campus, non-academic obligations encountered at higher rates than their CG peers such as family responsibilities, parenting roles, the need to work fulltime while in school more than their CG peers, and faculty unprepared to identify FG students in need of support (Horowitz, 2017; Hutson et al., 2022; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2012; Wilcox et al., 2021). Additionally, FG students experience what McCarthy et al. (2023) described as a lack of a sense

of belonging at much higher rates than CG students. This sense of otherness often felt by marginalized populations, that FGCS do not fit into the culture on a student campus demotivates participation, especially when inclusion is not prioritized by faculty (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2021).

Gibbons et al. (2016) also pointed out that FG college students "often lack information about the career development process" (p. 488), which can make it difficult to enter their chosen profession after graduation. Another factor preventing FG college students from pursuing their chosen career after graduation is the phenomenon known commonly as imposter syndrome, when "an individual who doubts their own skills, abilities, successes, and overall capabilities in their life" (Le, 2019, p. 22). Holden et al. (2021) and Orme (2021) found that FG college students are more likely to experience imposter syndrome than their CG peers. Though new professionals often encounter imposter syndrome, FG students experience it at a significantly higher rate than CG students, and these imposter syndrome feelings often follow FG students well into their established careers (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Holden et al., 2021; Orme, 2021).

Much has been written about the interventions that help undergraduate FG college students persist to graduation (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Conefrey, 2018; House et al., 2019; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Tym et al., 2004). However, little research thus far has been conducted on the unique challenges FG graduate students face and the supports necessary for them to persist to graduation (Standlee, 2018; Wofford et al., 2021). It has been suggested that interventions that have been recommended to support undergraduate FG college students are not appropriate for FG graduate students. Hutson et al. (2022) wrote, "first-generation graduate students cannot readily take advantage of the same programs designed for first-generation undergraduates. The population is older, works full-time, and has familial responsibilities that

prohibit attendance of such events and activities" (p. 101). Some of the student retention programs that FG undergraduate students have available that FG graduate students may not be able to access readily are mentorship group meetings and academic advising with faculty during traditional office hours (Eveland, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2017; Hutson et al., 2022).

As previously discussed, FG college students are more likely than their CG peers to be drawn to work in the nonprofit sector in lower-paying, social science-related helping professions such as nursing, social work, and counseling (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2021; Chen & Carroll, 2020; Wright et al., 2021). FG college students are also more likely to struggle in graduate school for the same reasons they did as undergraduate students, primarily related to a lack of social capital (Evans et al., 2020; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Simmons et al., 2018). Unlike their time as undergraduate students, FG graduate students face additional challenges due to their life stage (Hutson et al., 2022).

Additionally, there is a significant lack of previous research into the supports that would assist this marginalized population (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021) in entering the counseling profession in a way that allows them to break generational wealth gaps that keep them oppressed. For instance, because of their lack of educational social capital, FG students are less likely than their CG peers to know about or how to apply for scholarships rather than take out loans. Thus, they incur more educational debt than CG students (Fry, 2021). By not having the tools necessary to identify this population's challenges and the resources in place to refer them to, CES faculty do not have the necessary information to help this marginalized group persist to graduation and enter the mental health profession.

There is reason to believe that FG college students are urgently needed in the counseling profession. As U.S. society continues to become more diverse, the counseling profession is

ethically mandated to evolve to meet the mental health needs of traditionally marginalized groups (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Ratts et al., 2016). Additionally, it is recognized that counselors and CES professionals should be social justice activists who advocate for those without power or adequate resources (Fortuna et al., 2020; Marshall-Lee et al., 2019; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018).

Though conversations addressing DEIA often center on race and gender identity, social justice-focused counselors supporting equity must also attend to issues of educational accessibility and socioeconomic status (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2021). It is well documented that FG college students often hold marginalized racial, cultural, and socioeconomic identities complicating their educational pursuits and leading to higher attrition rates than their non-FG peers (Evans et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Seay et al. (2008), one of the few studies into the graduate FG college student experience, suggested that the attrition rates of these students are the same as FG undergraduate students.

To serve a growing multicultural population, the ACA and CACREP have called on the profession to be more diverse (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; CACREP, 2015). Much research has been conducted on marginalized identities related to race and ethnic background, but little is known about FG college students as an educationally oppressed group (Brown et al., 2020). Brown et al. (2020) put forth that because the counseling profession seeks to ensure competent and effective services for marginalized clients, the profession must better understand the challenges and supports of FG college students attempting to enter the profession. This PAR study contributes to this gap in the literature that will assist CES faculty and other higher education and counseling profession stakeholders in helping FG college students persist to graduation.

Summary and Conclusion

While there has been much written about the challenges faced by undergraduate FG college students (Cataldi et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2020; Hammermeister et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2019), little is known about the experiences of FG graduate students (Brown et al., 2020; Standlee, 2018; Wofford et al., 2021). There is even less that is known about the experiences of these students hoping to enter the counseling profession. What is known is that these students likely face the same educational, financial, and social stressors they did as undergraduate students, as well as others likely related to other commitments (Hutson et al., 2022; Schuman et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2020). The counseling profession, including CES faculty, has been tasked with helping to diversify the field to meet the increasingly multicultural population it serves (Meyers, 2017; Thacker & Minton, 2021). The discourse surrounding DEIA in higher education often addresses race, ethnicity, and disability access, yet the educational accessibility of marginalized FG college students is often ignored (Williams & Ash, 2021).

The objective of this chapter was to show that graduate FG college students are a marginalized group with unique challenges that their CG peers do not experience at higher rates that impact their attrition levels (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Fry, 2021; Wagner et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021). As mentioned, FG students are more likely than their CG peers to need to work while in graduate school, have more familial obligations, financial stress, and more acute self-doubt and imposter syndrome, all of which contribute to high attrition rates (Bechard & Gragg, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021). Additionally, it underscored the general lack of information on the specific supports that faculty can offer FG students who are drawn to the helping profession that would help them persist to graduation and

become counselors (Chen & Carroll, 2020; Wright et al., 2021). Due to a gap in the literature, there is currently little known about the challenges faced by and supports needed for graduate FG college students studying to be counselors. The next chapter will outline this study's plan to explore the lived experiences of graduate FG college students training to be counselors using a qualitative PAR approach.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative PAR study was to work alongside FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them persist to graduation. This was accomplished by first exploring the systemic obstacles they face as FG graduate students. PAR was chosen for this study because of its focus on empowering marginalized groups, such as FG college students, by inviting them to take an active part in the research process. This approach aligns with the call for counselors and counselor educators to be social change agents. This chapter outlines the plan for this study. It includes a discussion of the study's research design and rationale. Additionally, it includes an explanation of the role of the researcher in the study, a discussion of the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Using Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM, the two RQs informing this study are:

- RQ 1: What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face?
- RQ 2: What supports would help FG college students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation?

The central concept of this study was the systemic challenges faced by FG college students who are in graduate-level training programs to become counselors so that supports could be identified. Because of the lack of literature related to the unique challenges of FG graduate students, it is unlikely that CES faculty, administrators, or other counseling profession stakeholders are well-informed to help these students persist to graduation and enter the counseling field in an expedient timeframe with minimal emotional stress or debt. Removing barriers and providing equitable supports for marginalized groups (such as FG college students)

is an ethical mandate of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; Remley & Herlihy, 2020).

Research Tradition and Rationale

PAR is a qualitative methodology that centers on the importance of an equal relationship between the researcher and the population of the study (Fine & Torre, 2021; Patton, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (Ravitch & Carl, 2020), PAR is considered “a collective form of research where community members are assisted in researching issues that affect their own and surrounding lives” (Freire, 2018, p. 82). PAR was developed and refined by social scientists dissatisfied with the traditional research approach that is typically conducted *on* a population where the researcher controls the entire process and information, thereby continuing to limit the amount of power a marginalized group has (Doucet et al., 2022; Fine & Torre, 2021; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mordock & Krasny, 2001). PAR instead is a collaborative process between the researcher and the marginalized group of the study that seeks to enact social change that applies a democratic research approach that includes issues related to social justice in its design (Babbie, 2017; Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stuart, 2020). PAR is a form of academic “inquiry that is done *by* or *with*” (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 3) participants to address injustice being faced by an oppressed group (Patton, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR is a constructivist approach to research that focuses on integrating feedback from participants to generate practical information that stakeholders can use to enact effective positive change (Ammentorp et al., 2018; Burkholder et al., 2020; Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020; Herr & Anderson, 2014).

