

Towards Equitable Access to Postsecondary Education: Learning From the Voices of  
First Generation Students

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative, phenomenological study investigated first generation students' perceptions of the challenges they experienced in the process of accessing higher education and the type of school-based support that was received. Particular emphasis was placed on the impact of parental education level on access to postsecondary education (PSE) and how differences in support at the primary and secondary levels of schooling influenced access. Purposeful, homogenous sampling was used to select 6 first generation students attending a postsecondary institution located in Ontario. Analysis of the data revealed that several interrelated factors impact first generation students' access to postsecondary education. These include familial experiences and expectations, school streaming practices, secondary school teachers' and guidance counselors' representations of postsecondary education, and the nature of school-based support that participants received. The implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed and recommendations for enhancing school-based support to ensure equitable access to postsecondary education for first generation students are provided.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Given the shift that has occurred within Canada, from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based economy, attending postsecondary education (PSE) has increasingly pertinent benefits. This study investigated the degree and nature of the impact of parental education level on access to PSE and how differences in the quality of primary and secondary schooling affect access. This study was grounded in a concern with equity, particularly as it relates to a student's academic outcomes and access to postsecondary education. More specifically, this study was guided by the principles of critical-democratic pedagogy, namely the understanding of education as a sociopolitical context (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007).

### **Background of the Problem**

The postsecondary education system in Ontario has grown substantially in the past decade (Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004; Rae, 2005). Ontario has experienced a 31% increase in university enrolment and a 20% increase in college enrolment between 2002 and 2010 (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], 2013), making it an area with one of the highest postsecondary rates in the world (Boothby & Drewes, 2006; Lambert et al., 2004; Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance [OUSA], 2010). However, despite these high attendance rates, several identifiable groups continue to be underrepresented in PSE due to a variety of financial, social, academic, physical, geographic, motivational, and informational barriers (OUSA, 2010). These groups usually include students from low-income families, first generation students, Aboriginals, individuals with disabilities, and rural and northern students (HEQCO, 2010; OUSA, 2010). Given that postsecondary education is now strongly

correlated with economic success and with a high quality of life at both the individual and societal level (HEQCO, 2010; Lambert et al., 2004), there is a growing concern regarding equity of access to PSE for all types of students (Finnie, Sweetman, & Usher, 2008). Finnie et al. (2008) suggest that this concern became particularly relevant in the 1990s as tuition fees and student debt levels increased and the correlation between PSE participation and certain family characteristics became more apparent.

It is unrealistic to suggest that all members of society should attend PSE, as some individuals will prefer careers or lifestyles that do not involve pursuing college or university and others lack the ability (Finnie et al., 2008; Williams, 2004). However, the opportunity to access postsecondary education and the associated benefits should be open to all individuals on equitable terms (Finnie et al., 2008; Williams, 2004). Thus, in creating policy and practices surrounding access to higher education, it is important not only to focus on increasing overall participation rates but also ensuring that all interested and qualified students have the opportunity to obtain a PSE (Finnie et al., 2008). Ideally, differences in family background should not impact who accesses and persists within higher education (Williams, 2004).

### **Statement of the Problem Situation**

This study focused on issues of access as experienced by first generation students. Within the context of this study, a first generation student is defined as one whose parents do not hold any diplomas or degrees from postsecondary institutions (Davis, 2010). This definition of first generation status therefore includes students whose parents or guardians have never attended college or university at all and students whose parents or guardians attended some college or university but did not obtain a diploma or degree (Davis, 2010).

This particular definition was chosen based on research that suggests that the households of students whose parents have some experience in college or university are more similar to than different from the households of students whose parents have never attended a postsecondary institution (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Further, although the term first generation technically does not apply to students until they are enrolled in PSE, for clarity's sake, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary students whose parents have not obtained a diploma or degree will be referred to as first generation students. Moreover, the term PSE will be used interchangeably with higher education to describe apprenticeship, college, and university programs and institutions.

The specific focus on first generation students stems from the literature that suggests that parental education level is the most important factor in determining a student's PSE attendance (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011). Further, first generation status often intersects with other aspects of identity, such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, or race, which are connected to postsecondary access. For instance, first generation students are more likely to be individuals of colour, Aboriginal, immigrants, from low-income families, and/or from rural or northern areas (Choy, 2001; HEQCO, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; OUSA, 2010). Consequently, Choy (2001) argues that policies and programs that increase access for first generation students may also do the same for other underrepresented groups.

### **Purpose of the Study**

If one recognizes the importance of altering the social pattern of who attends PSE, it becomes crucial to consider when students begin to think about their postsecondary pathway, in order to strategize appropriate timing of outreach and support. Research

suggests that a large number of students formalize their educational plans between Grades 8 and 10 (Acumen Research Group, 2003; Choy, 2001). Thus, given that decisions are made early, an attempt to foster equitable access to PSE must also occur early on in a student's educational pathway. Informational programs and initiatives regarding PSE that start early and remain consistent throughout elementary and secondary school are most effective in influencing students' educational goals (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003; OUSA, 2010; Rae, 2005). Moreover, given the impact of both financial and nonfinancial barriers, it is important that these programs address a wide range of barriers as the mere provision of financial aid is not sufficient in ensuring equitable access to PSE for all types of students (Cunningham et al., 2003; OUSA, 2010).

Early outreach programs that promote access to PSE need to be supported by various provincial and government ministries and coordinated strategically with municipalities and local communities (OUSA, 2010; Rae, 2005). Recognizing that a multisectoral and multilevel response is needed to ensure equitable access to PSE, this study explored what public elementary and secondary schools are doing and can do in this endeavour. An exploration of students' experiences within the education system is valid, given the amount of time students spend within the system and the influence that teachers, administrators, and school leaders can have on students. Nieto (2007) highlights that it is primarily through public schools that "children are given the possibility, perhaps the only one that some of them will have, of a better life than that of their families" (p. 300). This therefore demonstrates that the type of school environment that is fostered and the type of programs that are implemented can have a substantial impact on students'

academic achievement and attitudes toward education. Therefore, this research sought to discover the conditions within elementary and secondary schools that can maintain and enhance the motivation levels of first generation students and provide appropriate informational support, thus optimizing equitable access to PSE.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by three main questions:

1. What are the central barriers and challenges, if any, that first generation students report experiencing in the process of accessing PSE?
2. What school-based support do first generation students receive while in elementary or secondary school?
3. What gaps or problems do first generation students believe exist in the school-based conditions or support?

Within a phenomenological approach, research questions are considered meaning questions, “questions that ask for the possible meaning and significance of a certain phenomenon” (Orbe, 2000, p. 607). Further, within phenomenological research, such questions “cannot be solved and thus done away with; instead the essence of such questions is the opening up and keeping open of possibilities” (Orbe, 2000, p. 607).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research relied on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage student college choice model. This model is based on a U.S. context, where the term college can refer to institutions offering either diploma or degree programs. Thus, in order to make this framework relevant to a Canadian context, Hossler and Gallagher’s college choice model will be referred to as a postsecondary choice model within the context of this study. In

this model, Hossler and Gallagher define three stages in the transition to higher education: predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage involves students' decisions or aspirations to continue their formal education after high school. These decisions and aspirations are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, parental education level, academic ability, attitudes of parents and peers, involvement in activities during elementary and secondary school, and elementary and secondary school quality (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). If students decide they would like to pursue PSE, they transition into the search stage, which refers to the process of considering types of postsecondary institutions to which students could apply. Finally, the choice stage refers to the selection of an institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) emphasize that at each stage of this model, individual and organizational factors intersect and influence outcomes for the student. This theoretical framework therefore stresses that several features of one's familial background, including parental education level, influence participation in PSE (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Further, this framework emphasizes the role that schools can play in facilitating the transition through the postsecondary choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For instance, Hossler and Gallagher argue that involvement in extracurricular activities and the quality of the high school curricula influence PSE participation. Additionally, this framework reinforces the notion that postsecondary attendance involves a process that begins early in a student's educational pathway and is therefore conducive to the idea that ensuring equitable access to higher education must begin early and remain consistent throughout elementary and secondary school years (Cunningham et al., 2003; OUSA, 2010; Rae, 2005).

### **Importance of the Study**

In addressing the importance of this study, it is necessary to highlight why a concern with equitable access to PSE is crucial in Canadian society. Williams (2004) argues that within a democratic society there is a responsibility to educate all citizens to ensure they have the skills and capacities to participate, both economically and socially. However, Rae (2005) highlights that access to PSE is unequal as many groups face significant barriers and are consequently underrepresented. As a result, increased access to PSE for underrepresented groups should be a key priority for a democratic society, largely because of the way that systemic inequalities within one social domain often generate inequalities in others (Williams, 2004). Williams argues that systemic inequalities “extend across an array of social domains, including income, education, social status (including cultural affirmation or stigmatization), health, life expectancy, infant mortality, and representation in political institutions” (p. 4). Consequently, given that an individual’s level of education significantly affects his or her lifetime earning potential and that income level is correlated with other determinants of health and well being, one can conclude that “the social pattern of access to postsecondary education necessarily functions to either reinforce or weaken existing systemic inequalities” (Williams, 2004, p. 5). In a knowledge-based economy where it is estimated that up to 70% of all future jobs will require PSE (Rae, 2005) and where “higher education yields greater and greater advantages to those who pursue education, an unchanged pattern of access to university will not only reinforce but will likely amplify existing structures of social and economic inequality” (Williams, 2004, p. 6).

My personal interest in this particular topic stems from the recent opening of a

public focus school in Ontario, currently serving elementary and secondary school students whose parents did not attend college or university. Raywid (1994) defines a focus school as one with an explicit purpose in that it identifies a particular target group, set of aims, or instructional orientations. Focus schools lie in contrast to the common or comprehensive school where students are placed in schools according to the zone in which they live and where the diffuse purpose is to meet all needs and tastes (Raywid, 1994). Through social and academic support, this particular focus school in Southern Ontario aims to encourage students to be the first in their respective families to graduate from a postsecondary institution. The establishment of this school demonstrates recognition on the part of policy makers, school administrators, and community members that first generation students face a unique set of barriers in the pursuit of higher education. Further, this particular initiative aligns with recommendations to foster early outreach programs to provide support for first generation students (Cunningham et al., 2003; Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2010; Rae, 2005).

Given that this school is relatively new, it is important to engage in research regarding how to optimize the school environment and the types of support offered to students in order to make the most of this unique opportunity. Further, although I commend the effort of those involved in establishing this school, I am still concerned about what can be done in the remaining comprehensive schools to promote access to higher education, particularly because this focus school may only reach a particular cohort of students who need support. Given these concerns, I suggest that administrators, teachers, and other school leaders in all elementary and secondary schools can learn a lot from the voices of first generation students currently enrolled in PSE. While there is an

extensive body of research that focuses on the barriers experienced by first generation students and the need for increased support, there is little qualitative research that has been carried out in Canada that focuses on how the voices of first generation students enrolled in PSE can be used to inform elementary and secondary school policy, programs, and initiatives.

It is anticipated that the findings of this study will be useful for policy makers, administrators, teachers, and other leaders in elementary and secondary schools. In part, the study highlights the type of elementary and secondary school environment and support programs that are viewed as most beneficial by first generation students who are currently enrolled in PSE. The study also addresses perceived gaps or problems in the programming and support. Therefore, the findings can be used as guidelines or recommendations to inform the practices, programs, attitudes, and behaviours of those involved in elementary and secondary schools, particularly as they offer support to students who are determining their future educational and career pathways. Further, the findings may be useful to first generation students in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary school and their families as they gain exposure to voices of those who share similar backgrounds.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study focused on programs that students could enter directly from secondary school, thus excluding any graduate degrees or postgraduate diplomas. Furthermore, the study focused on issues related to access to PSE, rather than persistence, where access refers to the opportunity to enter a given program and persistence refers to continuing and completion of that program (Finnie, Laporte, & Lascelles, 2004). These particular foci

were chosen in order to examine the initial transition from secondary to postsecondary studies as experienced by first generation students and the school-based support that aided in that transition. However, it is important to acknowledge that access is only one part of the concern with ensuring that all types of students have an equitable chance to reap the benefits associated with higher education. It is equally important to consider issues of persistence, as many of the benefits of PSE come only with obtaining a diploma or degree (Davis, 2010; Finnie et al., 2008).

Although the definition of first generation status used within this study refers to students who are attending apprenticeship, college, and university programs and institutions, the study focused on access to university. Despite this particular focus, it is important to recognize that there are multiple pathways to higher education and benefits associated with each pathway. The OUSA (2010) highlights that within Ontario, university is often favoured over college and professional trades and that this “hierarchy of pathways” (p. 5) can be damaging to a student’s decision-making process. The decision to focus on access to university within this study is not meant to suggest that university is the optimal choice of a postsecondary institution for students. This particular focus is grounded in the research which suggests that parental education level has a more significant impact on access to university than on access to college or apprenticeship programs (Finnie, Lascelles, & Sweetman, 2005; Knighton & Mirza, 2002; Lambert et al., 2004). Therefore, this study concentrated on examining the PSE pathway where the effects of first generation student status are most significant.

### **Outline of the Remainder of the Document**

Chapter 1 highlighted the background and rationale that led to this study. Further, this chapter discussed the problem situation this study aimed to address, outlined the purpose of the study, and identified the research questions the study sought to address. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) postsecondary choice model was outlined as the theoretical framework used to contextualize the study. Lastly, this chapter addressed the scope of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature that provides additional context for the research problem. The chapter is organized thematically, focusing on the benefits of pursuing PSE, the role of parental education, the need for early and multidimensional outreach, and the power of elementary and secondary school support.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology, specifically the means by which data are collected and the philosophy underlying those methods. The choice of a qualitative, phenomenological research design is explained, as are the methods used for site and participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Further, the chapter outlines relevant methodological assumptions and the ways in which credibility was ensured.

Chapter 4 presents the data that have been collected and an analysis of the findings. The data are presented thematically, focusing on familial experiences, streaming practices, perceptions and representations of PSE, school-based support, and participants' recommendations and personal advice.

Finally, chapter 5 addresses the research questions that guided the study and connects the findings to existing literature. Further, the chapter discusses implications of the findings and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a theoretical foundation that guided the research. This chapter examines literature related to the benefits of pursuing PSE, the influence of parental education on student access to PSE, the need for early and multidimensional outreach, and the power of elementary and secondary school support.

### **The Benefits of Pursuing Postsecondary Education**

Attending PSE has significant benefits for both the individual and for society at large. The majority of these benefits are correlated with the economic shift that has occurred in Canada since the mid to late 1990s from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based economy where technology, research, and innovation are pivotal (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2009; Boothby & Drewes, 2006; Rae, 2005). According to Statistics Canada (2011), Canada's manufacturing industry lost 278,000 jobs between 2000 and 2007. Contrastingly, job creation occurred in professional and managerial occupations, which demand qualifications obtained through higher education (Bouchard & Zhao, 2000). Moving forward, the federal government estimates that up to 70% of all jobs in the future will require some PSE (Rae, 2005). Therefore, given this shift toward a knowledge-based economy (Drewes, 2010), Canada's economic prosperity, quality of life and competition in a global market are directly dependent on an increased number of individuals having access to PSE (Berger et al., 2009; Boothby & Drewes, 2006; Drewes, 2010; Drolet, 2005; Emery, 2005; Rae, 2005).