PAR was chosen for this study because counselors and counselor educators are ethically tasked with addressing injustice and promoting social justice (ACA, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016;

Remley & Herlihy, 2020). By challenging the status quo and existing power structures, PAR seeks to create "opportunities for the development of innovative and effective solutions to the problems facing our schools and communities" (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 81). This study focused on understanding the systemic barriers the FG college student CIT marginalized population faces. It sought to understand the supports they identify so that faculty at colleges and universities which offer professional mental health or school counseling programs can help them persist to graduation and successfully enter the counseling profession. PAR has been widely used in research focusing on both mental health and education (Herr & Anderson, 2014), making it additionally well-suited for this study.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, how the researcher's positionality and intersectional identities convene determines their role in a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This means a researcher must ask the question, "Who am I in relation to my participants and my setting?" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 37). In an academic setting, such as a CACREP counseling program in higher education, as in this study, I, as the participatory action researcher, needed to shift from someone who has control over the research process to more of a collaborator, consultant, and facilitator who shared power with participants (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mordock & Krasny, 2001).

Positionality and Social Identity

In most approaches to research, participants are not considered co-researchers because they might bias the outcome of the objective research (Danley & Ellison, 1999). PAR not only includes participants in the collection and analysis of practical knowledge, but it is also a cornerstone of the process (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). By including participants in this

democratic research process, oppressed groups can reclaim power over information that, until that point, had been used as a currency of power by the dominant group (Babbie, 2017). Because of the focus on the redistribution of knowledge and power, it is of particular importance that I as the researcher addressed my positionality and biases so as not to appropriate participants' experiences for personal gain (Fine & Torre, 2021). Considering positionality and social identity in PAR helps minimize power differentials and create an equitable process (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

In this discussion of my positionality and social identity in my role as the researcher in this study, I will be framing it using Collins's (1986) concept of "outsider-within" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 39), in which a researcher holds two seemingly conflicting identities (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). In Collins's case, in her research on Black feminism, she considered herself a researcher and an outsider. However, she also shared the same racial and gender identities as the participants, making her an insider in the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2014). As an FG college student from a low socioeconomic background, I was an insider in this PAR study, giving me what Collins referred to as "specialized, subjugated knowledge" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 55) of the FG college student lived experience. However, my privileged identity as a licensed mental health counselor who has already completed my master's degree and is now serving as a doctoral student researcher caused me to hold an outsider identity in this process. Because of my outsider-within positionality and social identity, it was vital for me as the researcher to do as Herr and Anderson (2014) suggested and interrogate my "multiple positionalities in relationship to the question under study" (p. 55), which will be discussed in the following section.

Addressing Researcher Bias

Qualitative approaches such as PAR assume researcher subjectivity will be present in the research process (Burkholder et al., 2020). Ravitch and Carl (2020) wrote that participatory action researchers "must not only recognize and accept the existence of their subjectivities, but sincerely and actively engage in practices to uncover and explore what those subjectivities are" (p. 223). In PAR, it is imperative that in addressing researcher bias, there be an agreement with participants that "set the conditions for social change that improve the lives of participants *with* participants when advocating a particular approach or position" (Chapman, 2019, p. 109). The first step in this process was sharing my positionality and social identity with participants during the study recruitment phase (Fine & Torre, 2021). This was included in the email message soliciting participants (see Appendix A).

As an FG college student from a low socioeconomic background who attended graduate school as a parent-student, working full-time, and funding my education with student loans, I share many of the same social identity characteristics common to the FG college graduate student experience (Hutson et al., 2022). Further contributing to my outsider status, I have successfully completed my CIT education. I am also working in the counseling profession as a licensed counselor, unlike the participants who were actively pursuing their master's degrees. Understanding and clearly communicating my social identity and the power differentials in the research relationship with participants was vital so that communication in the interview process was transparent, honest, and open between myself as the researcher and the participants as my co-researchers (Ravitch and Carl, 2020).

Ongoing self-reflection in the form of maintaining a comprehensive audit trail has also been shown to be effective in helping to control for bias in qualitative studies (Rudestam &

Newton, 2014). Burkholder et al. (2020) wrote that audit trails include detailed notes about the information gathered from data collection and researcher reflections on how every step of the project was decided on and conducted. Keeping an audit trail helps a researcher address concerns about bias and power and also helps to make a later case for trustworthiness in the study (Babbie, 2017

Keeping with best practices for PAR, this study used ongoing member checking at every stage of the data collection process (Herr & Anderson, 2014). It also incorporated a comprehensive audit trail, including research reflective journaling, that I shared with participants throughout the process. Because of the democratic nature of PAR and the researcher's focus on ensuring that the participants' voices are centered in the study, I deferred to the participants when a data discrepancy arose.

Methodology

This section describes the methodology of this study that examined the lived experiences of FG college student CIT so that this research can be replicated by other researchers. It outlines participant selection logic that went into identifying the population's participants and issues related to sampling. Additionally, it includes a description of the instrumentation that was used to collect data and the plan used to analyze the collected data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The participants in this study were self-identified FG college students as defined in Chapter 1: students "pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree" (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017, p. 635). These FG college students were CIT enrolled in a CACREP-recognized graduate counseling program. Because of the specificity of this population, they were selected through nonprobability or purposeful sampling

(Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling is used by qualitative researchers when the desire is to recruit a group of participants with knowledge of the phenomenon being addressed, in this case, the lived experiences of FG college student CIT (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Though conventional thinking regarding sample size in qualitative research is that the sample should be large enough to reach saturation, many participatory action researchers disagree on this number and see it as subjective (Babbie, 2017; Patton, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Marshall et al. (2013) found in their review of qualitative literature that the average number that most researchers reported meeting the threshold of saturation was seven participants, which informed the goal for this study's sample size. To ensure that at least seven participants were available for the entire research process, ten were recruited to account for the possibility that some might decide to leave their programs or the study.

To recruit this sample size of ten participants for this study, a recruitment email was sent to the following listservs attached to organizations I am a member of: the American College Counseling Association (ACCA) listserv, the CESNET-L professional listserv for counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors, and the Western Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (WACES) listserv. These emails included the definition for first-generation used in this study so that students could self-identify as FG college students and attest to this status. Additionally, because of the democratic nature of this study, the recruitment email also included a brief explanation of the PAR process and my positionality and social and cultural identity. The email included my contact information so that participants could contact me directly and protect their anonymity in their program if they wished to do so (see Appendix A).

Instrumentation

Once initial contact was made with participants, they received a link to complete an online Qualtrics demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C). Online questionnaires are considered a convenient, affordable, and effective way to gather data about an individual to save time later in the interview process (Groves et al., 2009). This form asked them if they are FG or CG and explained that only FG students would be considered for this study. This form also asked them for information regarding their gender identity, preferred pronouns, relationship, parenting, and employment status during graduate school. It also asked for their availability over the next three weeks for a semistructured interview and meetings to review the data collected as part of the democratic PAR process.

Data was collected in online video semistructured interviews conducted over a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)-compliant version of Zoom. Interviewing was selected for this study because it is often used when collecting qualitative data for a specific topic, in this case, about the lived experiences of FG college student CIT (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Two of the primary goals of PAR are the creation of new knowledge and the education of all parties in the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Semistructured interviews allow for limited development of conversational partnerships in the research process yet still align with the focus on co-creating new knowledge that is shared (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A list of questions that were asked of participants is found in Appendix B.

The interviews were 60 minutes and were conducted over the online video platform Zoom and recorded on my password-protected computer. As a backup, the audio was also recorded using Adobe Audition audio recording software and then saved to my password-protected computer. Before the interviews, the participants received an informed consent

document (see Appendix D) that outlined their participation as well as their rights to end their participation at any time. During the first meeting, participants selected a different name to be used in the study to protect their privacy. At the end of the meeting, participants scheduled a 60-minute follow-up Zoom meeting to review the coded data with me. This meeting was also recorded using Zoom format (audio only) and Adobe Audition.

Data Analysis Plan

As a qualitative approach, PAR uses many of the same data analysis procedures standard in qualitative studies, including the use of technology in the coding process (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Participatory action researchers are particularly concerned in the data analysis stage with a commitment to respecting the language participants use to encourage shared power in the research relationship (Danley & Ellison, 1999; Fine & Torre, 2021). Though coding software is well accepted in PAR, Fine & Torre (2021) cautioned participatory action researchers that these instruments cannot fully capture context, "sarcasm, irony, emotions, and nuance" (p. 59), which can only be established through reviewing the data with participants. To ensure participants had maximum participation and agency in the research process, I shared all coded data with participants to ensure that it reflected their words and meaning (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020).

After conducting an interview, the audio was transcribed using the Otter.ai automated transcription service. The Otter.ai automated transcription service allows researchers to securely upload pre-recorded audio files from Zoom and be automatically transcribed into a Word document. It was chosen to allow me to be the only human with access to the actual recordings, yet also assisted with the speed of data collection, analysis, and ongoing member checking inherent in the PAR process (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

I then compared the transcription to the audio to ensure accuracy. Then the transcript was emailed to the participants for their review. Upon their verification of its accuracy and after any necessary changes were made, it was then coded using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. Though other qualitative software such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti were considered, after testing them during trial periods, MAXQDA was selected because of its affordable price, extensive search features, and the software interface's ease of use.