At an individual level, a strong correlation exists between employment opportunities, job stability, earning potential, and higher education (Berger et al., 2009; Boothby & Drewes, 2006; Drolet, 2005; Ferrer & Riddell, 2002; Mudge & Higgins,

2011). Mudge and Higgins (2011) highlight that as industries downsize to compete within a global market, employers are able to be selective in their search for well-trained and developed employees. When selecting suitable candidates for employment, employers are able to use PSE completion to screen for characteristics such as perseverance, leadership, creativity, problem-solving skills, and flexibility (Ferrer & Riddell, 2002; Mudge & Higgins, 2011). As a result, the employment rate for individuals with a university degree has remained above 85% since 1980 and is much less affected by fluctuations in the economy in comparison to individuals with lower education levels (Boothby & Drewes, 2006). This therefore demonstrates that a university degree not only helps individuals gain employment but also leads to a relative amount of job security (Boothby & Drewes, 2006). Furthermore, in 2005, an individual with a bachelor's degree earned approximately \$18,000 more annually than an individual with a high school diploma and an individual with a graduate degree or postgraduate diploma earned \$29,000 more per year than a high school graduate (Berger et al., 2009). Moreover, the earnings of university graduates have increased since the mid 1990s even after adjusting for inflation, demonstrating an increase in the relative value of higher education (Berger et al., 2009). This relationship between employment, earnings, and higher education demonstrates that there “continues to be a strong demand for the human capital produced by Canada's PSE system” (Drewes, 2010, p. 21).

Beyond benefiting the individual, attending PSE also has positive economic and social benefits for the broader society. Individuals who obtain a diploma or degree are less likely to rely on social services or commit crime (Rae, 2005). Statistics demonstrate that Canadians holding a university degree make up 22% of the population, yet pay 41%

of the income tax and receive only 14% of government spending (Berger et al., 2009). Individuals who hold a diploma or degree also tend to be more active community members who, for instance, vote and do volunteer work, when compared to others (Moretti, 2004). This therefore demonstrates that spending money on PSE is a solid investment for both the individual and government to make (Rae, 2005). Berger et al. (2009) argue that “few if any investments...will produce as much of a return as higher education” (p. 8).

### **The Role of Parental Education**

When considering issues of access to PSE, focus has traditionally been on financial barriers experienced by students and their families (Finnie et al., 2011; Finnie & Mueller, 2008). However, recent research suggests that sociocultural factors such as parental education levels exert a much stronger influence on PSE participation than family income and other financial factors (Berger et al., 2009; Choy, 2001; Finnie et al., 2011; Finnie et al., 2005; Finnie et al., 2008; HEQCO, 2010; Knighton & Mirza, 2002; OUSA, 2010). Finnie et al. (2008) argue that generally

Culture dominates money, where culture is shorthand reference for the various non-monetary and significantly family based influences that cause one kind of student to steer towards and prepare for PSE, often from a relatively early age, while another has no such orientations, undertakes no such preparations, and ultimately winds up making different PSE choices (p. 22).

Within this context, the term “culture” is used to refer to factors such as parental education levels, parental expectations for their child’s schooling, family size, family dynamic (single parent versus dual parent households), and family location (rural versus

urban), among others (Finnie et al., 2011). Similarly, de Brouker and Lavallee (1998) suggest that “the inherited intellectual capital of the family—forged over the years by generations of family members’ achievements at school and work—often play a large role in a child’s educational achievement” (p. 22). De Brouker and Lavallee highlight that intellectual capital is transmitted through attitudes and expectations regarding education and educational investment strategies such as buying books, setting aside time to read, and limiting television viewing. Thus, parents provide an environment in the home that likely reflects their own academic background and consequently may or may not be conducive to high levels of educational attainment (de Brouker & Lavallee, 1998; Lambert et al., 2004).

Parents who hold a diploma or degree are more likely to place higher value on PSE and have higher expectations for the academic achievement of their children (de Brouker & Lavallee, 1998; Finnie et al., 2008; Lambert et al., 2004; OUSA, 2010). PSE-related attitudes and expectations exert a strong influence on whether students will attend PSE (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2012; Lambert et al., 2004). Students whose parents thought PSE was important and expected them to go to PSE were more than twice as likely to attend than students whose parents did not expect them to participate in PSE (Frempong et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2004).

Moreover, parents are often “required to play the critical role of ‘broker’ or advocate for children, connecting the child to information and resources intended to enhance future life opportunities for the child” (Mudge & Higgins, 2011, p. 130). Choy (2001) highlights that the number of students whose parents were involved in various activities related to PSE access such as attending information sessions, visiting campuses,

and locating information about financial aid was significantly higher if the parents had a bachelor's or advanced degree. Students whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree often receive little support from their families in regard to planning and preparing for PSE because their parents did not have direct experience with PSE and were thus disconnected from basic information such as different programs available, tuition costs, and admission requirements (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; Mudge & Higgins, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2001). As a result, first generation students have reported feeling that their parents are unreliable sources of information (EKOS Research Associates, 2009; Lambert et al., 2004). Consequently, many first generation students are left to navigate the complex path to PSE with little help from their families who may lack this experiential knowledge (Jehangir, 2010).

Further, Plank and Jordan (2001) highlight that many first generation students and their families make decisions regarding PSE based on inaccurate information about tuition, living expenses, and financial aid (p. 950). As a result, such students and their parents may decide that PSE is not financially viable (Plank & Jordan, 2001). Plank and Jordan suggest that if families are given appropriate information about PSE expenses and opportunities for financial support early enough in a student's educational pathway, some may still believe PSE is not feasible, but others may find that the combination of various means of financial assistance can make funding PSE a possibility. Moreover, Plank and Jordan illustrate that many students and their parents do not gather information early enough regarding the steps that are required for admittance into postsecondary institutions. Thus, Choy (2001) argues that without the appropriate and timely information regarding the necessary steps, first generation students are less likely than

their peers to be academically prepared for admission to college or university.

It is also important to consider the experiences of families who have immigrated to Canada to pursue better living conditions and increased educational and workplace opportunities. Fuligni and Witkow (2004) found that adolescents from immigrant families received roughly the same grades as their peers and reported similar levels of educational aspirations. However, students from immigrant families possessed a stronger value of general academic success than their peers (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004). Fuligni and Witkow argue that the success of immigrant families within secondary school is linked to the strong value parents place on education as a means of ensuring the child's future occupational and economic success. Further, immigrant parents are more likely to aspire for their children to attend PSE (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004). Despite academic success and educational aspirations, Baum and Flores (2011) argue that many immigrants and their children face significant barriers in accessing PSE. These barriers typically involve having inadequate information regarding PSE and can be amplified by cultural differences, language barriers, and discrimination (Baum & Flores, 2011).

Consequently, as parental education levels increase, so too does the likelihood that the child will enroll in a postsecondary institution (Choy, 2001; de Brouker & Lavallee, 1998; Drolet, 2005; Finnie et al., 2004). Research indicates that students who come from a family where the highest level of parental education is less than high school have between a 10-20% PSE participation rate (Finnie & Mueller, 2008). On the opposite end of the spectrum, students whose parents have a graduate education have between a 60-70% PSE participation rate (Finnie & Mueller, 2008). More specifically, students are three times as likely to attend university if at least one of their parents holds a university

degree as compared to students with parents of any other education level (Finnie et al., 2004). Finnie et al. (2004) also suggest that the participation gap between students whose parents have high education levels and students whose parents have low education levels has increased over time. Using data from the Youth in Transition Survey, Finnie et al. argue that family background and more specifically parental education level became a more significant determinant of PSE access in the 1990s. However, using the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, Drolet (2005) found no such evidence to suggest that there was a widening in the postsecondary participation gap by parental education levels during the 1990s. While there may be inconsistencies in the literature regarding whether the effect of parental education level on access to PSE has become more pronounced since the 1990s, there is little question that PSE participation is strongly related to parental education levels.

### **The Need for Early and Multidimensional Outreach**

First generation students, among other groups underrepresented in PSE, face multiple and interconnected barriers to higher educational attainment (Berger et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2003). There is not one factor or group of factors that will ultimately predict participation in PSE (Berger et al., 2009). Further, factors are not always mutually exclusive and the same factor can play a much different role from one student to the next (Berger et al., 2009; OUSA, 2010). Traditionally, tuition fees are thought to be a major barrier to accessing PSE, which raises a concern for students from low-income families who may not have the same opportunity to pursue PSE as their middle class peers (Finnie et al., 2008). However, it is important to recognize that there are several other barriers such as individual characteristics and behaviour, family context, academic performance,

and availability of information regarding PSE that are all related to participation in PSE (Berger et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2003; Finnie et al., 2008). Finnie et al. (2008) argue that

If the end result is unequal access to PSE and, in particular, if these inequalities are related to family or other background factors such as socioeconomic status, surely they should be regarded as inequities or otherwise considered as barriers, representing different sets of PSE—and life course—opportunities. (p. 6)

Therefore, given the range of nonfinancial barriers that influence access to PSE, discussions and policies that focus exclusively on the provision of financial aid are not sufficient to ensure equitable access to PSE for all students (Cunningham et al., 2003; Finnie et al., 2008). As a result, intervention strategies and policies must be comprehensive, address multiple barriers, and involve all of society (Berger et al., 2009). However, it is important to recognize that some barriers, such as parental income or parental education level, cannot simply be changed directly by public policy or outreach programming (Berger et al., 2009). Rather, the effect that parental income and parental education level have on access to PSE can be influenced indirectly by finding ways to equip parents with the tools necessary to assist their children in making informed choices regarding their future (Berger et al., 2009).

Furthermore, these factors that influence participation in PSE typically begin to affect students at an early age (Cunningham et al., 2003; Finnie et al., 2008). Students' decision making regarding PSE is largely impacted by the type of information they receive and when they receive it (EKOS Research Associates, 2009). It seems that those who do not pursue PSE tend to make this decision at an early age and completely

disengage from the idea of pursuing PSE (Frempong et al., 2012). Research suggests that 72% of university applicants decided to attend university by the age of 14 (Acumen Research Group, 2003). Consequently, Rae (2005) argues that access to PSE is “not the result of what happens in the first year of university or college, or the last year of high school” (p. 13). Rather, as Choy (2001) highlights, “enrolment in postsecondary education represents the culmination of a process that typically begins earlier” (p. 7).

Given that underrepresented students face a complex and interrelated set of barriers and that these barriers begin to influence students’ educational pathways at an early age, it is recommended that early outreach programs begin at the elementary school level and remain consistent at the secondary and postsecondary level (Berger et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2003; OUSA, 2010). The concept of early outreach is defined as “the active pursuit and engagement of youth in a dialogue about education, its purposes and benefits, so that each student can make informed decisions about postsecondary education” (OUSA, 2010, p. 3). Further, such programs encourage students and their families to acquire the appropriate information and perform the steps necessary to access PSE (Cunningham et al., 2003).

Cunningham et al. (2003), Rae (2005), and the OUSA (2010) provide several suggestions for and examples of potential early outreach programs. The OUSA argues that a comprehensive outreach strategy must involve both the government and local communities. Further, in implementing this outreach strategy, the role of the government should be the coordination, funding, and evaluation of these programs, leaving community organizations a certain degree of freedom in carrying out such programs as they have firsthand knowledge of the types of barriers their students encounter (OUSA,

2010). This therefore demonstrates that a “one size fits all” approach is not suitable in addressing the myriad factors that influence PSE participation (OUSA, 2010). Rae advises that colleges, universities, and school boards should reach out to first generation students at an early age. Rae highlights that this outreach should involve first generation students who are currently enrolled in PSE visiting schools as role models and tutors to spend time with students who may otherwise not have considered entering a postsecondary program. Such a strategy would work to stimulate interest in higher education and provide support throughout the process of accessing it.

Rae’s (2005) recommendation to involve postsecondary student ambassadors corresponds with the value this study has placed on the experiences and voices of current first generation students enrolled in PSE. Other examples of early outreach programs in elementary and secondary schools can include postsecondary advising, career advising, assistance with financial aid and personal counseling, summer programs, tutoring, test preparation, postsecondary level courses taken while in secondary school, parent involvement, personal enrichment, leadership seminars, and scholarships (Cunningham et al., 2003). Given the variety of forms that early outreach can take, it is important to rely on the expertise of first generation students currently enrolled in PSE. Relying on the knowledge of those who have experienced first generation status can aid in determining which programs are perceived as most valuable in assisting students in the transition through Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) postsecondary choice model.

### **The Power of Elementary and Secondary School Support**

There are diverging perspectives on the issue of whether school reform can aid in fostering equitable outcomes for all types of students. De Brouker and Lavalley (1998)

ask, “if the family cannot transmit intellectual capital, is the education system able to provide equal educational opportunities to all?” (p. 28). By believing in and advocating for public and higher education, challenging conventional wisdom, modeling social justice, and using their power inside and outside the classroom, educational leaders can improve the life and academic outcomes of students (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008; Nieto, 2007). Dei and Karumanchery (1999) suggest that “educational reforms carry the potential to reshape how resources are shared and/or redistributed so as to work toward the optimum use of human talent and skills” (p. 112). Further, in a recent study, Frempong et al. (2012) considered whether schools can compensate for disadvantage stemming from a student’s familial background and affect students’ access to PSE. Overall, the findings suggested that even after student-level and school-level backgrounds are adjusted, variation in the likelihood that students enter a postsecondary program is still statistically significant among different schools (Frempong et al., 2012). The study revealed that academic pressure and student–teacher relations are the most important factors in determining which students are more likely to pursue PSE (Frempong et al., 2012).

Additional studies have highlighted that the elementary and secondary education system can create an environment that meets the needs of all students (Mudge & Higgins, 2011; Rae, 2005). More specifically, research has revealed that an academically challenging high school curriculum that engages the learner in higher order thinking skills can significantly increase the chance that a student will pursue PSE (Choy, 2001; Mudge & Higgins, 2011). Additional suggestions for school-based support include increasing dissemination of information about all PSE options, including aptitude testing

that links potential careers to PSE options, introducing information about PSE and related issues earlier in the curriculum, and increasing support for students who are unsure about their educational path (EKOS Research Associates, 2009; OUSA, 2010). Further, it is important for schools to involve parents in PSE planning (Choy, 2001; EKOS Research Associates, 2009; Mudge & Higgins, 2011). Mudge and Higgins (2011) argue that, in particular, engaging underserved families in the PSE process requires a sincere respect for varying family values and culture.

Nieto (2007) also highlights that many educators, researchers, and policy makers argue that educational policies and practices by themselves cannot transcend “inequality, structural barriers due to racism and other barriers, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, unfair bureaucratic policies, and other institutional and ideological barriers” (p. 302). It is important to recognize that any attempt at reform towards equity in academic and life outcomes is situated within a broader sociopolitical context that involves the “ideologies, conditions, laws, regulations, policies, practices, traditions, and current events that define a society [and frequently] keep structural inequality in place” (Nieto, 2007, p. 300). Nieto highlights that educators and economists, such as Jean Anyon and Richard Rothstein, have made it clear that “what schools can accomplish will be limited if larger macroeconomic policies do not change” (p. 302). While I agree that school change must accompany broader societal change, reform needs to begin somewhere. The public education system houses students from various socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and gender backgrounds and can therefore be an appropriate place to begin working towards fostering equitable outcomes for all types of students. As Nieto suggests, “public schools,

if done correctly, can fuel democracy” (p. 300). I agree with the position outlined by Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011), who write:

[This book] does not romanticize the role of schools by claiming that they can overcome all odds and create equality in outcomes. At the same time, it does not take the view that until society changes, schools are powerless in the face of inequality of life conditions (p. 9).

Thus, as Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa highlight, the broader sociopolitical context does matter, but so does the work done in schools. I would therefore suggest that primary and secondary schools can impact access to PSE.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter served to contextualize the study within existing literature concerned with fostering equitable access to PSE. The literature suggests that attending PSE has significant benefits for the individual and that family characteristics such as parental education level have an impact on whether students access PSE and reap the associated benefits. Given that students make decisions regarding their postsecondary pathways at an early age and that a variety of factors can impede access to PSE, it is crucial that outreach begins early and addresses both financial and nonfinancial barriers. Further, the literature highlights the impact that school-based support can have, specifically on students’ career and educational pathways. The next chapter will outline the methodology for the study.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

This study used a qualitative research approach in order to explore the complexity of the experiences of first generation students (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Rather than attempting to simplify the central research problem, qualitative researchers recognize that there are many issues and layers involved and thus work to portray the issue in its multidimensional form (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Further, qualitative researchers recognize the importance of listening to the voices of participants being studied in order to gain new insights about the problem of interest (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Further, this study used a phenomenological research design in order to understand and describe “what is common about how several individuals experience a phenomenon” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 238), in this case, first generation student status. Beginning as a philosophical movement introduced by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology later emerged as an approach to research used in an array of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and education (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) define phenomenology as a “person’s perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists external to the person” (p. 139). Thus, a phenomenological study “attempts to understand people’s perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 141). Furthermore, phenomenology allows a researcher to “incorporate diverse voices within the research design in meaningful ways” (Orbe, 2000, p. 606). Through examining multiple perspectives, this study sought to discover what it is like to be a first generation student based on an insider’s perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

The phenomenological research design or “process of discovery” involves three stages: “(a) collection of descriptions of lived experiences, (b) reduction of [data] into essential themes, and (c) hermeneutic interpretation of themes” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610). The first stage, “the collection of descriptions of lived experiences” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610) will be described in the data collection section within this chapter. The second and third stages, “reduction of [data] into essential themes” and “hermeneutic interpretation of themes” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610) will be described in the data analysis section within this chapter.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) highlight that “it is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases” in order to present the “complexity” of a group of individuals and avoid “superficial perspectives” (p. 255). More specifically, Creswell (1998) highlights that a typical sample size for phenomenological research is five to 25 individuals. Further, it is crucial that each of the participants has had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). Thus, in keeping with a phenomenological approach, purposeful, homogenous sampling strategies were used to select six, first generation students attending a postsecondary institution located in Ontario (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Purposeful sampling occurs when researchers intentionally select individuals who are information rich in order to learn about or understand the central phenomenon (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Homogenous sampling is a strategy used by researchers to sample “individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 254). Therefore, I intentionally selected individuals who identified as being the

first in their families to attend college or university in order to learn more about this particular subgroup within PSE.

### **Data Collection**

Before conducting the research, clearance was obtained from the appropriate research ethics board. Once clearance was received (File # 12-227 ARMSTRONG), participants were solicited for the study. Recruitment posters were hung throughout the campus, with the permission of the department responsible for the Campus Promotion's Policy. I did not screen for race, gender, religion, or economic status. Rather, all first generation students at this particular university were invited to participate in anticipation that diversity would arise through the experiences of the participants. Six students responded via email, indicating that they were first generation and interested in participating in the study. Each participant was provided with a letter of invitation to provide additional information regarding the study. Participants were asked to review the letter of invitation and confirm that they were interested in participating. From there, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form. Once all participants gave consent to participate in the research, the data collection process began.

### **Collection of Descriptions of Lived Experiences**

Using a phenomenological approach (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Orbe, 2000; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) one-on-one, retrospective, semistructured interviews were conducted as a means of collecting the "descriptions of lived experiences" (Orbe, 2000, p. 610). Two interviews were conducted with each participant. After the first interview (Appendix A) was conducted and transcribed from audio to text format, the transcript was analyzed for key themes. The themes that emerged from the first interview guided

the development of the second interview (Appendix B), which was meant to encourage participants to reflect and elaborate upon information from the first. During the second interview, there were some questions that were asked of all participants and others that were unique to the individual and based on emergent themes from the first interview. The second interview occurred approximately two weeks after the first in order to allow the participants to contemplate the preceding interview and still maintain connection between the two.

Orbe (2000) highlights that in-depth interviews are the most commonly used approach in phenomenological research because they “provide a means for [participants] to tell the stories in their own words” (p. 612). Bailey (2007) outlines that in a semistructured interview “the interviewer uses an interview guide with specific questions that are organized by topics but are not necessarily asked in a specified order” (p. 100). Depending on the “flow of the interview” (Bailey, 2007, p. 100) and the types of answers given by the interviewee, questions may be asked out of order or skipped entirely. Several open-ended questions were used to “allow the participant to create his/her own options for responding” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 257) and thus provide space for the participants’ experiences, thoughts, and attitudes to be heard. Additionally, probing questions were included as to encourage participants to “clarify what they are saying and to urge them to elaborate on their ideas” (Plank Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 259). The study’s research questions and Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) postsecondary choice model guided the development of the interview guide. Table 1 provides an outline of the study’s research questions in relation to the interview questions. To the right of

Table 1

*Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions*

Research question	Interview question
What are the central barriers and challenges, if any, that first generation students report experiencing in the process of accessing postsecondary education?	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5
What school-based support do first generation students receive while in elementary or secondary school?	1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5
What gaps or problems do first generation students believe exist in the school-based conditions or support?	1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5

each question are codes (i.e., 1.2 or 1.3) that refer to specific interview questions. For instance, 1.2 refers to the second question from the first interview.

Furthermore, the interview protocol that was used stems from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) postsecondary choice model and the three stages involved in the transition to higher education: predisposition, search, and choice. Table 2 provides an outline of the stages of the postsecondary choice model in relation to the interview questions. To the right of each question are codes (i.e., 1.2 or 2.3.) that refer to specific interview questions. For instance, 1.2 refers to the second question from the first interview. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) point out that "the actual implementation of a phenomenological study is as much in the hands of the participants as in the hands of the researcher" (p. 141). During the phenomenological interview, the researcher and participants "work together to arrive at the heart of the matter" (Tesch, 1990, p. 147). Phenomenological research rejects the "traditional scholarly stance that positions one side of the investigation as the researcher and all others as the researched" and "embraces a collaborative both/and approach to the discovery of knowledge" (Orbe, 2000, p. 608). Throughout the interview process, the participant was encouraged to do the majority of the talking, while I actively listened. The intention of the study was to rely on "local knowledge" of those who have "expertise as individuals who live in the research issue" (Powers & Tiffany, 2006, p. 80), by engaging with the lived experiences of first generation students currently enrolled in university. Powers and Tiffany (2006) argue that young people have "suffered from misinformed decisions and policies intended to help them, but designed without their input" (p. 80). The research design is thus guided by a concern with how frequently research relies on adults engaging with other adults about

Table 2

*Stages of Postsecondary Choice Model in Relation to Interview Questions*

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage postsecondary choice model	Interview question
Predisposition	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.11, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5
Search	1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5
Choice	1.10, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5

interventions for children and youth. It is problematic that the primary recipients of research and educational policy often do not have a voice in the process.

### **Data Analysis**

In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the central tasks during data analysis were the “reduction of [data] into essential themes” and the “hermeneutic interpretation of themes” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610).

#### **Reduction of Data Into Essential Themes**

The participants’ interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim into text format. Orbe (2000) highlights that “the process of transcribing interviews is important in phenomenological reduction because it represents an opportunity for researchers to become more aware of the phenomenon as consciously described by [participants]” (p. 614). Through the transcription process, “transcripts begin to speak to researchers and themes begin to emerge from the text” (Orbe, 2000, p. 614).

Three steps are involved in the process of phenomenological reduction (Orbe, 2000). Orbe (2000) highlights that the first step is to read through each transcript without making any notations in order to re-familiarize the researcher with the participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences. The second step involves reading through the transcript a second time and highlighting particular words and phrases that appear essential in the lived experiences of the participants (Orbe, 2000). The third step is to “bracket these paradigmatic (initial) thematizations from the first transcript” (Orbe, 2000, p. 615) before reviewing the remaining transcripts in order to “approach each transcript horizontally” (Orbe, 2000, p. 615). Horizontalization is defined as the process in which “data analysts go through the data and highlight significant statements, sentences, or

quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 63). Horizontalization was conducted within case (within each participant’s experience) and cross case (across all participants’ experiences). Paterson (2010) highlights that a within case analysis can be used “initially to develop a standalone description of each case and then to conduct a cross case comparison to identify what each case has in common, as well as what attributes about each case are unique” (p. 971). Consequently, patterns that were found within each individual case were then compared across case, and similar and divergent patterns were articulated. Orbe (2000) highlights that once this initial reduction process is completed, it is important for researchers to review all of the transcripts again and the initial themes that emerged and identify the themes that are interconnected, redundant or “not essential to the lived experiences of the phenomenon (p. 616). Consequently, the remaining themes are those, which “seem to reveal the essence of the transcripts” (Orbe, 2000, p. 616).

### **Hermeneutic Analysis**

The final stage in the phenomenological method is hermeneutic analysis whereby one reviews “the essential themes and [formulates] ideas on how these themes relate to one another” (Orbe, 2000, p. 616). Within this stage of the data analysis, the researcher seeks to explore and uncover what was embedded in the participants’ stories and “find meanings that were not immediately apparent in the earlier steps” (Orbe, 2000, p. 616). Sensitizing concepts accrued from the literature review were used to assist in deductively analyzing the data for ideas that might have been implied but not actually articulated. Sensitizing concepts are defined as “categories that the analyst brings into the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 456) or “background ideas that inform the overall research problem”

(Charmaz, 2003, p. 256). Through interpretive analysis of the data, themes emerged that supported and/or contested the literature. Orbe (2000) highlights that it is important for one to acknowledge that it is impossible to arrive at a complete interpretation. Given that “researchers are consciously engaged in their own lifeworlds, and this involvement is an ongoing, dynamic process, our interpretations are changed the instant that we view the ‘finished’ product and begin to reflect on it” (Orbe, 2000, p. 616).

### **Establishing Credibility**

In order to ensure that the findings were credible and “minimize alternative explanations for the results obtained” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 101) bracketing and member checking were implemented. Further, given the nature of the process of writing a thesis, feedback has been acquired from academics in the field of education who can verify whether the conclusions that have been made from the data are appropriate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 101).

### **Bracketing**

In keeping with a phenomenological approach (Orbe, 2000), the process of bracketing was used to establish credibility. Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) define bracketing as the process whereby “a researcher reflects on his or her own views and experiences related to the study’s central phenomenon, describes these perspectives in writing, and then works to set them aside (or ‘bracket’ them) during the analysis process” (p. 287). Given that phenomenological research design “rejects the notion of an objective researcher” because the “researcher is fully immersed in the lifeworld” (Orbe, 2000, p. 606), phenomenological researchers are required to acknowledge their position in relation to the phenomenon. More specifically, Orbe (2000) highlights that:

Phenomenologists must draw on their lived experiences in order to gain insight into the phenomenon which is the focus of their research. A self-assessment by the researcher is a crucial first step in a phenomenological study because it allows the researcher to become aware of his or her own preconceived biases, ideas, and subjectivity. It also serves as a way of locating the researcher as a person with a historical, social and personal identity. (p. 611)

Furthermore, researchers “must acknowledge their insider/outsider relational status in terms of the group(s) under investigation” (Orbe, 2000, p. 606). Thus, I reflected on the influence that my family background and parents’ education level has had on my academic and life outcomes.

Through this process of self-assessment, I examined my role in relation to the group under investigation. Given that I am not a first generation student—my father has a PSE—I am an “outsider” in relation to the population of students under investigation. I can recall that from a very young age, both of my parents instilled the value of education and the expectation that I would attend university. Further, I recall being surrounded by learning materials such as books and my parents limiting television viewing and internet surfing to encourage time for homework completion and extracurricular activities. Consequently, I brought this “inherited intellectual capital” (de Brouker & Lavallee, 1998, p. 22) with me into the education system. During my time in elementary and secondary school I performed well academically and felt as though I had positive relationships with my teachers and peers. I always felt as though my teachers cared about me as an individual and encouraged me in my educational pathway.

Given my role as an outsider, I felt as though it was of particular importance to ask open-ended interview questions to allow participants to speak about their experiences without restriction. Further, I felt it was important to carry out a pilot study. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) highlight that a pilot study allows the researcher “try out particular procedures, measurement instruments, or methods of analysis” (pp. 110-111). In particular, I was interested in gathering feedback regarding the nature of the interview questions and whether they would prompt participants to speak about their experiences as first generation students in meaningful ways. In order to determine whether the study was feasible and whether the chosen instrument would work to satisfy the research problem, a small pilot study was carried out with individuals who met the same criteria as the target group. Their feedback was used to change the instrument accordingly.

### **Member Checking**

Further, member checking is defined as the process in which the researcher takes the findings back to participants and asks them to consider whether the description is complete (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 287). Once the interviews were converted from audio to text format, participants were sent a copy of the transcript, and thus provided with the opportunity to add, delete, or alter any of the details from the interview as they saw fit. This was done after both the first interview and the second interview.

### **Methodological Assumptions**

Several major assumptions were made about the participants and the phenomenon of first generation status. Given that the very nature of a phenomenological design is to discover “what is common about how several individuals experience a phenomenon” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 238), it was assumed that there were similarities in the

experiences of first generation status from one student to the next. It is assumed that all university students whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree experienced some type of barrier in accessing higher education. The limitations of these assumptions are recognized, as it is likely that not all first generation students experienced difficulty in accessing PSE.