The next step, in keeping with the democratic PAR process, the codes were then shared with the participants in a follow-up Zoom video meeting for their review and additional comments. Throughout the process, I kept a journal that details the audit trail of the process. Observations were shared with participants from this audit trail throughout the research process. Though PAR is criticized for the time-consuming nature of checking in with participants at every data analysis stage, this spiraling approach of planning-acting-observing-and reflection is necessary to ensure equity in the process (Danley & Ellison, 1999; Herr & Anderson, 2014). Herr and Anderson (2014) wrote that during the research process, "there should be a constant feeding back to participants ongoing observations and working hypotheses about the data" (p. 128). This process continued until saturation was reached. The final results of the study were shared with participants in the form of an email.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the amount of confidence in a research study's results (Laureate Education, Inc., 2016). This section details validity issues related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this research study. All contribute to trustworthiness. Additionally, it includes a discussion of the concept of democratic validity, a key feature of PAR.

Credibility

Like quantitative research's concept of internal validity, credibility in qualitative research suggests that the results of a study are, in essence, believable (Burkholder et al., 2020). Additionally, when a qualitative study is credible, the data collected accurately reflects the lived experiences of the participants (Laureate Education, Inc., 2016). Shenton (2004) suggested that in qualitative research, "credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness" (p. 64). Researchers can ensure credibility through processes such as prolonged and varied field experience and engagement, persistent observation, time sampling, researcher journals, triangulation, member checking, and peer examination and debriefing (Anney, 2014; Burkholder et al., 2020; Laureate Education, Inc., 2016). As pointed out previously, checking in with participants at every phase of the research process was done to ensure credibility.

Transferability

Transferability, also called generalizability, refers to how much of a qualitative study's results can be somewhat applied or transferred to other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Burkholder et al. (2020) pointed out that transferability can be established by using "thick descriptions and maximum variation" (p. 91). Transferability was addressed in this study by providing enough contextual details from data collection interviews that helps the reader determine if this study's "overall findings ring true" (Anney, 2014, p. 278).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is demonstrated by the researcher's ability to show that the process "was logical, traceable, and documented" (Patton, 2014, p. 685). To do this, I kept a well-documented audit trail and a clear process of coding and recoding data. This research project's audit trail documents the data collection phase of the study, including interview notes,

researcher reflections, and communications with participants while analyzing and coding, and recoding the data (Anney, 2014). The audit trail process is also considered helpful when addressing the issue of confirmability (Patton, 2014).

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability in qualitative research, researcher bias, though accepted and inevitable, must be addressed and minimized (Shenton, 2004). If the findings are the result of the participants' lived experiences and are not based on the researcher's assumptions or agenda, then the data is said to be more highly confirmable (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Burkholder et al. (2020) suggested that the primary tool to ensure confirmability is a comprehensive researcher audit trail. Because I, as the participatory action researcher in this study, was an outsider-within who shares the same marginalized FG college student identity as the participants, a comprehensive audit trail was essential to ensure confirmability.

Democratic Validity

Herr and Anderson (2014) suggested that participatory action researchers should consider framing their work through additional validity criteria: dialogic and process validity, outcome validity, catalytic validity, democratic validity, and/or process validity. For this study, democratic validity was additionally chosen to add to its trustworthiness. Democratic validity is defined as how much of the "research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation" (Newton & Burgess, 2008, p. 26). Democratic validity is ensured through the cyclical nature of the PAR process that involves ongoing checking with participants during every stage of the study to ensure that their voices are accurately represented. Focusing on democratic validity helps to support credibility, and for the participatory action researcher, it is also an ethical and social justice imperative (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

Ethical Procedures

This research study was conducted while adhering to the ethical mandates for researchers outlined in the ACA ethical code and set by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants received a detailed email and verbal explanation of the purpose of the study as well as my hope for their levels of participation in the research process (see Appendix A). All participants received a written informed consent document which was also verbally reviewed with each of them before recording the first interview in the data collection process (see Appendix D).

Participants in this study did not meet the standards set by the Walden University IRB to consider them members of a vulnerable population. Participant identities were protected by using pseudonyms that the participants chose. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from it at any stage in the research process. The recorded interviews and all data were kept on an external, password protected, and encrypted hard drive in the researcher's home office that was protected by two physical door locks. Any paper documents generated, such as an audit trail notebook, was stored in a locked file cabinet in the same locked office. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years, as required by Walden University. All digital data will then be deleted from the password-protected computer, and any paper records will be shredded.

Summary

Chapter 3 of this dissertation discusses the research design and rationale for selecting PAR as the approach for this study. Additionally, it outlined the role of the researcher in this process, including guidelines in place to address researcher bias. This chapter also detailed the methodology, including a discussion of participant selection logic, instrumentation, and a plan

for data analysis. This chapter addressed trustworthiness issues, including credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and democratic validity, and concluded with a summary of ethical considerations and procedures. The following chapter will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

With this qualitative PAR study, I aimed to work alongside 10 FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic challenges they have encountered and develop recommendations for counseling programs, CES faculty, and other stakeholders to support this marginalized student population better. The PAR process was guided by the following RQs: What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face? Additionally, what supports would help FG college students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation? In this study, I sought to enhance the literature on FG college students studying to be counselors. This chapter discusses the setting of the study, participant demographics, the data collection process and analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and the study's results.

Setting

Data collection for this PAR study was conducted through semistructured Zoom video interviews with 10 self-identified FG college graduate students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the United States. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval 08-01-23-1042464, in August 2023, I began recruiting participants using social media networking and counseling and counselor education listservs. Interested participants contacted me by email, and I directed them to complete an online Qualtrics survey that was used to schedule the initial Zoom interview. After completing online informed consent and demographic documents, I scheduled 1-hour video interviews over Zoom that were recorded from my home office. All the participants chose pseudonyms that were used throughout the research process. During the data collection process, one of the 10 participants dropped out of her graduate program before reviewing her transcribed interview, so it was not included in the final data analysis.

Demographics

All selected participants met this study's criteria of self-identifying as FG college students over the age of 18. Additionally, at the time of this study, all were currently enrolled as graduate students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The following participants are listed chronologically based on when they were interviewed for this study.

"Mallory" is a graduate FG college student from the South who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a hybrid CACREP-affiliated counseling program, combining online and traditional on-campus courses. She reported that she is currently single and not a parent. She is employed part time while in school.

"Addison" is a graduate FG college student from the Southwest who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a CACREP-affiliated counseling program that is exclusively on-campus and in-person. She reported that she is single and is not a parent. She is employed part time while in school.

"Cecelia" is a graduate FG college student from the South who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a hybrid CACREP-affiliated counseling program, combining online and traditional on-campus courses. She reported that she is currently partnered and is a parent with school-age children living at home. She is employed part time while in school.

"Michelle" is a graduate FG college student from the Southwest who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a CACREP-affiliated counseling program that is exclusively on-campus and in-person. She reported that she is married and pregnant with her first child. She is employed part time while in school.

"Daniella" is a graduate FG college student from the Northeast who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a CACREP-affiliated counseling program that is online.

She reported that she is currently married and is a parent with school-age children at home. She is employed part time while in school.

"Alexis" is a graduate FG college student from the Southeast who identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. They attend a hybrid CACREP-affiliated counseling program, combining online and traditional on-campus courses. They reported that they are currently married and is not a parent. They are employed part time while in school.

"Acorn" is a graduate FG college student from the Northeast who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a CACREP-affiliated counseling program that is online. She reported that she is currently married and is a parent with school-age children at home. She is not employed; her children are homeschooled, and she is responsible for their education.

"Cindy" is a graduate FG college student from the South who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a CACREP-affiliated counseling program that is in-person and on-campus. She reported that she is currently married and is not a parent. She is employed part time while in school.

"McKenzie" is a graduate FG college student from the South who identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She attends a hybrid CACREP-affiliated counseling program, combining online and traditional on-campus courses. She reported that she is currently partnered and is not a parent. She is unemployed while in school.

Data Collection

The participants for this interview were recruited from listservs and social media platforms and were instructed to reach out to me directly with their interest (Appendix A). Twenty possible participants contacted me with interest in participating. Of these, two were rejected, one because they were a non-U.S. college counseling student, and the other was a social

work graduate student. Eighteen participants were then sent a link to a Qualtrics form (Appendix C), where they submitted demographic data and their interview availability.

After I confirmed that they met the criteria for this study, they were sent an informed consent email and a link to their scheduled Zoom interview. Of the 18 who met the criteria of this study, 10 confirmed Zoom meeting times. After the interviews, one participant dropped out of her program and was not included in this study.

Semistructured interviews (Appendix B) were used to collect data from nine participants. All the interviews were conducted via Zoom from my home office. The interviews were conducted over 3 weeks in September 2023. The interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature, and Adobe Audition recording software was used as a backup. All the audio recordings of the interviews were saved and kept on my password-protected home computer. Each participant was interviewed one time. Every interview was scheduled for 60 minutes; however, all took less time, averaging 45 minutes each. During the data collection interviews, I kept notes in a paper journal with my observations about each participant's comments.