Further, the identities of first generation students are being essentialized to one aspect of their identity—parental education level—while largely ignoring other aspects such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, culture, and religion. In carrying out a phenomenological approach to find out what is common about students whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree, the study is perhaps missing the way that dynamics of race, class, and gender and the expectations, norms, privileges, and process of subordination that occur in these dynamics must be understood in terms of how they intersect (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). This challenge is common in phenomenological research, whereby the process of discovery (collection, reduction, and interpretation) may oversimplify complex experiences (Orbe, 2000, p. 617). Orbe (2000) highlights that in attempt to examine the lived experiences of participants, a major concern of phenomenologists is “centralizing their lived experiences without essentializing them” (p. 617). However, Orbe suggests that if used correctly, phenomenology can be useful in “revealing the commonalities of diverse experiences...while simultaneously giving attention to the ways in which lived realities differ within and between these same groups” (p. 618).

Furthermore, given that retrospective interviews are being conducted, the study has relied on the memories of first generation students as they share their experiences of

the past (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest that human memory is subject to inaccuracies and distortion and that people are “apt to recall what might or should have happened (based on their attitudes and beliefs) rather than what actually did happen” (p. 148). Levering (2006) indicates that subjectivity is often seen as a methodological problem and that a certain amount of doubt often exists in a person’s ability to accurately share his or her own experiences.

### **Limitations**

One potential limitation of this study is its focus on only one particular perspective—first generation students who are currently enrolled in university. By also interviewing family members, peers, or members of the education system who interact with first generation students, the study could have potentially accrued a more in-depth look at the factors that influence access to PSE. Furthermore, by choosing to focus only on students who have gained access to PSE, the voices of students who have not entered PSE and perhaps for whom the barriers were too great are being ignored. By also interviewing first generation students who have not entered PSE after graduating from secondary school, the study could have potentially gained a stronger understanding of the barriers that limit access to PSE and the perceptions of school-based support. However, as with any study, one cannot include every possible perspective or voice. In order to collect rich and meaningful data, a focus had to be chosen.

A second potential limitation of this study is the small sample size, including only six students. Including more participants and thus listening to the voices of more first generation students could likely strengthen the results. This small sample size will likely reduce the ability of the results from this study to be generalized beyond the sample used.

However, the small sample size was chosen both for reasons of practicality, and also in order to present the “complexity” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 255) of a group of individuals and avoid “superficial perspectives” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 255) which can arise in a phenomenological study by attempting to include data from too large a sample.

Another potential limitation is the level of comfort that was achieved by participants during our interviews, which may have influenced the quality and depth of their responses. There was limited time to build rapport with the participants and although an attempt was made to create a relaxed and conversational atmosphere by conducting semistructured interviews and asking open-ended questions to allow for spontaneity, the process itself was still fairly unnatural. In order to minimize this potential limitation, participants were emailed the questions in advance so that they had time to review them and gain a solid understanding of what would take place during our time together. Furthermore, notes were not taken during the interviews, as this can often be viewed as obtrusive and establish a more formal environment. Participants were also made aware that they would have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and alter any points they wished.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given that research was conducted with human participants, it was necessary to receive clearance from the university’s Ethics Review Board (File # 12-227 ARMSTRONG) before participant recruitment and data collection began. Interview questions were chosen carefully to ensure that they would not cause any embarrassment,

offense, or stress. There were no anticipated physical, physiological, or social risks to the participants associated with conducting these interviews.

Participants willingly agreed to participate in the study and signed a consent form. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question they were uncomfortable with and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and their names were not recorded on any of the transcripts or in any written documents regarding the study.

### **Chapter Summary**

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of six first generation students at one university site. Two retrospective interviews were conducted to collect data, which were then analyzed with the intention of identifying similar patterns in the participants' experiences as first generation students. The following chapter will present the "collection of descriptions of lived experiences" and "the reduction of [data] into essential themes" (Orbe, 2000, p. 610). Chapter 5 will present the "hermeneutic interpretation of themes" (Orbe, 2000, p. 610).

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This study investigated the barriers that first generation students report experiencing in the process of accessing higher education and the type of school-based support that was received. This study used a qualitative, phenomenological research design in order to understand and describe how several individuals experience first generation student status (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Further, this study used purposeful, homogenous sampling strategies to select six, first generation students attending a postsecondary institution located in Ontario (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Two, one-on-one, retrospective, semistructured interviews were conducted with each participant. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the central task during data analysis was to “identify common themes in people’s descriptions of their experience” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 142).

In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the purpose of this chapter is to provide details on the “collection of descriptions of lived experiences and the “reduction of [data] into essential themes” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610). Throughout the presentation of results, there is frequent use of direct quotations from the participants. This aligns with the desire to rely on the “local knowledge” of those who have “expertise as individuals who live in the research issue” (Powers & Tiffany, 2006, p. 80) when presenting the themes that emerged from the data. This extensive use of direct quotations aligns with the principles of a phenomenological research design, whereby researchers are “active in becoming a medium for the voice of their [participants] without manipulating, altering, or reshaping their life experiences” (Orbe, 2000, p. 608). Further, my use of direct quotations serves to give a voice to the participants who may not normally be heard.

## **Participants**

Table 3 provides some basic demographic information regarding the six participants who were involved in this research study. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identities. Each student's current year of study is based upon when the data collection was completed.

### **Participant Profiles**

Sarah took applied level courses throughout the majority of secondary school and expressed an overall dissatisfaction with the school-based support she received in accessing PSE. Although Sarah expressed wanting to take a year off after secondary school to figure out what she wanted to do, her parents were uncomfortable with this idea and offered to pay for college. Sarah explains that she “had no excuse not to, so [she] went” and completed a diploma program. When asked about her experience in college she explained that she didn't enjoy the material, she felt she was not getting the grades she wanted, and she didn't build strong relationships with teachers. After completing the diploma, Sarah entered the workforce but did not feel satisfied with her career prospects and felt that she was capable of doing more. Sarah was later encouraged by her supervisor to attend university to pursue a degree in child studies because of the natural talent she exhibited as a child-care provider. Sarah is currently in the third year of her degree program in the social sciences.

Andrea also took applied level courses throughout the majority of secondary school and highlighted the lack of school-based support she received in accessing PSE. Andrea attended college directly after secondary school and was generally dissatisfied with the experience. Although Andrea graduated with a diploma, she highlighted that she

Table 3

*Overview of Participants*

Pseudonym	Sex	Area of study	Year of study
Sarah	Female	Social Sciences	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Andrea	Female	Social Sciences	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Christine	Female	Social Sciences	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Julie	Female	Health Sciences	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Noah	Male	Business	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Matthew	Male	Social Sciences	2 <sup>nd</sup>

never really took it seriously. Similar to Sarah, Andrea entered the workforce for a few years after college but felt she was capable of doing more with her life. Andrea is currently in the third year of her degree program in the social sciences.

Christine took academic level courses throughout the majority of secondary school and is the only participant who entered university directly after completing secondary school. Christine consistently made reference to the strong internal motivation she possessed regarding pursuing postsecondary studies. Christine also linked being diagnosed with cancer during elementary school and being surrounded by medical professionals to the drive she had for attending university. Christine felt that there was a strong support network in her secondary school to assist in accessing PSE. Christine is currently in the third year of her degree program in the social sciences.

Julie took academic level courses throughout the majority of her secondary school career and referred to the lack of school-based support she received in accessing PSE. Julie attended college directly after secondary school and completed a diploma. After working in the fashion industry for a few years, she was encouraged by a supervisor to pursue recreation studies in university because of the passion she demonstrated in working at a day camp. Julie is currently in the third year of her degree program in the health sciences.

Noah took academic level courses throughout the majority of his secondary school career and highlighted feeling as though he received little school-based support in accessing PSE, but recalls the positive influence of one particular teacher. Noah attended college after completing secondary school, which he says was based on the fact that he “had no clue what [he] wanted to do.” While he originally thought he was interested in

sport medicine, Noah took an accounting course during his time in college because it fit into his course timetable and ended up realizing that he enjoyed the subject. Noah transferred into university and is currently in the third year of his degree program in business.

Matthew took applied level courses throughout the majority of secondary school and highlighted that he received minimal school-based support in accessing PSE. Matthew entered the workforce directly after secondary school, but began to feel that he was capable of doing more with his life and wanted more out of his career. Matthew began a college diploma before transferring to university. He is currently in the second year of his degree program in the social sciences.

### **Overview of Themes and Subthemes**

Table 4 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes that emerged during the data analysis. Although the intent of this study was to learn about the school-based support offered in accessing PSE in both elementary and secondary school, all of the participants expressed that there was no mention of PSE in elementary school. Rather, participants highlighted that the focus of elementary school was on secondary school preparation. Consequently, in the following presentation of results, the data are focused on the nature of the experiences within secondary school.

### **Familial Experiences**

The data suggest that school-based experiences are inextricably linked to the expectations and attitudes toward education that exist within a student's home.

Table 4

*Overview of Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
Familial experiences	Encouragement from parents Experience of siblings Knowledge of the system
Streaming: Applied and academic courses	Decision making process Associated stigmas
Perceptions of postsecondary education	Benefits of postsecondary education Difficulty level/unpreparedness Internal motivation
Representations of postsecondary education	Choosing career before degree/interest Postsecondary experience as a scare tactic
School-based support	Size of secondary school Passive support Relationships with teachers/guidance counselors
Participants' recommendations and personal advice	How to enhance school-based support Personal advice for success

## **Encouragement From Parents**

Throughout the interviews, participants frequently linked their intention to attend PSE to whether they received emotional support and encouragement from their parents. Andrea, Christine, Julie, and Noah expressed the value their parents placed on attending PSE and how this influenced their intent to attend PSE. Contrastingly, Sarah and Matthew outlined that they never felt as though PSE would be in their future because they were not pushed toward this particular path.

**Strong sense of encouragement.** When I asked Andrea whether she ever considered entering the workforce directly after secondary school, she reported that she did think of becoming a hairdresser at one point but that her father would not accept this. Andrea's father told her "you need to go to university." Similarly, Christine mentioned that her parents always advised, "just go to school, get a good education" and "if you do well, you'll do well in life." Christine highlighted that she always knew she would go to university and when asked what sort of factors influenced this perception, she responded:

My parents just encouraged me and they knew that I enjoyed school and I did well in school. I think part of it was the product of both my parents not going to postsecondary education and they know how important it is now. So they made sure to encourage that and they knew it was obviously something I'd be interested in.

Christine also highlighted that her parents instilled within her the desire to build a very strong work ethic. Julie also reported receiving support from her parents regarding postsecondary education, particularly her father:

I received a lot of emotional support from my parents, that was number one.

My dad really wanted us, my brothers and I, to have the best education and the most education because, you know, he didn't have that opportunity and he knows how important it is. So, I got a lot of emotional support.

Both Julie and Noah link the encouragement received from their parents to their decision to attend PSE:

My dad saw the value of university. I think that there are certain situations where parents don't have the same amount of value on school as mine did because they didn't go. But even with mine not having gone to university, my parents were very adamant that university was something that we need to do. It was something that they were willing to support... I could see it as being more of an issue in other situations where parents didn't go and therefore don't really value higher education. (Julie)

My dad was always really keen about postsecondary, because he was actually a high school drop out, kind of a hell raiser. I think he definitely just realized that I could be a bit smarter about it. So he was always really keen on us becoming well educated. (Noah)

**Lack of encouragement.** Contrastingly, Sarah highlighted that she never felt as though she would go to university. When asked why, she responded:

Because my parents never really said you're going to university. And to be honest, I think that if that was always what was enforced, I probably would have been more inclined to push myself through the academic courses.

On a similar thread, Matthew highlighted that during elementary and secondary school he

never thought he would go to college or university and that he was “never pushed to go to any postsecondary.” In addition to not pushing Matthew to attend PSE, Matthew also described the rejection he experienced from his family since he decided to attend university. Matthew explained that he hasn’t spoken with his family in about 3 years as a result of his decision to go to university. When I asked Matthew to expand on his family’s attitude towards PSE, he replied:

My family always just thinks that people that go to school are snobby and you don’t need it. It has created a lot of problems...I was kind of expecting support from my mom and she completely turned around she said stuff like “Well you should really reconsider, that’s a lot of money. Look at me, I’m doing fine without it.” Which she’s not...but just...her biggest thing was that she thought what she gave me wasn’t good enough. She thought I was going to school to try to do better than what she could.

### **Experience of Siblings**

In addition to the influence that a parent’s experience or lack of experience within PSE can have, Sarah and Julie also highlighted how sibling experiences influenced their decisions to attend PSE. Sarah highlighted:

I had an older sister, my sister is 10 years older than I am, and she never went, so I guess it was just never in the back of my mind. I supposed I would have been more open to the whole experience if my sister was experiencing it. But, I never really had any older siblings that were applying to university or college. So, I guess it was never in my face.

Contrastingly, Julie explained that she had two older brothers who both attended university. Julie visited the university campuses with her brothers and recalled feeling “I want to do this.”

### **Knowledge of the System**

Although participants frequently highlighted receiving emotional support and encouragement from their parents to attend PSE, they also described not receiving appropriate informational support. Participants were therefore left to navigate the pathway to PSE with little support from their families.

Andrea felt as though her parents always encouraged her to go to university but that they lacked the time and informational resources to support her in this pathway.

Andrea highlighted:

My family was going through a lot of pressure. We came to Canada, my mom lost her job, my dad lost his job. It's a new country, you're trying to get used to new people. You have four kids, they are all young...so there was a lot of pressure on my family. They just didn't have the time to actually look into my courses for instance and be like, let's go for academic instead of applied.

When I asked Christine to recall whether she had received any support from her parents during the application process she mentioned:

Not as much. Simply because they didn't know what to do, what the process was. So we had a lot of materials sent home with us that we could give to our parents so that they were understanding the process, but it was more me taking it on myself.

Furthermore, Christine identified a lack of school-based support as problematic:

Especially for students who don't have parents who know the system, I mean if you have a professor as a parent or somebody who has gone to university, it might be a different story. But as someone who may not have someone in their family who has gone to university before they obviously can't turn to their family for that support.

When asked whether she had received any informational support from her parents regarding her pathway to PSE, Julie responded "No, they just didn't really know." She went on to say:

I think a lot of students go to their parents and ask what they should do, and they look at it and things like that so some people already know where they are going to go. That's sort of beneficial.

The participants were also asked to consider how their experiences may have been different if they were not first generation students. In response to this question, Andrea outlined:

If I had kids right now and they reached an age where they were about to go to university or college, I think things would be so much better because I would know the things that I went through that were wrong. I wouldn't want them to go through the same experience, just because I'm well aware of how the system works...I'm not saying challenges wouldn't come through, they would come through but at least I would be aware of the circumstances that would come along with that process.

Further, Noah indicated that parents who attended college or university could provide "insider tips" regarding how to navigate through the system. With specific reference to

his mother, Matthew responded:

I think she probably would have pushed me to go as well. I definitely think I would have went if she did go or if other family members did go. But since I am a first generation student—I am kind of a minority. So I am the one who is viewed as different.

Similarly, when asked to consider how her experience going through the process of getting to university might have been different if her parents had a diploma or a degree,

Sarah responded:

They would have been able to tell me first hand, what to expect, what not to get discouraged about and kind of what to do next. I didn't really have that. ...My parents didn't really know I guess because they didn't go through the process.

That would have been really helpful. I just feel like there would have been a more proactive attitude. ...They would be able to give really good feedback and what to expect.

However, both Christine and Julie expressed feeling as though the generational gap would limit the amount of relevant informational support parents could provide.

More specifically, Christine articulated:

I think having parents who have been to university may help buffer the initial effect of what's going on, what to expect, but at the same time, university changes quite frequently. So what they experienced 10, 15, 20 years ago is now completely different from what's going on now.

Christine also highlighted that parents who hold a postsecondary degree or diploma might pressure their children to pursue a similar program that may not be right for them. For

instance, if a parent currently works as a doctor or a teacher, he or she may push his or her child to pursue a similar field. Christine is therefore suggesting that being a first generation student may in fact be liberating and allow a student to make his/her own choices regarding their PSE pathway without pressure from parents. Additionally, Julie highlighted that:

It depends on how old your parents are in my opinion. Because my parents are so much, not necessarily older than others, but their generation is just so far back from mine that things are just different. Like my parents didn't have computers in the sixties, so they didn't have the same type of application process that we have now. So in general, I'm not sure how much school has changed technology wise, so I'm not sure how much they could do in that regard.

### **Streaming: Applied and Academic Courses**

Participants were also asked when they began to think about PSE for their future. Many outlined that the streaming process forced them to begin thinking about their PSE pathway. Some participants problematized this process because they felt they were too young to make the decision, they were unaware of the implications of their decision, and/or they recognized the stigmas associated with applied level courses.

### **Decision Making Process**

Participants were asked to describe the decision making process that was involved in choosing between applied and academic courses. Of particular interest, was whether participants expressed feeling as though they were prepared to make an informed decision.

**Applied level courses.** Sarah, Andrea, and Matthew took applied level courses throughout the majority of their secondary school career. Sarah and Andrea articulated feeling as though they were too young to make the decision regarding whether they were better suited for applied or academic level courses. Sarah, Andrea, and Matthew also expressed feeling as though they were not fully aware of the consequences associated with picking one stream over the other. Andrea and Matthew both expressed feeling that their decision to pursue applied level courses was based on the perception that it would be an easier route.

Sarah started out taking academic courses at her parents' request, but found it was too difficult, so she "dropped down to applied" level courses. When asked how she felt making the decision to pursue academic or applied level courses in grade nine, Sarah responded: "It's such a big decision, and I didn't know how much it would impact me, it's absolutely too young." Sarah also outlined that the process to switch from academic to applied courses was minimal: "It was so simple to get out of it...you had to get a note from your parents and sign it and they dropped you down...there was no meeting, it was like, I have this note." Consequently, Sarah mentioned feeling as though she was not made fully aware of the implications associated with choosing applied over academic level courses. She also stated that receiving support prior to high school regarding this decision and the associated implications would have been helpful.

Andrea took applied courses all throughout high school. When I asked her about what was involved in this decision process, she remembered being given a piece of paper and circling applied courses. After doing so, Andrea highlighted: "They went okay and

they typed it in and they gave me my schedule. Nobody really talked to me about...how about you try academic first... I don't remember getting that type of encouragement."

Further, Andrea recalled: "I just did not think, the school allowed me or saw that type of capability with those university courses." Similar to Sarah, Andrea made reference to the minimal involvement associated with this process and the fact that she was unaware of the implications associated with choosing applied over academic level courses. Further, Andrea also described how difficult it was to make the decision at such a young age:

I didn't know what applied was for and I didn't know what academic was for.

Plus, thinking about how young I was at that time...I'm trying to think, how am I going to get through these four years...so you're not even thinking about okay, what am I going to do for my postsecondary education. I think they need to be realistic and say with applied education you know that you're only going to be going to college and if you decide to change your stream to university it's going to be hectic, you're going to have to start as a mature student...there's a lot of complications. I went through it and I know the type of complications that come with it. It's not that easy to switch from college to university, it takes a while.

Andrea went on to describe the ramifications associated with this decision in saying that "it really does determine your path and what you do."

Similarly, when asked to consider what the process was like for deciding on applied level courses, Matthew responded:

I am not too sure to be honest. I think you knew coming into high school. But I always had really good grades. I was always at the top of the class. I was just

never told...well not told about academic courses, because I knew they were there. Just I was never pushed.

Matthew went on to say: “Thinking back now, I wasted so much time in between high school and college because I was never told there were options and how to go about doing them.”

Andrea, Matthew, and Sarah highlighted that their decision to pursue applied level courses was linked to their perception that this would be the “easy way out.” When I asked Andrea about the decision to take applied level courses, she remembered thinking: “Applied is easy, why would I want to do anything hard kind of thing.” Further, Andrea said she chose applied level courses based on the following thought process: “You’re like how can I go through this process, the process of high school, without any challenges? What’s the easiest way out?” Matthew also pursued applied level courses because he thought it would be an easier route: “Well if you can do the easier one you might as well. I was just kind of like...get out of school the easiest way possible.” When asked to elaborate on this comment, he responded:

I wish I would have been talked into doing the academic classes. Because I know I could have done it for sure, it was just the easy way out for me to take the applied courses and the teachers just kind of went with it. They never said, “Well if you do go to academic then you can go to university and it would open up all these options for you.” They always just kind of limited me.

Further, Sarah highlighted:

I was just lazy in high school, like really I was just lazy, and my parents didn’t go

to university, so it was never like, “You’re going to university, we’re going to make this work.” You know, it was always just kind of accepted that I was going to go to college and that was fine. And I mean, being a 15-year-old girl, I was just kind of looking for the easy way.

**Academic level courses.** Christine, Julie, and Noah took academic level courses throughout the majority of their secondary school career. When asked to describe what was involved in the process of deciding to pursue academic level courses, Christine responded:

I had always done well in school so it was more of a challenge thing, just to keep going and I seemed to do well in academic courses so I continued. I also had a good idea that I was going to university, so I had done enough research that I knew I had to kind of stick in that stream and take those courses in order to get into university.

When I asked Julie and Noah to describe why they chose to pursue academic level courses, neither felt as though it was much of a decision. Julie outlined: “It was never a thing, in grade 10 I was still in private school, so when I got to public school, it just wasn’t a conversation...I was only going to do academic.” Noah, who attended secondary school in British Columbia, does not recall the streaming of applied and academic level courses. Noah outlined:

Pretty much the distinction was made in math. With grade 10 math, you either chose applied math or regular math. And applied at that point, you kind of knew that was restricting you, that wasn’t going to get you into university. You’re

probably going into something more applied. Other than math, I don't think the courses really had that restriction.

### **Associated Stigmas**

Sarah, Matthew, and Julie outlined the stigmas they felt existed surrounding applied level courses. Further, Sarah, Matthew, and Julie highlighted that students, teachers, and guidance counselors perpetuated these stigmas. Sarah and Matthew expressed feeling as though the attitudes of teachers and guidance counselors were influenced by whether a student was in the academic or applied stream. Sarah highlighted:

With the applied and academic routes, I think the teachers internalized that and if you were teaching an applied course, there was of course no mention of university. So I guess the attitude was always like once you were in the applied, you're not going to university. I imagine that if I was in the academic for the full four years, they probably would have been a little bit more strict with preparation and things like that. I remember talking to my guidance counselor about stuff like that, and I just think the attitude with college was, in high school if you just get the grades...you don't really have to do that well to get in.

Additionally, Sarah highlighted that "once you were in the applied course it was like, they weren't going to push you to do academic or shoot higher." When I asked Sarah about whether she had received any encouragement from teachers or guidance counselors to continue on a particular path, she responded no and outlined: "I really think they probably would have taken university, like academic streamed students more seriously."

Further, Matthew highlighted:

It seemed like for us that were in the applied courses we just kind of got pushed aside...I remember some of my friends in the academic courses, they had different universities that would come in and do speeches and stuff. We never had stuff like that.

When I asked Matthew to elaborate on how he felt about the treatment of students in applied level courses in comparison to students in academic level courses, he outlined:

It was almost like all of us that were in the applied classes we didn't want to go to university anyways and maybe the teachers acknowledged that. So it's like, why should I put the effort into these kids if they aren't going to do anything with it. Whereas, I think that can be changed because there are still a lot of great college programs out there and you still need the marks and everything.

Julie also referred to the stigma associated with applied level courses in saying "you felt like the stupid kids were in applied, so you took the academic."

### **Perceptions of Postsecondary Education**

Participants were also asked about the impressions they held of PSE throughout elementary and secondary school. More specifically, participants were encouraged to discuss the benefits they felt attending PSE would bring and what they thought PSE would be like.

### **Benefits of Postsecondary Education**

When asked to discuss the benefits they associated with attending PSE, participants frequently cited career-related benefits such as gaining particular

employment and earning money. However, two participants also felt that PSE would provide opportunities for personal growth and relationship building.

**Career related benefits.** Sarah, Christine, Julie, Noah, and Matthew felt that attending PSE would better equip them for suitable employment. When I asked Sarah about what benefits she felt attending postsecondary would bring, she said: “A job. I guess, anything strictly related to like a monetary...I never really thought about what I’d be learning as much as what I would gain at the end of it.” Additionally, Sarah mentioned knowing that “you have to have some postsecondary education to do pretty much anything.” Christine mentioned that she had a strong sense that if she didn’t go to postsecondary education she would have a really hard time finding a career. When I asked where this perception stemmed from, she referred to the difficulties her mother experienced entering the workforce without a postsecondary degree or diploma. Christine responded:

Part of it I will say came from my parents because I just know the difficulties, not so much that both of them had, but I know my mom would always talk about how she made her choice not to go to postsecondary and then eventually she had myself and my brother and they made that choice to have her stay home. When she was ready to reenter the workforce it was far more limited. She didn’t have any type of schooling background.

Additionally, Christine referred to the importance of having a PSE:

It just gets really hard, I think, if you look at the jobs right now it either calls for

experience in something or a degree, so it seems like that's...not the only option, but a few who get lucky enough to find those positions are lucky and that's just what it is. It's not available to everybody.

When I asked Julie about why she decided to attend PSE and about what benefits she felt it would bring her, she responded:

Because I want to get a job. Now I love it and I want to keep learning, but definitely...and one of the reasons why I want to keep going and do a Master's is because I feel like I need it to get a job now, like you... you're not even good enough anymore with just an undergraduate degree. So, career is a big reason.

Both Matthew and Noah made reference to the career-related benefits they felt a PSE would bring them in saying: "I guess at that point it was mostly employment still. I think that was kind of the general theme—go to university so you can get a good job" (Noah) and "I'm not going to say it was for money, but just basically a better future and a better career" (Matthew).

**Social and exploratory opportunities.** Aside from the very tangible, career-related benefits, Andrea and Julie also referred to additional opportunities they felt attending PSE would allow them. More specifically, they perceived PSE as a place to build relationships with like-minded individuals, explore one's interests further, and develop "soft" skills. When I asked Andrea about the benefits she felt attending university would bring her, she mentioned that she did not think about the type of job she would be able to get with a university degree. Rather, she referred to the people she would meet and the relationships she would build. Specifically, she recalled feeling that attending university would provide her with the opportunity to meet people who were "on

the same types of pages as you.” Julie emphasized that attending PSE was not only about developing skills required to acquire a specific career but also about discovering what she was interested in:

Definitely career skills, learning things to get a job regardless of the actual diploma...the piece of paper, but the actual knowledge that would help me get a job and figure out even what I wanted to do because there was a little...I’m still not really sure what I exactly want to do. But every time I take a new course, I’m like oh I really like that or, I don’t like that. And I thought that’s what university would help me with.

### **Difficulty Level and Unpreparedness**

Sarah, Andrea, Christine, and Matthew all made reference to their perception that PSE would be very difficult. When I asked Sarah about what her impressions of PSE were throughout elementary and secondary school, she responded that her “perception was, even from a young age, that it was really difficult...really hard.” Further, Sarah expressed feeling a certain level of vulnerability and fear of setting herself up for failure as she mentioned, “I didn’t want to go into a class where I as like, I don’t know how to do this. That was my fear with university, that I was going to get in and just not have any idea what they were talking about.” When asked whether she felt discouraged about attending PSE, Sarah recalled thinking that she “wasn’t smart enough to go.” When asked about the general attitude towards PSE she felt existed within her secondary school, Sarah recalled:

I guess the attitude that I always felt personally was that [teachers and guidance counselors] were not very encouraging, it was always like, you’re up against a

really big battle. So, I think that may have had something to do with the fact that I was so afraid of university. Because, they never really, I never really had a teacher that was like, “You can do this, you’ve got this.” It was always like, “Do you know the grades that you need to have to get in?”

Andrea also referred to the difficulties she perceived in PSE, specifically her belief that there would be a lot of papers, that there would be a large amount of students and that the courses would be very fast paced. Christine’s impressions of PSE during elementary and secondary school were that it would be “more difficult in terms of being the next step up.” Similarly, Matthew responded that he “thought it would be really hard.”

### **Internal Motivation**

Three of the participants linked their decision to come to university, either after attending college or directly from high school, to a strong sense of internal motivation. For instance, Sarah highlighted: “I felt really lame not doing anything...I needed to do something more. So it was definitely an internal thing.” Further, Sarah explained:

In the back of my mind, I was just like, I know I’m going to do something, I am going to do something well, but I just had to grow up...I was just like, I know I am destined for more. It kind of sounds cheesy, but I was just like, this is not what I’m supposed to do. Like, I know I’m smart...I knew that...I was capable enough to do university courses.

Similarly, when asked about why she decided to come to university, Andrea said that after taking some time off after college: “I was just like, you know what I’m going to go to university, I’m going to do the things I always had in the back of my head, or I could see myself doing, but this is when I decided to go for it.” Christine, who was diagnosed

with cancer in elementary school, referred to the strong sense of internal motivation she consistently possessed. When asked to consider who influenced her decision to attend PSE, Christine said: “It’s always been more of an innate thing to want to really do it myself.” More specifically, Christine highlighted:

For me, it was just a personal thing. I had always been determined to do well in school and stuff like that. It only seemed like the natural next step, especially once I got sick, I knew that it was something that I really wanted. And then by high school, by grade 11, I had actually decided that I knew I wanted to go further and I wanted to go to university and stuff, so I made it a priority for me to focus on my academics...So I think it was more, most importantly a personal drive to just keep going and do something with it than it was an influence from others.

### **Representations of Postsecondary Education**

In addition to exploring how students perceived PSE, this research also examined how teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators shaped those perceptions through their representations of PSE. More specifically, the study examined the particular ways that school leaders encouraged students to make decisions about the postsecondary program that best suited them and how they represented the postsecondary experience. Based on the feedback received from participants, it seems that the way that PSE was represented had a large influence on their attitudes toward the experience.