All the interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. Then, I reviewed the written transcription with the audio, correcting the words and phrases that Otter.ai misinterpreted. These reviewed transcriptions were then emailed to the nine participants to ensure they accurately reflected what they wanted to convey. After the participants approved them, I began the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the collected and participant-reviewed data for this PAR study using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. I uploaded the participant-reviewed transcripts to MAXQDA and then read through each interview a minimum of three times, coding the data

collected from the interviews. Codes were chosen based on consistent ideas, words, or phrases in participant responses. Using MAXQDA, I organized this coded data by color and 26 codes emerged. These codes were then clustered into themes. The themes that emerged from RQ 1 were (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational. The themes that emerged from RQ 2 were (a) relational and (b) financial.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This section details evidence of trustworthiness in this study. It outlines the implementation and adjustments of strategies stated in Chapter 3. This section includes discussions related to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and democratic validity.

Credibility

Credibility was established by sharing the final transcript of each participant's interview with them for their review. This member checking was done with participants before proceeding into the data analysis phase of my research, as is central to establishing credibility in PAR studies (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Patton, 2014). There were no adjustments to credibility strategies.

Transferability

Patton (2014) posited that maximum variation sampling suggests that "any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (p. 283). This study's relatively small yet diverse sample produced theme consistency. The participants in this study attended online programs (two participants), hybrid programs (four participants), and in-person/on-campus programs (three participants). This study showed consistent themes regardless

of program setting, allowing the results to be reasonably transferable to all types of counseling graduate school programs. There were no adjustments to transferability strategies.

Dependability

Dependability was established using a well-documented audit log that tracked recruitment, data collection, and analysis processes (Patton, 2014). This documentation would allow the study to be repeated or replicated by future researchers studying FG CIT (Anney, 2014). There were no adjustments to the dependability strategies outlined in Chapter 3.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established through an audit trail and a reflective journal that I kept throughout the research process (Burkholder et al., 2020). To confirm accuracy, I checked in with participants throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure that my interpretations were based on data and not my assumptions. After the coding process, only three participants responded to my email about discussing the emerging themes that had surfaced. Three were interviewed a second time for 15 minutes each, confirming that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. This information further demonstrates that the data collection and analysis resulted in saturation (Babbie, 2017; Marshall et al., 2013; Patton, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Not being able to interview six of the nine participants was an adjustment that was made to confirmability.

Democratic Validity

As written in Chapter 3, democratic validity in PAR refers to the amount that the participants were able to collaborate with the researcher (Newton & Burgess, 2008). All nine participants reviewed the transcripts of their first interview prior to coding, which helped to ensure democratic validity. However, since only three of the nine participated in a second

interview to review codes, democratic validity was partially established.

Results

In this PAR study, I aimed to determine FG CIT challenges in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. This section provides direct quotes from participant interviews that shaped how I determined themes in the collected data. It is organized by emerging theme headings. Each heading includes data excerpts from participant interviews that support this study's findings. The themes that emerged from RQ 1 were (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational. The themes that emerged from RQ 2 were (a) relational and (b) financial.

RQ 1

The first RQ under investigation was, RQ 1: What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face? The codes that supported the themes were: financial issues, faculty, general institutional support, some institutional support, no institutional support, mentors, self, family, cohort peers, friends, helping, challenges, why counseling, why masters, positive FG meaning, did not identify as FG, negative FG meaning, education discouraged, educations encouraged, systemic issues, social justice, privilege, no opportunity to identify as FG, opportunity to identify as FG, loans, and motivation. The themes that emerged from the coded data were (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational.

Financial

The first theme that emerged was about the systemic financial challenges faced by the FG CIT participants. This is a notable theme because previous research has shown that the systemic challenge related to the exorbitant cost of an education, combined with the higher financial burdens carried by FG students, is a strong predictor of attrition (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Hébert, 2017; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Roksa et al., 2018). Because of

the increasing cost of higher education, marginalized groups such as FG college students experience more socioeconomic challenges than CG students (Brown et al., 2020; Eveland, 2019; Fry, 2021; Hutson et al., 2022; Kolluri & Tierney, 2019; McDonald et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Schuyler et al., 2021; Tierney, 1999; Wagner et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021). Addressing systemic socioeconomic inequities is vital to long-term social change for marginalized populations (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014).

Of the nine participants in this study, seven reported being employed part time while in counseling graduate school, one is unemployed, and one is fully responsible for homeschooling her children. The financial stress that accompanies graduate school emerged as a significant theme. Most of these students can only pay for school by taking out student loans, which many already had from their undergraduate experience. Acorn, an online FG CIT from the Northeast, said:

> Oh, [in undergrad] I didn't know not to take out so many student loans. My parents, that's what happened to me, they had no idea. And my high school was like, "Yeah, take out all the loans." My parents were like, "I guess we gotta take out loans." And so, then I was stuck with so many loans for so long. And that was the story for a lot of my friends whose parents didn't have generational wealth or, you know, go to graduate school.

McKenzie, a hybrid FG CIT from the South, echoed this sentiment on FG CIT having less generational wealth than their CG peers:

> Yeah, socially, definitely a little bit of a disconnect. Whether it be just talking to other people and feeling like that they don't really understand how I struggle with like, the financial aspects. So, I felt like I struggle more than a lot of my colleagues do, like in terms of having transportation to get to school or having to work more than most of my

> peers who didn't have a job throughout grad school, were just purely able to focus on grad school, which is something I would have loved to do. But you know, couldn't. Taking out loans was definitely a big difference. I have more loans than most of my colleagues. As well as a lot of my colleagues have never even taken out loans. So just that whole difference, them not really understanding, finances in general, being able to find textbooks! I've had to really dig illegally to find like free PDFs of textbooks online, when a lot of my classmates just, you know, go and buy it from Amazon.

Cecelia, a hybrid FG CIT from the South, talked about her relationship with student loans and her internship. She said, "I've taken out a *massive* loan in order for me to work for free for 20 hours a week." Alexis, a hybrid FG CIT from the Southeast, said that even though they have a partner who financially supports them, they see how other FG students in their cohort struggle financially:

> It just, I think that makes it very hard, especially for master's students who a lot of times have families or, you know? Like, everyone has bills. I'm really lucky because I have a husband. So, we have an income, but I know a lot of other people can't really afford to pay to their do internship through tuition, have that kind of financial burden, and then also have to work 20-plus hours a week and try to manage their other jobs or commitments to actually make money.

All participants expressed frustration with the practicum and internship phases of their graduate experience. Cecelia, who identified herself as a parent, said of her unpaid practicum and internship:

> Well, I mean, it's like I have to do it because it's, like, mandatory for my program. But it's stress. It's been a source of stress, because I've been excited about it. But then at the same

> time, like, for practicum, for example, which was over the summer, it was less time, but the kids are out of school, and it's like, “Okay, God, I have to pay a babysitter,” but I don't-- I'm not making any money to compensate, while I'm paying for this babysitter and like, I have so many other things to manage. And it's really difficult. And personally, I have to work part-time still. I can't just devote my time to the internship. I've said many times that like, I would love to, even if I could get some money. And I could just do my internship, the five days a week, get my hours, but I wouldn't have to worry about anything else with that. I can just do that. Which I could if they provided some sort of income.

Some participants, such as Cindy, expressed a sense of acceptance with her school’s unpaid internship program. She said of her unpaid internship, “I feel like it's free labor. It's, it's not fair really. But you know, most of them are unpaid. So, it is what it is.” McKenzie said of her unpaid internship:

> I hate it. I liked the work a lot. But yeah, it's definitely challenging. I'm working 20 to 24 hours a week for no pay. Yeah, I think it's really unfortunate. You know, I get it in some ways, because it's our profession’s way of being able to provide treatment to people who aren't able to afford it. And being able to do that? I do love. But at the same time, it's pretty tragic. You know that I'm doing so much hard, good work for free labor.

Exacerbating many of their financial challenges was a sense of frustration that their work is unlikely to help them become more financially secure once they enter the counseling field. When asked how hopeful she is that she will be able to pay back her loans by working as a counselor, McKenzie said:

> Not hopeful. Not very hopeful, at least not for the next 20 years? I feel like 20 years is

> probably--- I don't know, I have some hope. Because on one hand, the average median salary for the profession I'm entering is like, a lot higher than what I was raised with. But then in other ways, the amount of loans that I've taken out? I don't know. Yeah, I'm not super hopeful that it's going to be anytime soon that I'm going to get loans paid off.