### **Choosing Career Before Degree/Interest**

Three of the participants made reference to the fact that when they were encouraged to think about PSE during secondary school, they were told to pick a career first and then consider which diploma or degree would help them acquire that career,

rather than thinking about what subject or field interested them. For instance, Christine highlighted:

I think we get so mainstreamed with what careers are out there. Especially as you're younger, you learn there's teachers and there's doctors and there's fireman and policeman and stuff like that. But you don't, it's not until you older, until you get in these positions where you realize there are so many intricate titles that exist and that are required to make our world function. I think it's important not to stress so much about your title.

Further, when I asked Christine whether she felt the school perpetuated this notion of choosing a career rather than a general interest, she responded:

Yes...I think that's just what we've trained ourselves to do...because you grow up being asked that question, "What do you want to do when you're older?" All of us still ask little kids that and it's natural because it gets the ball rolling. But it's not the ball. It helps you think about things but it's not solely what you need to think about. Like it's not like you have to make that decision, you just have to pick something you're interested in.

Consequently, Christine suggested that schools should "encourage interest areas versus careers and jobs." Similarly, Julie highlighted:

I think people are worried about what program to choose and worried about what they want to do in their career and I just think that the reality of our time is that your degree doesn't really reflect your career. A lot of people end up going for post graduate degrees and that is when they figure out what they want to do as opposed to having an undergraduate degree in you know, biology and thinking

now they have to be a scientist. There are just so many more options now.

Noah also outlined:

I definitely remember it being sort of...like there wasn't a lot of learning for the sake of learning talk going on. It seemed like the questions they, in the Personal Planning class or whatever it was, a lot of the stuff seemed to be like, how much time are you willing to commit, how much money can you commit to paying for a degree or a diploma? A lot of it was basically just like, checking off restrictions, like okay you fit in this box. You're going to college or you're doing a two-year diploma. You're not going to...which I guess may again be more realistic, but it wasn't...they didn't start the conversation with what are you interested in.

Noah referred to this process as problematic, in saying:

It seemed like, first of all you had to decide what you wanted to do for the rest of your life and then you could pick where you should go to school...I was just really relieved to see that once I got to college that it's okay...the point of your undergrad isn't the subject of it so don't worry about that. That was not conveyed at all. It was basically like, okay you're 16 years old and you need to decide right now what you're going to do for the next 70 years or whatever and then pick your school. So yeah, I think that's why I was kind like, woah I don't know.

Noah highlighted feeling that this process was discouraging for students. However, Noah did mention that one teacher took a different approach in encouraging students to attend university even if they didn't know exactly what they wanted to do and "study things because you are interested in them and because you like them." Noah mentioned how positive he felt this approach was and outlined how important he thought it is for school

leaders to emphasize “what [students] think [they] might be interested in learning” and not to “worry so much about the end result of [their] careers.”

### **Postsecondary Experience as a Scare Tactic**

Four of the participants made reference to the fact that throughout secondary school, their teachers and guidance counselors would allude to the difficulty and impersonal nature of university in order to frighten students into “shaping up.” For instance, when asked about whether her school leaders ever discussed the demands she would experience in college or university, Sarah responded:

There was stress on the kind of work that they were looking for. Like if you were to hand in an assignment that was like unacceptable, it was like well, in college they wouldn't even look at this or they wouldn't even do this... But I think to be honest it was probably more, the feedback that I received was less about the work and more about like attendance. So if we weren't in class or something, they would say, you know in college they are not going to care about you, you are just a number and you've already paid so they don't care if you go to class.

When asked about how she would have liked her school leaders to represent PSE, Sarah explained:

I wish they would have been a little bit more positive about the whole process. When I think back, I kind of just remember them saying, “Well you have to do it this way because this is how it's going to be in college or university.” And it sort of instilled this fear... I think if they were just a bit more positive about the whole process, even in just the general attitude.

Similarly, when asked about her impressions of PSE throughout secondary school, Julie highlighted:

I remember in high school always being told that it's going to be so much harder in university. No one's going to help you. I think I was a little scared...

Everybody tells you that there's so many more people and that you're just going to be another number and I had that impression, which is not the case... I can remember my grade 12 English teacher saying that we were all going to fail if this is what we thought... this isn't university level.

Julie also remembered wishing that her school leaders had been more positive in their representation of PSE. Similarly, when I asked Noah about whether his school leaders ever talked about the demands he would face in college or university, he said it was used as “pull up your socks thing.” Matthew also recalled being told by school leaders that “professors don't care about students” in PSE and hearing “oh, just wait until you get to university, you are going to get a wake-up call.” When I asked Matthew whether his teachers or guidance counselors talked about the demands he would experience in PSE, he also mentioned that they were “using scare tactics to get people to work harder” rather than actually “preparing [them].”

### **School-Based Support**

Throughout the interview process, participants were frequently encouraged to comment on the nature of the school-based support they received in accessing higher education. When discussing the support they received, participants discussed the size of their secondary school, indicated that the support received was passive in nature, and

spoke of the positive and/or negative relationships they had with teachers and guidance counselors.

### **Size of Secondary School**

Participants often attributed the negative experience they had in secondary school and the lack of school-based support they received in accessing PSE to the size of their secondary school. Sarah explained that she enjoyed her time in elementary school because it was a “smaller school that [she] went to.” Contrastingly, Sarah reported that she did not enjoy secondary school because “the school [she] went to was really large.” Similarly, Andrea mentioned that she went to a large school and that she partially attributed the fact that she did not excel academically in secondary school to the size of the classroom and that there were “so many students [for teachers] to try to concentrate on.” Christine highlighted that “high school was a new challenge for me because I’d gone from a small school...to high school where it was a bigger environment.”

Julie mentioned that she enjoyed her time in elementary school because she “went to a pretty small elementary school” and “because the class sizes were so small, [she] really got one on one with [her] teachers.” Contrastingly, in regard to secondary school, Julie emphasized: “I went to a huge school, like there was 4,000 kids and I just...didn’t do anything. I really slipped through the cracks and I got away with everything.” Julie recalled feeling that she did not have any sort of relationship with her school leaders “because [she] wasn’t a high performing student and it was such a big school.” Julie also highlighted: “As a student at a large secondary institution I just didn’t receive as much help as I would have liked or needed. I just think that they could have done more than they did in secondary school.”

### **Passive Support**

Four participants referred to the nature of the school-based support they received as being passive—information was available but they had to take the initiative to seek it out. For instance, Sarah mentioned, “they have the books that kind of tell you what programs you could go to, what each school offered, but it was nothing more than that.” Sarah also referred to the co-op program in her secondary school as a “really effortless approach from the high school to help you in terms of what direction you wanted to go.” However, Sarah mentioned that she did not find the co-op experience useful because she felt “it was just, so, this is what the course is. Like there was no extra direction, it was just like, do the co-op requirements, if this is what you want to do, great.” When I asked Sarah about whether any of her teachers or guidance counselors had urged her towards a particular path, she responded: “No, not at all. Nobody asked me about my interests at all really.” Andrea described the general attitude regarding PSE in her secondary school as follows:

I think they did have information accessible to you when you felt like grasping it. But were they reaching out to students to tell them okay this is your option at this point? No. I think they were concentrating on some certain amount of students. Like, the very smart ones. That, I could see. I don’t remember them reaching out to me and saying okay these are your options, what would you like to do. I think I had to do all of this on my own.

Julie reported a similar lack of direct school-based support regarding PSE:

I remember there being books in the guidance office and [the guidance counselor] could go through them with you, but she didn’t...there wasn’t a lot of support. I

don't know if other students had more support because they had better grades. But I didn't get a lot of support.

When I asked Matthew about the importance of receiving support in secondary school in accessing higher education, he emphasized the importance of early intervention:

I think it would have definitely helped me, just because I didn't receive any help from my family...I wasted 3-4 years between high school and college. I could have been done by now. So, if I would have had that support earlier I think that would have helped me.

### **Relationships with Teachers/Guidance Counselors**

When participants were asked to identify what they enjoyed about their experience in elementary and/or secondary school, they all underscored the importance of relationships with teachers. Sarah emphasized the importance of a “positive environment” in fostering learning. When asked why she enjoyed elementary school in particular, she explained feeling as though she was able to “build more of a relationship with the teachers.” Contrastingly, during secondary school Sarah felt as though the teachers were “much colder.” When asked Sarah to describe a positive student–teacher relationship, she responded:

I would say, a teacher you kind of encouraged learning in a positive way and took the time to just have, sort of a personal relationship with each individual student...Just someone that takes the time to kind of, get to know a few of the complexities about each child.

Christine felt that she developed very strong relationships with teachers during elementary and secondary school and indicated that teachers should recognize students'

individual strengths and talents and provide words of encouragement. When asked to define a good connection with a teacher she responded:

I would generally define a good connection with a teacher as a relationship that you feel supported and understood. Also, a good connection is absent of the feeling of burden or like you are bothering the teacher but that you are instead welcome to consult them at any point.

Throughout our interviews, Julie frequently made reference to the negative experiences she had with her guidance counselor. When I asked Julie to expand on the nature of the relationship, she responded “I just think [she was] not very proactive at all. I think that there were just too many students for her ability. The guidance counselor is supposed to know who you are and remember you.” Contrastingly, when asked to describe the type of support she wished she had received from her guidance counselor and her ideal of the nature of the relationship ideally, she responded:

I think someone that asks you what you’re interested in as hobbies to start with.

Just like, who you are, what makes you happy type of thing. I think then sort of go into, well this program offers this and just sort of saying these are different programs that you might fit into. Just yeah, giving me some options. Showing me what programs are out there.

When asked to define a positive student–teacher relationship, Julie referenced the nature of the relationships she experienced with professors in university. More specifically, she placed value on having teachers listen to you, recognize individual talents, and provide encouragement. I asked Julie to consider how her experience within secondary school may have been different if she had a positive relationship with her teachers. Based on her

definition of a positive student–teacher relationship. Julie responded:

I think I would have been more invested in school. I think that I probably would have just done better at school and may have been more interested. I'm not sure if [my] interest level is high at university because I like what I'm studying but also because I like my professors and I have a positive relationship [with them].

Throughout our interviews, Noah frequently made reference to one teacher in particular who stood out to him as being a positive role model. When speaking of this teacher, Noah made reference to the fact that his “expectations and workload was way higher,” he was “super engaging,” and “really charismatic.” More specifically, he mentioned that this teacher was “really keen on students working hard and progressing onto university.” Contrastingly, when I asked Noah about the relationship he experienced with his guidance counselor, he responded:

I didn't have much of a relationship at all. I think they just had so many people to deal with...and I think as long as they sort of thought you had it roughly planned out, they were like okay we don't have to worry about you.

Noah made further reference to the type of approach he felt guidance counselors took in assisting him in choosing a postsecondary program:

A lot of the style with guidance counselors was basically like, how much time are you willing to commit and if people... I mean there were a lot of students in my grade 10, 11, 12 classes who were kind of like, “Four years, that sounds like a lot.” And they are just like, “Okay great, you are going to college for a two year program.” There wasn't a lot of effort in helping us wrap our minds around a four year degree.

Matthew described his relationships with his classroom teachers as being “highly un-individualized” and that it was “just kind of get you out the door, get the next students.” Further, Matthew recalled feeling as though “the teachers didn’t want to be there themselves.” He observed:

I just couldn’t wait until I got out of high school and then I would be done. So maybe—teachers not talking to us or teachers not putting the effort in towards teaching and building relationships just made me view them as people who don’t care. I was always told that in university teachers wouldn’t care about you, you were just a student number. And after coming here, it’s totally opposite—I can go up to any of my professors and they will answer any questions that I have. But I had that perspective about them that it was just this big line and as soon as you get out the chair would be filled with another student.

When asked to define a positive student–teacher relationship, Matthew emphasized the importance of feeling as though teachers cared about the well-being of students both inside and outside the classroom. Further, Matthew suggested that an approachable and friendly teacher with a positive attitude can “really make a difference.” Matthew also made reference to the negative perception he had of his secondary school guidance counselors in saying:

Personally, I kind of think they are useless. It was just one of those times where we would look forward to it because it was time away from class. So it was like, “Oh, let’s go talk to the guidance counselor for a few minutes and then we can wander around the halls.”

### **Participants' Recommendations and Personal Advice**

Given that this study sought to rely on “local knowledge” of those who have “expertise as individuals who live in the research issue” (Powers & Tiffany, 2006, p. 80), this section includes the recommendations and personal advice that participants offered regarding accessing higher education.

#### **How to Enhance School-based Support**

The participants were asked to consider what advice they would offer teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators to best support first generation students in accessing PSE. Sarah highlighted that it would be valuable to have someone within the secondary school to act as a liaison between the students and postsecondary schools. More specifically, Sarah highlighted that it would be valuable to have “someone that wasn’t biased and had a good rapport with different universities and could get you the kind of information that you needed.” When asked about the type of school-based support that she thought should be implemented, Andrea highlighted the importance of providing personal support:

I think the biggest thing is one-on-one interaction. I think that’s so important, when I usually sit with someone one-on-one and I discuss my academics or anything at all...personal matters, I feel like that’s so valuable. I think if that was emphasized more and if they took more time in doing that I don’t think a lot of these issues would be experienced.

In addition to offering one-on-one support, Andrea emphasized the importance of remembering key details about students and making an effort to follow up with each student regarding his or her interests and aspirations. Further, Andrea highlighted that it

would be valuable for teachers to provide a clearer insight into what college and university are really like to help avoid the shock that students experience in the transition.

Christine recommended that teachers and guidance counselors not only encourage students, but also “get involved in the searching for programs and universities.”

Additionally, Christine highlighted the importance of early intervention and advice:

I think it’s really important to start really early because you get one or two electives in grade 9 and eventually those build up over time and they have kind of a ripple effect, so what you take in one year may affect what you can actually take in the next year. So, starting it early enough to say, “Now you’re in high school, now you have to consider the next step.” You don’t have to know what you want to do, just know what’s out there. Find out what types of programs are out there and I think it would make a huge difference than waiting until grade 10 or 11 when you’re halfway through and it may not be as easy to turn back what you need to fix.

Christine also recommended that it would be valuable to integrate discussions of PSE throughout various aspects of the curriculum in order to facilitate connections between school and university programs:

Even just once or twice a year in different classes, talk about the university structure for that field. So if you are taking biology, describe the programs that are out here because...there’s so much more than people realize...So I think maybe even putting a component in like that in all of the classes to say that these are the types of educational opportunities that are out there for this subject matter or whatever.

In addition to integrating a discussion of PSE opportunities within the curriculum, Christine also suggested that it would be valuable for individuals running extracurricular activities to discuss what they've done in college or university. Christine highlighted:

It's just a matter of getting that knowledge out there and people open to discussing where you got your education, how university was, those different types of things because often it takes hearing those experiences to actually be peaked in your interest.

Further, Christine highlighted that it would be valuable for secondary school students to be paired with someone who is currently in university to share their experiences and provide an opportunity for mentoring.