In discussing the imbalance of the cost of her graduate school education versus her future earnings, Acorn said:

> Um, I mean, I chose this program partially because of the cost. The other university that I was considering is (name of other university) and their program is $100,000. Whereas (current school) is like 40,000. And I had to laugh, like, does (other university) realize what my potential income is?! You know, it's not a lot. So, I think that for people who are considering a counseling degree, knowing that while, of course, you know, it matters where you go to an extent, it's all the same degree, we're all going to be LPCs (licensed professional counselors). I started looking for online counseling programs. I had some hang-ups about, “Gosh, I'm going to like an online program at a school that nobody has ever heard of.” But when I talked to people who are my contemporaries, my peers who are in like management positions at like law firms or who own therapy practices, they're like, “It doesn't really matter where you went.” My one friend, who was the partner at a law firm, she's like, “I want to know if you can write a sentence and talk to people.” You know, if you can demonstrate these skills, where you went doesn't really matter. And so, when I accepted that, it was easier for me to make a choice about a place that made financial sense.

Institutional

The second theme emerged regarding institutional challenges that the participants faced

as FG CIT. This theme is important to counseling programs in addressing systemic barriers because of the mandate to make “continuous and systematic efforts to recruit, enroll, and retain students that enhance and support the diversity of the program” (CACREP, 2024, p. 4). The first institutional challenge participants discussed was feeling that their programs did not offer appropriate clarity about their programs. This challenge is significant because a common concern previously reported by FG college students is distress from feeling like they do not have a map for their higher education like their CG peers do (Tierney, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2021). This feeling persists in graduate school, as Alexis said:

> Um, there's just a lot of jargon and lingo. I feel like academia has its own culture. So, when you're having to navigate that on your own for the first time, that adds another layer of stress. And then just I feel like, it's so expensive not having parents that, you know, got an education and had maybe higher paying jobs. Also, you know, I have to navigate that on my own.

Some participants, such as Cecilia, said she felt “othered” as an FG College student during the interview process for her counseling program:

> They (representatives from the college’s counseling program) said, like, “Oh, you want to do a Zoom interview? You have to have a computer you can't do it on a phone.” And I did not have a computer. At the time, I didn't even own a computer. And I was waiting for tax money to get a computer. You know, and I, you know, I had been wearing a uniform for 20 years, I didn't have dress clothes. I had this kind of setup where I was like, “I don't think they can tell if I'm on the phone. I don't think they can tell.” But you know, I had in my head like, I don't want them to know that like, I'm completely broke. And I'm trying to get in, you know what I mean? Like, I'm completely broke, I probably don't

have any money in my bank account right now. You know, I have these two kids. I wanted to conceal the fact that I had like, it was almost kind of like an embarrassment like in my perception of it.

Addison, an on-campus/in-person FG CIT from the Southwest, said that as an FG graduate student in a counseling program, a lack of clarity from the institution caused distress. She said that more consistent communication from professors would help lessen general anxiety about how to progress through her program:

> More connection between the professors -- like we have a pretty small program -- and the students. Also more open communication with what's happening! And what to expect, and kind of almost like a normalization of what's happening. I know, our cohort and pretty much every other one out there, I'm assuming we're almost just like screaming in in anxiety, "What's happening right now?!" And it's like, not really talked about, it's just like, "Oh, yeah, you're gonna be anxious and it's gonna be fine," but it feels very dismissive. Um, so yeah, I think just like more open communication, and warning signs, and then also opportunities or support. Above and beyond what you would find in just like a "normal" cohort. So, knowing the professors on a personal level. And then also clear expectations when it comes to academic work and personal work.

Addison said of the lack of support for graduate FG students:

> I actually don't think there are any graduate-specific programs -- even like, clubs or advising or anything -- that caters to grad students. There's a ton in undergrad. And it's just like excess handholding almost. And then it's just kind of like they dump you off in a master's program.

Relational

The third theme related to RQ 1 that emerged was relational challenges. This is a significant theme when addressing systemic barriers because a lack of knowledge of these challenges faced by FG CIT can understandably make it more difficult for CES faculty to create and effectively "maintain an inclusive and equitable learning community that respects individual differences" (CACREP, 2023, p. 4). A more robust understanding of FG cultural identity could help counseling programs to better identify and support "underrepresented populations" (CACREP, 2023, p. 5), such as FG college students.

Among the relational aspects of being FG important to counseling programs is how participants talked about the lack of understanding from family about why they pursued a master's degree after earning a bachelor's degree. Alexis said that when she told her parents she was going to get her master's degree in counseling, they saw it as "just a waste of time, money, and energy." Alexis also added:

> My parents were very anti-college. So, when I got into the master's program, instead of being met with, "Wow, that's wonderful. That is so cool," instead, it was like, "Ugh, are you really going to do that? Why would you do that? What's the point?"

Michelle, an FG CIT in a hybrid program in the Southwest, echoed this lack of parental support:

> There was a lot of misunderstanding about what I was doing. I know, at least for my mom, she very much struggled with my previous degree of even knowing the right questions to say. "What are you working at?" Like, like, how do I connect with you, like, she is intelligent, but I think she discounts herself a lot, and we often wouldn't have these in-depth conversations about what I'm learning or what I'm working on. I always felt like

I had to pare it down for her.

Cindy talked about how she was surprised by how often students in her program were asked to involve their parents in parts of their classroom experience:

> I think that a lot of times, the other students might have resources from their parents, like, just certain professional resources that I see that a lot of students have. Whereas I don't really have that same background. I don't have knowledge of certain fields or anything like that based on like, parents, or anything. Like literally nobody I knew growing up went to college at all. So I don't have those same resources. I feel like sometimes, when we're like, in earlier classes, we were told to, like, interview our parents about this or that and different subjects. And I feel like it was kind of difficult when you don't have that background. So yeah, that's kind of the challenges that I faced and just my parents also not really understanding what I'm going through.

Addison pointed out that even when parents want to help support, they often struggle with the best way to do so:

> I think they attempt to understand. But I don't think they actually understand how it can be exhausting and draining. And it's just a lot of work to even just do the internship and practicum stuff. I try to explain it as best as I can. But unless you go through it, you don't really understand.

Participants often mentioned how, in addition to a lack of parental support, they struggled with feeling like they struggled to find encouragement or support from any friends or cohort peers. When asked who she turns to for support during her master’s program, Cecelia pointed at herself and said, “Always myself. I'm definitely my strongest support system.” Alexis said of her lack of support:

> I do not have anyone around me. I don't have anyone around me outside of school that understands. I feel like I was actively discouraged from entering the master's program and continuing my education, which is definitely something to contend with when your parents are not very supportive of that process. Yeah, it was pretty isolating.

All participants mentioned how their schools and programs rarely acknowledged FG college students and that none of the participants' schools offer student support programs for graduate students. McKenzie said that she centered her FG college identity in her application, but no one in her school or program acknowledged this identity:

> In my essay that I wrote, I talked about being a first-generation college student, but I was really never asked-- there were no questions that asked if I was a first-generation college student. I know I talked about it as well in my interview. So I was never really asked about it.

Despite how all participants' programs were structured as cohorts, participants talked about how they felt they did not have peer support. McKenzie said:

> It felt isolated, for sure. Well, in a way, it's like, I feel pride about it, because I'm like, wow, like I've really had to fight to get here. And I feel proud about that. But at the same time, it just kind of sucks. I have felt a little bit of a disconnect from some of my cohort, a lot of the time, I've felt like they don't understand my experience.

Participants talked about how faculty often encouraged student self-care and encouraged them to reach out to their support systems in and out of the classroom for help when it was needed. Cecelia spoke of her frustration with this messaging from the faculty:

> They keep going back to this like idea of a support system that in all honesty, I don't--- I think there's a vast majority of people that have a very minimum or none. And you can't

just create that out of thin air. That is something that kind of has to be in place. It has to be fostered. It takes time to build--- it takes an *opportunity* to build them if it's not within your biological family. If you're trying to build an external support system, that takes time and opportunity. Being in the right place at the right time, meeting the right person. And that is not something that anybody can just do.

Participants talked about how little acknowledgment there was of FG identity in their master's programs. Cecelia said of discussions about FG identity, "I think it might have been like a sentence in a (text) book." Addison said that in the rare instances when faculty did talk about their own FG identity, it was often framed through a deficit lens.

Addison:

Um, it was, I don't want to say like, in the middle of her (a professor's), like "sob story," but it was like, "I came from an abusive family." She was just listing off, like a laundry list, of bad things that have happened to her and kind of, like, fuel her to where she is now. And I think it was like, "Yeah, trauma and all of this stuff." And then like, "first-gen student." And then it very quickly turned to like, "Oh, but I went to (redacted) University. And I got my PhD, and I worked at like University of (redacted), and I did all these things."

Researcher:

So, it (being FG) was presented as something she overcame?

Addison:

Yes. Yes, it was lumped in with her trauma for sure.

RQ 2

The second RQ under investigation was, *RQ2:* What supports would help FG college

students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation? The codes that supported the themes were: financial issues, faculty, general institutional support, some institutional support, no institutional support, mentors, self, family, cohort peers, friends, helping, challenges, why counseling, why masters, positive FG meaning, did not identify as FG, negative FG meaning, education discouraged, educations encouraged, systemic issues, social justice, privilege, no opportunity to identify as FG, opportunity to identify as FG, loans, and motivation. The themes that emerged from RQ two were a) relational and b) financial.