Julie suggested that the school should provide more opportunities for students to experience what different careers would actually be like. Julie mentioned: "You can't really figure out what you want to do without doing it in my opinion." Consequently, Julie mentioned that the co-op program should be expanded and the school should provide additional experiential opportunities for students to engage with various career opportunities. Noah also highlighted that it would be valuable to learn about "a day in the life of different careers." More specifically, Noah mentioned that:

At that point, it seemed like you had to pick [a career]. So I was kind of like, well okay, what's it like to actually be an engineer, like my dad isn't one, so how do I find out. Just a little more opportunity to do informational interviews with different people working in different fields...or even just like profiles on them.

When I asked Matthew about the types of school-based support that he believed should be offered in regards to accessing PSE, he responded:

I don't think they should force it because it's not for everybody and some people don't want to do it. I definitely think they should give people the option and I think the main part is just teaching people to do what they want and what makes them happy because everybody's different. But, not discouraging people and pushing others. Just finding that balance.

### **Personal Advice for Success**

Participants were also asked to provide advice to other first generation students who are deciding upon their future educational pathway. Part of this involved asking participants to consider whether there was anything they wish they would have known or whether there was anything they would have done differently in the pursuit of PSE. Sarah advised that “there is no excuse financially not to go” because “there is support out there in terms of government help, government funding.” Further, when asked whether there was anything that Sarah would have done differently in her pathway to PSE, she responded:

I would have gotten better grades in high school, just to leave my options open. I just wouldn't have sold myself short in terms of not having good enough grades, I would have just worked harder...I would just, put the effort in so that I could make the decision later kind of.

Both Andrea and Christine emphasized the importance of “believing in yourself” and to “keep moving forward.” Christine and Noah also stressed the importance of making decisions that are right for the individual and focusing on a direction as opposed to the

specific job title that one will get once completing PSE. Noah emphasized the importance of not being overly concerned with the choice of one's undergraduate program and choosing "a program and being okay with the fact that it might not be your chosen field."

Similarly, Christine indicated:

I get the question all the time—"So what are you actually going to be when you're done?" It's hard to explain that to them and say honestly, I don't know but I know the positions are out there. I can't tell you what my title will be. I know I'll have this degree and I'll be able to do this, but I can't tell you where I'm going to work, what I'm going to do necessarily because there are so many options. I would say, that's hard for [people] to comprehend. I don't know if it would be any different for a non first-generation, but I find, it might be just a generational thing that they just don't understand that concept that there's so much more out there than meets the eye. That would be, don't be afraid to not know what kind of title you want, but just know what you're interested in and the direction you want to go with it.

Julie advised students: "Not to worry so much... whatever decision you make it is not final." Julie also emphasized the importance of choosing a school with the "right atmosphere" and to understand that university is "not as scary as it seems in high school." When I asked Matthew about the personal advice he would offer to other first generation students, he responded:

There's a lot you have to look into—where you are going to live, what you're going to do if you need to work, stuff like that. Just knowing that it is possible to go to school by yourself, because if I can do it, anybody can do it. Just—not to

give up and go after your dreams. I know it sounds so typical...

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter began by discussing participants' family-based experiences and the support and encouragement received regarding their education. Following a discussion of familial experiences, the chapter discussed how participants' perceived the decision making process involved in choosing between applied and academic level courses and the stigmas associated with applied level courses. The chapter also discussed participants' perceptions of PSE and the ways in which school leaders represented PSE. Further, the chapter highlighted the nature of the school-based support participants' experienced. Lastly, the chapter presented participants' recommendations for enhancing school-based support for students considering future career and educational pathways and personal advice for other first generation students. The following chapter will discuss the results in relation to the original research questions and existing literature, implications for theory and practice, and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter will begin with a summary of the study and then shift to a “hermeneutic interpretation of themes” (Orbe, 2000, p. 610) whereby the interrelatedness among the themes is discussed. This process will include a discussion of the results, offering connections between the data and the original research questions that guided the work. Further, this process will include a discussion of the implications of the research in terms of how the data connects to existing theory and practice and provide suggestions for further research related to first generation students and school-based support.

### **Summary of Study**

Ontario currently has one of the highest PSE rates in the world (Boothby & Drewes, 2006; Lambert et al., 2004; OUSA, 2010). However, there are still several identifiable groups that continue to be underrepresented in PSE due to a variety of financial and social barriers (OUSA, 2010). This study focused on issues of access as experienced by first generation students. This particular focus aligns with the research that suggests that parental education level is the most important factor in determining a student’s participation in PSE (Finnie et al., 2011; Frempong et al., 2012; Knighton & Mirza, 2002). Research also suggests that the type of learning environment that is fostered and the nature of school-based support can have a substantial impact on the attitudes and achievement of all students. Nieto (2007), for instance, highlights that it is primarily through public schools that “children are given the possibility, perhaps the only one that some of them will have, of a better life than that of their families” (p. 300). Thus, the aim of this study was to explore how differences in the school-based support that students receive impact access to PSE.

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological research design in order to understand and describe how several individuals experience first generation student status (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Purposeful, homogenous sampling strategies (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) were used to select six, first generation students attending a postsecondary institution located in Ontario. Two, one-on-one, retrospective, semistructured interviews were conducted with each participant. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the central task during data analysis was to “identify common themes in people’s descriptions of their experience” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 142).

Analysis of the data revealed several themes including the influence of familial experience, the implications of streaming between academic and applied level courses, the perceptions of PSE held by participants, the ways in which PSE was represented by secondary schools, the nature of school-based support received by participants, participants’ recommendations for enhancing school-based support, and personal advice offered by participants to other first generation students.

### **Discussion**

This research was guided by three main questions:

1. What are the central barriers and challenges, if any, that first generation students report experiencing in the process of accessing PSE?
2. What school-based support do first generation students receive while in elementary or secondary school?
3. What gaps or problems do first generation students believe exist in the school-based conditions or support?

Within this section, the data are used to address these questions. Furthermore, connections between the emergent themes and relevant literature are drawn. However, it is important to acknowledge that “phenomenological inquiry never positions itself as arriving at a definitive set of conclusions” (Orbe, 2000, p. 618). Therefore, although the data will be discussed in relation to the original research questions and existing literature, this section does not claim to offer a “final answer” (Orbe, 2000, p. 618).

### **Barriers and Challenges**

Question 1 sought to discover the central barriers and challenges that first generation students report experiencing in accessing PSE. The data suggest that the main barrier that participants report experiencing was a lack of informational support related to PSE. Although participants expressed receiving varying levels of emotional support from their families, they generally agreed that they were not equipped with an appropriate representation of what college or university would be like or how to navigate the pathway to postsecondary studies. Consequently, participants were frequently left to acquire information themselves or rely on the support of their secondary school.

**The home advantage.** The data draw attention to what Annette Lareau (1989) has referred to as the “home advantage.” Lareau emphasizes that the experiences that children have at home—which are inextricably linked to class and family dynamic—can serve to provide students with certain advantages or disadvantages within the school system. The data from this study suggest that parental education level equips students with particular advantages or disadvantages throughout their educational pathway. For instance, all six participants expressed feeling as though their parents were not able to provide them with appropriate information on what to expect from PSE and how to

navigate the pathway to postsecondary studies. This connects to the literature which suggests that parents are often “required to play the critical role of ‘broker’ or advocate for children, connecting the child to information and resources intended to enhance future life opportunities for the child” (Mudge & Higgins, 2011, p. 130). Students whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree often receive little support from their families in regard to planning and preparing for PSE because their parents do not have direct experience with PSE and are thus disconnected from basic information such as different programs available, tuition costs, and admission requirements (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; Mudge & Higgins, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2001). As a result, many first generation students reported feeling that their parents were unreliable sources of information (EKOS Research Associates, 2009; Lambert et al., 2004). Consequently, many first generation students are left to navigate the complex path to PSE with little help from their families who may lack this navigational knowledge (Jehangir, 2010).

Furthermore, two of the participants expressed feeling as though they were not pushed to attend PSE. These participants felt that if their parents had always articulated clear expectations regarding university attendance they would have been more likely to attend. This connects to the research which suggests that parents who hold a diploma or degree are more likely to place higher value on PSE and have higher expectations for the academic achievement of their children (de Brouker & Lavalley, 1998; Finnie et al., 2008; Lambert et al., 2004; OUSA, 2010). PSE-related attitudes and expectations exert a strong influence on whether students will attend PSE (Frempong et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2004). Students whose parents thought PSE was important and expected them to go to

PSE were more than twice as likely to attend than students whose parents did not expect them to participate in PSE (Frempong et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2004).

Consequently, this data draws attention to the role of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) within our education system. Wadesango and Machingambi (2012) highlight:

Cultural capital is the form of knowledge, skills, education and advantages that a person has, which give them a higher status in society. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system. (p. 117)

Further, Yosso (2005) discusses various forms of capital that influence the experiences students have within schools, including aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital refers to the “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Linguistic capital includes the “intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Familial capital refers to “those cultural knowledges nurtured among families that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Social capital refers to “peer and other social contacts [that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Navigational capital refers to the “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso, 2005 p. 80). Lastly, resistant capital refers to the “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

Yosso (2005) argues that these forms of capital intersect to influence the lived

experiences of individuals. The data suggest that the school system proves advantageous for students who bring with them particular capital. In particular, the data indicate that students who enter the school system equipped with PSE related aspirations and expectations, emotional and informational support from their families related to PSE access, and knowledge of how to navigate the education system have certain advantages. The data suggest that these particular forms of capital are privileged within the school system and that the system is structured in a way to meet the needs of students who possess these forms of aspirational, social, and navigational capital.

### **School-Based Support**

Questions 2 and 3 aimed to discover the school-based support that students received in accessing PSE. The data revealed a discrepancy in the nature of the school-based support received between those who took applied level courses and those who took academic level courses. Two of the participants, who took academic level courses throughout secondary school, could pinpoint specific teachers with whom they held a strong relationship and provided encouragement in their pathway to PSE. Generally, those who took applied level courses indicated that the school-based support that was received throughout secondary school was very passive. Although participants were aware that information was available via various outlets within the school, the school leaders did not actively disseminate such information. Rather, students had to seek out the appropriate information themselves. Furthermore, students who took applied level courses problematized the laissez faire approach regarding the selection of applied rather than academic level courses and the lack of information they received regarding the associated consequences of this decision. The participants who took applied level courses

also highlighted the un-individualized relationships they experienced with both teachers and guidance counselors. Three of the participants wished that their teachers and guidance counselors took more of an interest in them with regard to matters both inside and outside of the classroom. These participants also perceived that high achieving students received preferential treatment and stronger support. Moreover, the participants who took applied level courses felt as though discussions of PSE often had a negative undertone and were used as an opportunity to frighten students into working harder.

Regardless of whether participants took applied or academic level courses, three of the participants described feeling frustrated with having to decide upon their future career pathway while in secondary school and felt as though they had insufficient information to make such a decision. More specifically, two of the participants wished they had more opportunities to experience or gain more insight into what different careers would be like. Furthermore, participants highlighted that it is important to not only encourage students to decide upon their future career in order to decide upon their postsecondary pathway, but also to encourage students to simply consider their interests.

**The implications of streaming.** The data analysis revealed that participants problematized the streaming process that occurs within Ontario schools, wherein students entering secondary school have to choose between taking applied or academic level courses in grades 9 and 10. The academic curriculum is described as theoretical and abstract, while the applied curriculum is intended to be hands-on (People for Education, 2014). Students must choose between academic or applied courses in math, English, science, geography, history, and French. Courses such as arts, technology, and health and physical education are referred to as “open” (People for Education, 2013). People for

Education (2013) highlight that there are several factors that influence a student's decision regarding which courses to take including prior achievement, parental and peer expectations and attitudes toward school. Further, they indicate that there is a perception that applied level courses are easier than academic level courses. This study revealed that participants who took applied level courses outlined that their decision was based on the fact that their parents did not push them towards one particular path. Further, based on the perception that applied level courses would be easier, three of the participants selected applied courses because they were "lazy" and wanted the "easy route."

Further, research indicates that once a student decides to take applied level courses within grade 9, it is unlikely that the student will change to an academic track (People for Education, 2013). Research also suggests that there is a significant achievement gap for students in applied level courses, that students taking applied level courses are less likely to graduate from secondary school, and that a large portion of students in applied courses do not continue on to PSE (People for Education, 2013). Further, students taking applied courses are more likely to come from lower income families, immigrant families, Aboriginal families, and families with lower levels of parental education (People for Education, 2013). Consequently, there is a growing concern that practices of streaming students are likely to reproduce patterns of disadvantage based on family background. The nature of the streaming process within Ontario secondary schools draws attention to the education system as connected to social stratification and vocational specificity. Kerckhoff (2001) highlights that the education system serves to differentiate society's population based on the varied educational credentials received and the implications that these credentials have on their adult lives,

such as occupational attainment. Further, Kerckhoff indicates that “in a stratified system, the program offerings in the types of secondary schools are associated with different degrees of access to opportunities for additional, more advanced schooling” (p. 4). Additionally, he highlights that “education systems vary in the extent to which they offer curricula that are designed to prepare students for particular vocations and award credentials that are vocationally specific” (p. 6). Kerckhoff refers to this process as vocational specificity. Although all graduates of an Ontario secondary school will receive the same credential, an OSSD, streaming processes that separate students into either applied or academic level courses are reinforcing processes of social stratification and vocational specificity. The concern regarding the reinforcement of processes of social stratification and vocational specificity (Kerckhoff, 2001) and the fact that students taking applied level courses are frequently coming from marginalized families is heightened given the fact that three of the participants within the study expressed feeling as though they did not have the appropriate information to make the decision between applied and academic level courses and that there was a stigma associated within applied level courses, perpetuated by the attitudes and behaviors of both students and teachers.

**The marketization of schools.** Participants frequently identified feeling as though they were forced to “decide what [they] wanted to do for the rest of [their] life and then [they] could pick where [they] should go to school” (Noah). Furthermore, participants expressed feeling as though they were not necessarily encouraged to pursue postsecondary studies based on their personal interests, but rather were encouraged to pursue postsecondary studies as a means to acquire a particular career. The emphasis placed on choosing one’s career in secondary school and working towards that career

goal through the pursuit of PSE demonstrates the marketization of our education system wherein students are “disciplined to participate in the maintenance of the dominant socio-political and economic order” (Karumanchery & Portelli, 2005, p. 329) and “spit out to take their role within the relations of production” (Althusser, 1971, p. 154). Regarding the purpose of education, Karumanchery and Portelli (2005) ask:

Is public education meant to prepare students to compete and succeed in the global marketplace, or is it intended to reflect progressivist frameworks whereby students actively engage the intersections of school, home and community in order to learn how to critically examine and change their society? (p. 332)

In response to this question, the data from the study suggest that the purpose of our education system is to train students to enter the workforce and become economically productive members of society. It seems as though there was little mention of education as a means of promoting learning for the sake of learning, personal growth, and/or promoting social responsibility.