Relational

The first theme that emerged related to RQ two was relational. Participants were eager to share ways they believed higher education institutions and faculty could improve relationships with students and improve the student experience for FG CIT. All participants said their institutions did not have emotional, social, or academic support programs targeting FG CIT graduate students. None of the institutions had any general FG support programs for graduate students.

McKenzie said she would have loved it if the faculty had been more interested in her FG identity as part of her educational experience. She said, "I would have loved to be asked during the interview process more about being a first-gen student or even just like a question like asking if you're a first-gen student or not. That would have been really important to me."

Once in a program, participants spoke about how much they wished there were ways to connect with other FG college graduate students. Cindy said, "I think it would be some type of program that connects other first-gen students with each other. So that that way everyone can kind of connect and talk and share experiences." Daniella said, "It would be good to have

somewhere you can talk… and connect the dots to support each other through this process."

In addition to peer support, participants spoke of their desire to have stronger relationships with faculty, which previous research shows is a potent preventer of attrition (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). Addison said she wished she had "more connection with the professors! Knowing the professors on a personal level." Addison said she often compares her experience in her counseling program with other master's programs:

> Yeah, um, I have a friend right now who's also in a master's program of sociology. They have a really close relationship with professors. Like they call each other by their first name, they have barbecues outside of the building, they have monthly departmental updates of "this is what's happening, and these are the doc students, and this is the work that they're doing, and these are the conferences coming up." And I'm like, "Man, like, I really wish we had those." Because it's kind of an ownership of what's happening, I guess. And like, stepping into the professional identity and you know, surrounding yourself with the people who've walked the path before.

Michelle spoke of how her experience as an FG CIT would be more effortless if she felt the faculty were more welcoming in her program:

> Even if there was a like one person, not a whole department, someone should just go to with questions. And that's kind of their dedicated, or a part of their responsibility is to have maybe a separate orientation for first-gens in the beginning, kind of go over and just introduce themselves and say, "I'm here. Door's open, anything you need." Kind of similar to what our advisors do, but in a very pointed way.

Financial

The second theme related to RQ two that emerged was financial. All participants, even

those with paid internships, talked about how being paid for their work during their internships would benefit them as FG CIT. Acorn said that if she could redesign counseling programs to support FG CIT better:

> I think that it would include a lot of financial support. I don't need it because my husband is not a first-generation college student. And he was really financially set up, which really helped me, but I was not. We just finished paying off my undergrad student loans. So, I think, like, for many first-generation college students, there's not this generational wealth to tap into. And so, you're taking out loans, which are a huge burden that stick with you forever. So, I think offering a lot of financial support to first-generation college students that need it, I would absolutely advocate for everyone to get paid, even if it's something that's, you know, $25, $35, $50 an hour-- you know, it's not a full rate. I do understand why. You know, nonprofit organizations can't afford to pay interns, but I don't think that it's right.

Cindy said of her internship, “I feel like it’s free labor. It’s not fair really.” Cecelia spoke of how some compensation for her work in her practicum and internship would have offset her financial struggles. When asked about her unpaid internship, she said:

> Well, I mean, it's like I have to do it because it's like mandatory for my program. But it's stress! It's been a source of stress, because I've been excited about it. But then at the same time, like, for practicum, for example, which was over the summer, it was less time, but the kids are out of school, and it's like, “Okay, God, I have to pay a babysitter,” but I don't-- I'm not making any money to compensate, while I'm paying for this babysitter and, I have so many other things to manage. And it's really difficult. And personally, I have to work part-time still on the days that I'm not in the internship. I can't just devote

my time to the internship. I've said many times that like, I would love to, even if I could get *some* money. And I could just do my internship, the five days a week, get my hours, but I wouldn't have to worry about anything else with that. I can just do that. Which I could if they provided some sort of income.

Researcher:

So, you're, in some ways, you're paying to do your internship?

Cecelia:

I have said that many times. Yes, I've taken out a massive loan in order for me to work for free for 20 hours a week.

McKenzie said that compensation for practicum and internships would be beneficial to offset some of the costs that she was surprised by near the end of her time in her program:

I definitely was not anticipating all the barriers to becoming a counselor. I just took the CPCE (Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination), and just the payment walls behind everything is like wild, the textbooks, the paying for insurance for liability insurance, paying for the CPCE, paying for the NCE (National Counselor Examination). All of these, like barriers that I never anticipated, paying for a CSI (Chi Sigma Iota) membership. Like all of these things, there's so many payment walls and barriers that I never would have anticipated.

Many spoke of the need for more counseling program graduate assistantships to help offset the financial strain on the participants. Alexis noted, “I feel like that's probably one of the highest barriers to higher ed is the cost of it. Probably more paid GA-ships (graduate assistantships) and opportunities.” Daniela talked about how finding an internship that provided compensation was central to her being able only to work part-time that term:

> For me, it was impossible to do a full internship with nothing in return. It's tough, because, you know, yeah, I have to work part-time in my other job to do the internship. So having a stipend definitely made it easier to make that choice.

Summary

This chapter presented the setting for the study and the demographics of the participants involved in this qualitative PAR research about the lived experiences of FG CIT. It reviewed the data collection procedure and included descriptions of themes that emerged during the analysis process. This chapter also addressed this study's evidence of trustworthiness in the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and democratic validity. Finally, this chapter outlined the results of this study. Themes related to RQ one that emerged were (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational. The themes that emerged related to RQ two were (a) relational and (b) financial. Chapter 5 will address an interpretation of findings from this study, its limitations, recommendations for future researchers, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative PAR study was to work alongside FG college student CIT enrolled in CACREP graduate counseling programs to identify the systemic obstacles they face and the supports that would help them persist to graduation. PAR was chosen for this study to empower this historically marginalized group (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021), FG graduate students, to identify the oppression they encounter in higher education counseling programs. Previous research into the lived experiences of FG college students has historically centered on undergraduates (Eveland, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2016). Little research has been done on the experiences FG graduate students have in higher education, and no research as of the writing of this paper has explicitly investigated the experiences of FG CIT.

This chapter will detail how the outcome of my study addresses my RQs: "What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face?" and "What supports would help FG college students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation?" This chapter will additionally explore the interpretation of my study's findings, its limitations, and recommendations for future research and actions to help FG CIT persist to graduation. This chapter will conclude by outlining the implications for positive social change resulting from this research.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section outlines the ways the findings of this study confirm and extend knowledge in counselor education related to educating FG graduate CIT. This will be done by comparing my findings with the peer-reviewed literature previously discussed in Chapter 2. Additionally, this section will analyze my study's findings in the context of Bourdieu's SCT and Tierney's CIM.

Study Confirmations and Extensions

In this study, two RQs were investigated:

- RQ 1: What systemic barriers do FG college students who are CIT face?
- RQ 2: What supports would help FG college students who are CIT successfully persist to graduation?

The themes that emerged from RQ 1 were (a) financial, (b) institutional, and (c) relational. The themes that emerged from RQ 2 were (a) relational and (b) financial. Previous findings illustrate that FG college students face more systemic challenges than CG students (Brown et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2020). RQ 1 extends those findings to include FG CIT in the areas of financial challenges, institutional challenges, and relational challenges. RQ 2's findings that relational and financial supports would help this population persist to graduation will be addressed in in the recommendations section.

Financial Challenges

This study confirms previous research that graduating with an undergraduate degree does not alleviate the financial stress for FG graduate students (Evans et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2017; Seay et al., 2008) and extends it to include FG CIT. The participants in this study talked about financial challenges that were consistent with previous research into the lived experience of FG college students (Brown et al., 2020; Hutson et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Longwell-Grice, 2016; Payne et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021). Confirming the limited research on FG graduate students in other disciplines (Hutson et al., 2022; Simmons et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2021) and extending previous research on FG undergraduates (Brown et al., 2020; Eveland, 2019; Fry, 2021; McDonald et al., 2020), FG CIT in this study reported that they have had to take out significant student loans that feel like an overwhelming burden. As viewed through CIM, this study confirmed what was found in research on undergraduate FG college students: this financial challenge stems from a lack of conventional social capital (Tierny &

Almeida, 2015). My research, framed by SCT and CIM, builds on previous findings that FG college students typically come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their CG peers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Quinn et al., 2019; Whittinghill et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021) and extends it to FG CIT.

In relation to SCT, because of a lack of generational social capital, FG undergraduates struggle more financially than their CG peers (Brookover et al., 2022). This study, also framed by SCT, extends these findings to FG CIT. LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) also framed their research through an SCT lens and found that a lack of generational knowledge and wealth often resulted in more financial hardship for undergraduates. Also, using SCT, this study confirmed and extended this finding to include FG CIT.

Institutional Challenges

Framed by CIM, this study confirms previous findings that FG graduate students struggle to navigate the higher education landscape even after earning a bachelor's degree (Seay et al., 2008). Additionally, my research confirms previous studies (Hutson et al., 2022; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Simmons et al., 2018; Tierney, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2021) that showed that because of their lack of social capital, FG college students face challenges that their GC peers do not. Because my research focuses on FG CIT, this study also extends this previous research to a specific FG population. Further, confirming previous work that established how meaningful close faculty relationships are to FG college students (Gutierrez & Keeton et al., 2021; Havlik et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Schademan et al., 2015), my study extends these findings to include FG CIT. My study also confirms previous findings that faculty often do not recognize FG college students as a marginalized population in their classrooms, and when they do it is typically through a deficit lens (Coronella, 2018;

LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Martin et al., 2020; Olcoń et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020) in addition to extending these findings to FG CIT.

Relational Challenges

The most recent CACREP (2023) Standards call on counseling programs to intentionally "create and effectively maintain an inclusive and equitable learning community that respects individual differences" (p. 4). These standards point out that this commitment to diversity must include cultural identity encompassing generational status. Cultural identity includes the FG identity (Manzoni & Streib, 2018). CES faculty need to have information that better informs their understanding of this understudied and often misunderstood marginalized, vulnerable population (Brown et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Schuyler et al., 2021). A better understanding of the relational challenges that FG CIT bring with them will likely help these students persist to graduation. This section outlines the systemic obstacles FGCS CIT face since higher education institutions often overlook FG identities (Brown et al., 2020).

Previous research has extensively explored the unique relational challenges FG undergraduate students face because of a lack of understanding or support from their families and friends (Brown et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 208; Evans et al., 2020; Swanbrow et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2022). My research confirms these findings and extends them to include FG CIT. In addition to a lack of support from family and friends, my study found that FG CIT struggle to find support from peers inside their programs, leading to feelings of otherness and loneliness. This confirms previous research that showed that FG college students experience a sense of otherness because their educational path was dissimilar to CG peers (Brown et al., 2020; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2023; Orme, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021). My research extends these findings to include FG CIT.

Limitations of the Study

While this study confirms and extends previous research about the lived experiences of FG college students and provides insight into the challenges faced by FG CIT and the supports that would help them persist to graduation, it does have limitations. Though large enough to reach saturation in a PAR study (Babbie, 2017; Marshall et al., 2013; Patton, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2020), the sample size of this population was relatively small (nine participants). Additionally, this study did not include any male identifying FG CIT; eight of the participants in this study were female, and one identified as non-binary. Both factors could impact the transferability of this study.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, my role as the researcher could have served as a possible limitation. I am an FG college student who was also a CIT, the same as the participants in this study. While I used journaling, field notes, member checking, and validation meetings with participants to mitigate researcher bias, my passion for this topic and a shared identity with the participants can be considered a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This section outlines recommendations for future research based on the strengths and limitations of this study. Because there is no known previous research on this topic, this study is the first to yield findings on the lived experiences of FG CIT. Therefore, it provides ample opportunities for further research. First, it is clear from this study that an FG identity persists past undergraduate programs and into counseling graduate school. To support this marginalized group, one recommended area for future research is to study CES faculty’s perceptions of FG CIT and how they adjust or do not adjust their pedagogy to support them. Just as in undergraduate programs, this study shows that faculty are a significant determining factor when

it comes to preventing FG attrition (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). This recommended future research would help explore CES faculty's perceived competence in supporting FG CIT.

All the participants in this study spoke about how unpaid internships create undue financial and emotional stress on them as FG CIT. Future research into the opinions of CES faculty and internship site supervisors about unpaid internships could move the conversation forward about this systemic challenge faced by FG CIT. More studies are needed on the structural systems and beliefs perpetuating unpaid internships.

This study did not explore the possible impacts race, gender, sexual identity, and socioeconomic background play into the challenges faced by FG CIT. The findings of this study do show that socioeconomic status and a lack of financial resources do play a factor into the challenges facing FG CIT. Future research could explore this connection more in-depth. Future research into how intersectional identities impact FG CIT attrition could also assist CES faculty in refining their messaging to students in a more inclusively supportive way, which is a CACREP (2023) Standards requirement.

Recommendations for Action

This research demonstrates how the participants feel that their programs, institutions, and faculty do not believe that their FG educational status is seen as a marginalized identity. However, as detailed in Chapter 2 and supported by my findings, FG college students meet the standard to be considered a marginalized group. This is further supported by the most recent CACREP (2023) Standards that address the importance of respecting cultural identity, including generational status, such as FG identities (Manzoni & Streib, 2018). As such, it behooves counseling programs, the higher education institutions that house them, and CES faculty to adjust to better meet FG college student needs. This section offers actionable recommendations

for stakeholders, including administrators and faculty.

The first actionable recommendation from my research is for colleges and universities to continually revisit their expectations for counseling faculty cultural competence. In addition to addressing the importance of acknowledging such identities as race and sexual orientation, faculty need to be trained to understand better the needs of all marginalized students, including first-generation college students. As the demographics of this nation continue to evolve, faculty cultural competence training should as well.

The second actionable recommendation is for counseling faculty to actively and intentionally include FG generational educational status in all discussions centered on identity and multiculturalism. Once FG generational educational status is respected as a marginalized identity, institutions and faculty will start to, as Tierney's CIM called for, adjust to students' cultural backgrounds rather than put the onus on students to assimilate to a system structured to exclude them (Kolluri & Tierney, 2019). Counseling Education and Supervision faculty are on the front line of advancing this discourse to help FG CIT feel seen and valued for their unique identity and contributions.

The third recommendation is that as part of advocating for FG college students as a marginalized population, colleges and universities should offer more faculty-created and led opportunities for FG CIT to connect with one another and receive support. Participants in this study talked about how many people in their lives do not understand or appreciate the struggles of graduate school. Alexis said:

> My parents were very anti-college. So, when I got into the master's program, instead of being met with, "Wow, that's wonderful. That is so cool," instead, it was like, "Ugh, are you really going to do that? Why would you do that? What's the point?"

Colleges and universities should fill this gap by offering opportunities for community for FG CIT. One of this study's participants, Cindy, called for "some type of program that connects other first-gen students with each other. So that that way everyone can kind of connect and talk and share experiences." Organizations such as the ACA and ACES could also be proactive in facilitating online FG CIT support groups to connect students in smaller programs where they may be the only enrolled FG college graduate student in their cohort.

The fourth and arguably most significant critical action recommendation is also the most difficult to address. While the rising and exorbitant cost of a college education is a significant financial challenge for FG college students, the systems that support the normalization of unpaid counseling internships are something that CES faculty and other stakeholders can address immediately. The first way stakeholders can address this systemic inequity is by simply questioning the attitudinal discourse: "It has always been done this way, I did it this way, and it is part of paying your dues." Faculty could also advocate for the CACREP Standards to include a requirement for accredited programs to address financial literacy and readiness as part of new student orientation in subsection K of the Counselor Education Program section.

Stakeholders, particularly CES faculty, are called to advocate for positive social change. However, by remaining silent on the systemic unfairness of unpaid internships for CIT, their inaction perpetuates oppression. CES faculty, especially those with tenure and leadership positions in CES and counseling organizations, should advocate for challenging and dismantling the unpaid internship system. Intentionally and repeatedly identifying this injustice is the first step to systemic change.

In addition to changing the discourse about unpaid internships, stakeholders can implement creative financial ways to show that counseling interns are vital to the mental health

ecosystem. As one participant in this study, Acorn, said, "I would absolutely advocate for everyone to get paid, even if it's something that's, you know, $25, $35, $50 an hour." Cindy said of her unpaid internship:

> I can't just devote my time to the internship. I've said many times that like, I would love to, even if I could get some money. And I could just do my internship, the five days a week, get my hours, but I wouldn't have to worry about anything else with that. I can just do that. Which I could if they provided some sort of income.

Though it is unlikely that mental health internship sites or counseling programs currently have the financial resources to pay interns an industry-standard rate, the participants in this study would find any income better than none. Again, the onus is on stakeholders such as college administrators and CES faculty to work with internship sites to seek funding from such sources as insurance reimbursement or grants.

Implications

My aim with this study was to add to the literature on FG college students by including graduate CIT. Additionally, the goal of this research was to better understand the systemic challenges faced by this marginalized group and the supports that would help them persist to graduation. As I worked alongside the FG CIT participants in this study, implications for social change emerged.

This study made the case and established that FG college students, including FG CIT, are a marginalized population with unique needs and experiences. As the counseling field continues to center social justice and equity as a cornerstone of the profession (ACES, 2020; CACREP, n.d.; CACREP, 2023; Ratts et al., 2016; Ratts et al., 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018), generational educational status must be included in discussions regarding multicultural

competence. Participants reported that their FG identity was rarely acknowledged by their schools, faculty, textbooks, or classroom conversations about multiculturalism. Ensuring that generational educational status is addressed and respected as an identity FG CIT bring into the classroom will help this population feel less excluded and also center the core value counseling and CES professionals hold regarding equity and social justice.