Further, the data draw attention to the fact that the way in which educators talk about PSE has a dramatic influence on students’ perceptions. Although it may seem very practical to encourage students to work towards a particular career, the findings suggest that this can have negative repercussions for students. Rather than perpetuating the notion that the shift through secondary and PSE and into the workforce must be a linear process, whereby students decide upon their career during secondary school, attend a postsecondary program that will allow them to attain that career, and then enter said career, perhaps we should think of PSE as a venue to develop “soft” skills and hone interests. Perhaps the decision to pursue PSE would be less intimidating if students felt

that they were pursuing a field of interest and developing career aspirations along the way, rather than having to decide upon their future career during secondary school.

### **Implications for Theory**

The theoretical foundation for this study was Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage postsecondary choice model. In this model, Hossler and Gallagher suggest that there are three stages involved in the process of accessing PSE: predisposition, search, and choice. The data from this study suggest that the most important stage of Hossler and Gallagher's postsecondary choice model is the predisposition stage, involving students' decisions and aspirations to continue their formal education after high school. Hossler and Gallagher suggest that "of the three phases that are discussed, the predisposition stage has received the least attention" (p. 210). I would argue that this study has drawn attention to the relevance and multifaceted nature of the predisposition stage. Whether participants mentally engaged with the concept of attending PSE and felt as though they were encouraged to do so was seemingly more important than the process of searching for particular institutions and choosing which institution to attend. Further, the data align with Hossler and Gallagher's assertion that a student's predisposition toward PSE is strongly correlated with parental education level, academic ability, attitudes of parents and school leaders, involvement in activities during elementary and secondary school, and elementary and secondary school quality.

The data suggest that support should be aimed at influencing a student's predisposition regarding PSE participation. However, this is arguably the most difficult stage for which to offer support. Berger et al. (2009) outline that public policy or outreach programming cannot simply change some aspects of a student's background.

Rather, the effect that these dynamics have on access to PSE can be influenced indirectly (Berger et al., 2009). Consequently, although Hossler and Gallagher suggest that organizational factors do not exert as strong an influence on PSE participation in comparison to individual factors related to family background, I would argue that for first generation students, who may not receive appropriate informational and/or emotional support from their families, the potential influence of the school is greater. The data suggest that the influence of organizational factors, such as quality of secondary schooling, should be understood as having the potential to significantly affect a student's access to PSE.

### **Implications for Practice**

Firstly, I believe it is important to recognize the role that our education system plays in reinforcing social norms, expectations, and processes of privilege and oppression. This study has drawn attention to the fact that our education system can serve to either strengthen or weaken existing inequalities that exist within our society (Williams, 2004), specifically as they relate to educational attainment. This is particularly true when we think about the “home advantage” (Lareau, 1989) and the varying types of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) students are bringing with them into the school. More specifically, this research draws attention to de Brouker and Lavalée's (1998) question: “if the family cannot transmit intellectual capital, is the education system able to provide equal educational opportunities to all?” (p. 28). That being said, I certainly do not want to imply that teachers or school leaders are always to blame for inequitable access to PSE. I recognize the immense pressure that is placed on teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and support staff and the lack of resources that exist within schools. I

therefore do not want to suggest that the data present a series of problems regarding school-based support and that schools can simply solve these problems and that access to PSE would be more equitable. Further, I recognize that some of the issues regarding access to PSE are much larger and stem from more complicated processes of inequality.

The study revealed that there was no mention of PSE in elementary school. I believe this is problematic, given that participants must decide between academic and applied level courses upon entering secondary school. The study revealed the implications that this streaming process can have, particularly when students are not aware of the associated consequences of their decision. Therefore, I believe that schools should begin to engage parents and students earlier on so that they can understand streaming processes, the importance of PSE, and how to access PSE. This aligns with the literature that suggests that underrepresented students face a complex and interrelated set of barriers and that these barriers begin to influence students' educational pathways at an early age. It is therefore recommended that early outreach programs begin at the elementary school level and remain consistent at the secondary and postsecondary level (Berger et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2003; OUSA, 2010). Further, it is important for schools to involve parents in PSE planning (Choy, 2001; EKOS Research Associates, 2009; Mudge & Higgins, 2011). Mudge and Higgins (2011) argue that, in particular, engaging underserved families in the PSE process requires a sincere respect for varying family values and culture.

Furthermore, in recognizing that first generation students may require additional support in accessing PSE, I believe it is very important to avoid a deficit approach. Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007) define deficit discourses as follows: "Deficit

discourses place educational failure in individual and family shortcomings rather than in institutional or structural practices and power relations. They identify intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences as disabilities and deficits” (p. 7). Further, Portelli et al. highlight that deficit discourses maintain White middle-class privilege by leaving intact the dominant discourses perpetuated within schools and ignoring the fact that “it is the values and beliefs of this class which construct the standard against which risk is measured” (p. 9). Consequently, rather than blaming individual students and their families for potential shortcomings related to their academic success, it is important to focus on some of the systemic inequalities that exist related to PSE access. Further, rather than viewing students as empty containers into which educators must deposit knowledge or experience (Freire, 1970), it is crucial to consider the multiple perspectives, knowledge, and experiences which students and their families bring (Portelli et al., 2007).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While this research began with a general interest in how school practices can affect access to PSE, future research could be conducted within specific schools and programs that are focused on supporting first generation students, such as the focus school located in Ontario for first generation students. This institution opened in September 2011 and is the first of its kind in Ontario. After spending some time within this school, I believe that some of the school practices could address particular challenges highlighted by participants in the study. For instance, this particular school offers a single-track curriculum, where all students must take academic courses throughout all four years of secondary school. Given that participants problematized deciding between applied and academic courses and the stigmas that were associated with applied level

courses, perhaps this could help to negate some of these consequences. The school also provides several other “strategies for success” which include a focus on postsecondary preparation, advisory program support, mandatory after-school extracurricular involvement, parent engagement, and transportation from all communities. By analyzing these “strategies for success,” and other aspects of the school culture, future research could consider how this particular school works to promote access to PSE.

Furthermore, within the context of my research, I have focused exclusively on issues related to access to PSE, rather than persistence, where access refers to the opportunity to enter a given program and persistence refers to continuing and completion of that program (Finnie et al., 2004). I do however acknowledge that access is only one part of the concern with ensuring that all types of students have an equitable chance to reap the benefits associated with higher education. It is equally important to consider issues of persistence, as many of the benefits of PSE come only with obtaining a diploma or degree (Davis, 2010; Finnie et al., 2008). Further research could address issues of persistence, as the barriers that students experience in accessing PSE do not necessarily dissolve once they are enrolled.

Given that I did not screen for race, gender, religion, or economic status in my participant selection, further research could examine the way that dynamics of race, class, and gender and the expectations, norms, privileges, and process of subordination that occur in these dynamics intersect (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009) in the lived experiences of first generation students. For instance, research could examine how the experiences of a female whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree may differ from those of a male whose parents do not hold a diploma or degree.

Lastly, I believe that future research should incorporate the voices of a broader spectrum of first generation students. While my study focused on the voices of first generation students currently enrolled in university, future research could incorporate the experiences of first generation students who did not attend college or university, for whom the barriers were perhaps too great. Long-term studies could also be conducted that follow students from elementary or secondary school to PSE. Further, research could involve triangulation among families, students, and schools.

### **Final Thoughts**

Through use of a qualitative, phenomenological research design, this study retrospectively explored the experiences of first generation students within the education system. The study revealed the ways in which familial dynamics intersect with the lived experiences of students within the school system, particularly as they transitioned into PSE. Of particular concern was how participants' perceived the school-based support they received as they navigated their future career and educational pathways. Although it could be argued that the participants' perceptions of school-based support could also be generalized to students whose parents do hold a degree or diploma, I would argue that the gaps in school-based support are experienced most dramatically by first generation students who, as the data suggest, do not receive informational support from their families. Consequently, the potential ramifications associated with passive support, deciding between applied and academic level courses, and representations of PSE are much greater for first generation students who may rely on the support received within the school context to assist them in navigating the pathway to PSE.

As I consider the potential implications associated with the nature of the school-based support that students receive, I am once again forced to examine my relative position of privilege. Given the experiences and expectations that I brought with me as I participated in the education system, which were largely influenced by my family background, I have always felt as though the education system met my needs. Further, I felt as though I was able to take advantage of the support and opportunities that were made available. I came into secondary school equipped with PSE related goals and perceptions and therefore navigated through the system with relative ease. I knew that I would take academic courses and the consequences associated with this decision. However, as Dei and Karumanchery (1999) argue:

The success of public education must extend beyond the ability to meet the needs of those students able to take advantage of the system. An excellent school should be defined by its ability to meet the needs of those students least able to take advantage of available educational opportunities. (p. 119)

This therefore emphasizes how important it is for the education system to function in a way that meets the needs of all students.

The process of completing a thesis project has also encouraged me to make several methodological reflections, particularly surrounding my completion of a phenomenological research design. Of particular concern was the issue of methodological semantics. Something I was consistently aware of was whether I was using language conducive to a phenomenological research design. For instance, Orbe (2000) highlights the implications of using the word “data” which “refers to that which is given and gathering information from subjects where interviewers determine meaning via a pre-set

agenda” (p. 608). Consequently, the very use of the word “data” is antithetical to a phenomenological approach where researchers view participants as “human beings who signify—give meaning to and derive meaning from—their world” (Orbe, 2000, p. 608). However, the use of a word such as “data” to discuss that which had been gathered from participants was convenient and allowed for clarity. This issue of choosing appropriate wording draws attention to the power of language and context within research design.

Furthermore, as part of the phenomenological research design and, more specifically, the practice of self-assessment, I was forced to recognize my role as an outsider in relation to the research phenomenon being explored. Given that I am not a first-generation student, I often considered whether it was appropriate to do research with a demographic that I do not belong to. When I told people about the research that I was doing, one of the common questions people asked was whether I myself am a first generation student, implying that my own status as a first generation student would seem logical and create a certain level of interest in or understanding toward the experiences of this group of individuals. I believe that this raises a concern with authenticity and whether “outsiders” can adequately represent the life experiences of others. However, this made me question what constitutes an appropriate relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon or subgroup of individuals being examined. While an outsider may not share the same experiences, perhaps an insider would bring with them a set of preconceived expectations regarding the phenomenon. This particular concern draws attention to the fact that the researcher can never exist in a truly neutral position in relation to phenomenon and always brings with him or her a particular context that will undoubtedly influence the study.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol for First Interview

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for participating in my study. I am interested in exploring the experiences of first generation students – those who are attending a postsecondary institution whose parents do not have a diploma or degree. I am interested in what elementary and secondary schools are doing and can do in order to support first generation students in accessing higher education.

I am going to ask you a series of questions that are meant to encourage you to speak openly about your experiences during elementary and secondary school. You are under no obligation to answer questions that you are uncomfortable with. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time.

I will audio record this interview so that I can be sure to capture all of your ideas, opinions and experiences. Following our interview, I will convert the audio recording into text format. Within a few days, I will send you this transcript which will give you the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and add, delete, or alter any details as you see fit.

All of the information that you share today will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with your answers. Please feel free to ask me questions at any point throughout the interview.

#### **Ice Breaker Questions**

Generally speaking, did you enjoy your time in elementary and secondary school?

Did you feel as though you fit in to the school atmosphere? Why or why not?

What program are you studying here at [name of university]?

#### **1.1 When did you first consider postsecondary education for your future?**

- a) What factors influenced this decision?
- b) Who influenced this decision?

Comments:

#### **1.2 Why did you decide to attend postsecondary education?**

- a) What were your impressions of postsecondary education?
- b) What benefits did you feel it would bring you?

Comments:

**1.3 What was the general attitude towards postsecondary education in your elementary school? How about in your secondary school?**

- a) Did your elementary or secondary school leaders (teachers, guidance counselors, principals, etc.) stress the importance of having a diploma or degree from a postsecondary institution? In what ways?
- b) Do you remember any assemblies, presentations or special programs dedicated to a discussion of postsecondary education? If so, please describe the value, if any, that they had for you.
- c) Were you ever discouraged from attending postsecondary education?
- d) Did you consider entering the workforce directly after secondary school?

Comments:

**1.4 Throughout elementary and secondary school, did your teachers, principals or guidance counselors talk about the demands you would face in college or university?**

Comments:

**1.5 What school-based support did you receive in deciding which program you were best suited for?**

- a) Why did you choose the program you are in?
- b) What other programs did you consider? Why did you decide against them?
- c) Did teachers, guidance counselors or others in your school urge you to continue on towards a particular path?
- d) Did you ever take any aptitude tests?

Comments:

**1.6 What school-based support did you receive in deciding which universities or colleges to apply to?**

Comments:

**1.7 What school-based support did you receive in selecting the appropriate courses that you would need in order to attend postsecondary school?**

Comments:

**1.8 What school-based support did you receive in completing the application process (e.g., online application, essay components)?**

Comments:

**1.9 What school-based support did you receive in learning about how to finance your education?**

Comments:

**1.10 Once accepted, how did you decide which school to attend?**

Comments:

**1.11 In what ways did your school involve your family (e.g., parents, guardians, siblings) in any of the support offered to you regarding postsecondary education?**

Comments:

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for participating in my study. I will send you a copy of the transcript in a few days and will contact you within 2 weeks to set up a second interview.

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol for Second Interview

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for participating in my study. As you will recall, I am interested in exploring the experiences of first generation students – those who are attending a postsecondary institution whose parents did not go to college or university.

Once again, I am going to ask you a series of questions that are meant to encourage you to speak openly about your experiences during elementary and secondary school. The purpose of this interview is to reflect upon the information you shared in your first interview and to think more broadly about your experiences as a whole. You are under no obligation to answer questions that you are uncomfortable with. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time.

This interview will be audio recorded so that I can be sure to capture all of your ideas, opinions and experiences. I will also take brief notes throughout the interview. Following our interview, I will convert the audio recording into text format. Within a few days, I will send you this transcript which will give you the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and add, delete or alter any details as you see fit.

All of the information that you share today will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with your answers. Please feel free to ask me questions at any point throughout the interview.

**2.1 What would you say was the most challenging part about getting to this stage in your life – being enrolled in a postsecondary institution?**

Comments:

**2.2 How do you feel your experience going through the process of getting to postsecondary school might have been different if your parents had a diploma or degree?**

Comments:

**2.3 If you were to offer advice to your elementary and secondary school teachers, guidance councilors, principals or others involved in your educational pathway about how best to support first generation students, what advice would you give?**

a) Is there anything that these school leaders could have done differently in terms of the information, support, or guidance they provided you?

b) What other types of social and academic support/programs would be useful?

Comments:

**2.4 If you were to offer advice to another first generation student entering postsecondary school, what advice would you give?**

- a) What do you wish you would have known during the process of deciding to apply, searching for schools, applying, and accepting an offer?
- b) Is there anything you would have done differently?

Comments:

**2.5 Is there anything I have not asked you about that is crucial to understanding your experience as a first generation student going through the process of enrollment in postsecondary education?**

Comments:

\*The above questions were asked of all participants. Additional questions were asked of each participant based on emergent themes from interview one.

**Conclusion**

Thank you again for participating in my study. Your contributions are central to my research. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions or comments about this study.