Overall, the RQs addressed in this study included barriers and supports. Interestingly, while exploring the participant's social capital during initial interview questions, the theme of motivation was revealed. Because of their intrinsic motivation, with the proper supports, this population can thrive as students. Participants talked about various motivating factors that have kept them in their programs thus far despite the numerous challenges above. The most cited reason by participants for continuing to struggle to remain in graduate school was a desire to help others. Daniella, an FG CIT from the Northeast who attends an online program, said:

> My father passed away from COVID, and so that got me thinking about my life. And I felt stuck at the time. And I said, "Oh, my gosh, I need to do something." Because I think that triggered me to think about how life is short. How one moment we're here in the next we're not. And then I looked at my life, and I reflected, and I said, "I'm stuck." I'm not doing, you know, what I would want to do. And then I started thinking about how do I want to make an imprint in my life, you know, in this world. And so that's when I figured I wanted to help other people. And so that's what led me to counseling.

Another participant, Michelle, shared about her desire to help others:

> Personal experience with therapy was definitely a factor. I had success and I felt relief with the person I was working with at the time. And I thought, hey, this is something I would like to be able to help others with. My sister has had a history of depression and

anxiety ever since high school. So, I was around that growing up, and the family dynamic kind of revolved around how to help her, and I still feel like she has never quite gotten the help that she needs. And so that was another inspiring factor to say, "Well let me go into this field and you know, how can I help like, you know? It's not working for her." And I realized that there's so many different ways to help people but that was definitely a factor in deciding as well: counseling. And then also one of the other personal experiences was I lost a friend to suicide during the pandemic and again, "What can I do?" You know. The brain goes everywhere. "How could this have been prevented? What could we have done?" I think I was 30 at the time. I was looking at coaching, I was looking at other, I don't want to say less rigorous fields, but less, like shorter training times. But I convinced myself, you know, I'm starting at ground level zero, I really kind of want to pursue the education that I need and the best training I can find to help people. So, I went with like a structured graduate program. I looked at social work, I looked at psychology, I have debated going into research. And so, psychology, to me, was the longer path towards that. The more in-depth, the more intellectual side, which I think I've always kind of felt safe in. But I wanted to try something different and, you know, actually meet and connect with individuals and try to help people on a one-on-one basis. So, it became counseling.

Daniela spoke of how her positive personal experience with therapy motivated her to help others as well:

I also used counseling for my kids. My son is diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder). And so, he had a lot of social issues and some suicidal ideations. I sought out services for my son. I saw such a substantial change. I have always worked with children.

> So, when I saw that, I was like, you know, there is such a big need for children who either have been suicidal or had some sort of traumatic event. And I want to be able to help those families, you know.

McKenzie shared about her desire to help others:

> One of my biggest values that my parents instilled in me was just caring concern for others and having empathy for people. And so, I was raised by my mom and grandma. And they were, they had a big part in that I think they I always saw them helping people. And, you know, they always told me, it's important to help, especially people less fortunate than you. So, it's always something I valued. And I found that being able to do so in a career was a really good match for me.

Mallory echoed how her family instilled in her a desire to help others:

> I think that came from my grandma. She was always very helpful to those around her. She would be the type of person to give the shirt off of her back to somebody on the street. So, I grew up watching her and observing her. And I always admired that trait in her. I wanted to continue that in my own personal life. And my mom's the same way too; she's very giving to other people.

This further demonstrates the value these students have to the profession and the reason institutions/universities should consider employing the recommendations listed above.

Conclusion

The U.S. is experiencing a mental health crisis and needs more counselors (Dailey et al., 2022; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; Phillips, 2023; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). CES faculty and counseling programs must support a multicultural population of students to serve an increasingly multicultural general population (CACREP, 2023;

Dailey et al., 2022; O'Hara et al., 2021). Along with race, culture, gender identity, and sexual identity, generational educational status should be included in CES faculty cultural competence (CACREP, 2023). This study into the systemic challenges faced by FG CIT and the supports that would help them persist to graduation was borne out of personal experience and observation. I assumed that as an FG CIT, I was the only one struggling in my graduate counseling program with debilitating feelings of otherness and doubt. Teaching as a graduate assistant in a counseling program, I heard directly from FG CIT about their overwhelming feelings of imposter syndrome. Feeling as I was not alone in my experiences and finding no known previous research into the experiences of FG CIT, the concept of this study was created.

As the researcher and a doctoral student, I experienced firsthand the importance of faculty respecting and valuing the FG identity. While preparing to enter this research project, I was met with skepticism and microaggressions about my own identity as an FG college student by some CES faculty. These faculty dismissed my FG identity and suggested that once a student earns an undergraduate degree, this identity is no longer valid in a graduate counseling program. I was informed that the experiences FG college students reported in this study's literature review regarding feelings of otherness, imposter syndrome, and time and financial scarcity were not unique to FG college students and that all counseling graduate students experience them. What was not understood by this faculty is that while that may be somewhat true, marginalization intensifies all systemic obstacles.

The previous literature on FG college students shows that these students are more likely to leave school without a degree if they do not have the institution's support, especially from faculty (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). In my own experience as an FG doctoral student, I was very close to quitting my doctoral program several times, not because of the workload or the

difficulty of the dissertation process, but because I felt exposed and unwelcome by faculty due to my FG identity. I was lucky to have a small number of other faculty members who acknowledged my struggles as an FG college student. Because of their interventions, I felt like I belonged, that there was a space for me in academia, and that I was not a fraud.

As illustrated by my study, I am not alone in my experience. The participants in this study spoke of how their FG identity makes them feel othered and as if they do not belong in counseling programs. The FG CIT in this study spoke of challenges they were facing while training to enter a field that they are deeply passionate about, and that needs their empathy, cultural competence, and resilience (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Dumsch, 2016; Payne et al., 2023). They also talked about the motivations that drew them to become counselors and how CES faculty and counseling programs can improve practices to be more welcoming to and supportive of this marginalized population. These voices should be valued because their vital contributions to the mental health profession are desperately needed.

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Appendix A: Email Recruitment Letter

Subject line: Looking for participants: First-Generation College Students Training to be Counselors

Email message: This is a participatory action research study that aims to identify the systemic challenges facing first-generation college students training to be counselors and the supports that would help them persist to graduation.

About the study:

- Participatory action research is a qualitative and collaborative process that seeks to work with a group to create social change. Participants will be considered co-researchers during the process.
- Once selected, participants will complete an online demographic form (estimated commitment: 10 minutes).
- Participants will agree to one 60-minute Zoom interview that will be recorded.
- Participants will then review the transcript for accuracy, communicating with the researcher via email (estimated time commitment: 60 minutes).
- To protect your privacy, the data collection and published study will use fake names.
- After the researcher completes the coding of interviews, a second 60-minute Zoom interview will be conducted with the participants to review the codes, which will be recorded.
- The researcher is a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) and a Counselor Education and Supervision Ph.D. candidate who identifies as a first-generation college student.

<u>Volunteers must meet these requirements:</u>

- 18 years old or older.
- Identify as first-generation college students (Definition: An individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree).
- Currently enrolled in a CACREP-affiliated counseling program.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Randy Scott, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during September 2023.

Please respond to this email ([redacted]) to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested. This research has been approved by the Walden University IRB (approval # 08-01-23-1042464) and is being supervised by Walden University professor Dr. Jonnie Lane ([redacted]).

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- How did you choose to pursue a master's degree?
- How did you decide to study counseling?
- What does it mean to you to be first-generation?
- During the application and/or interview process for graduate school, what opportunities were there for you to identify yourself as first-generation?
- How were you able to connect with other first-gen students when you started your graduate program?
- What challenges have you faced as a first-gen student in your program?
- What supports are there at your school specifically for first-gen graduate students?
- What supports have helped you during graduate school outside of what is provided by the campus or your program?
- Imagine you could design a counseling program that fully supported first-gen students. What would it look like?
- What advice would you give to other first-gen students considering a counseling degree?

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

Name:_________________

Email address:___________

Do you identify as a first-generation college student? (Definition: An individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree)

- Yes
- No

Are you currently enrolled in a CACREP-affiliated counseling program?

- Yes
- No

Are you 18 years old or older?

- Yes
- No

Gender Identity:

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Other:______________

Preferred Pronouns:

- She/her
- He/him
- They/them

- Other:____________

Current Relationship Status:

- Married
- Partnered
- Single
- Widowed
- Separated
- Divorced
- Other:____________

Current Parenting Status While In School:

- Parent with children at home
- Parent with children not at home
- Not a parent
- Other:_______________

Current Employment Status While In School:

- Employed Full-Time
- Employed Part-Time
- Not Employed
- Other:________________

What time zone are you in?

____

Days and Times You Are Typically Available for Zoom Interviews Over The Next Three Weeks:

Monday / Times:____________

Tuesday / Times:____________

Wednesday / Times:_________

Thursday / Times:_________

Friday / Times:___________

Saturday / Times:_________

Sunday / Times:__________