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How First Generation Students Acclimate to the College Campus

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How First Generation Students Acclimate to the Residential College Campus

RUNNING HEAD: HOW FGS ACCLIMATE TO THE COLLEGE

How First Generation Students Acclimate to the College Campus

Introduction

First generation students (FGS) are entering college in larger numbers than ever because of the necessity of a degree to obtain a fulfilling career. Data gathered between the years of 1995-1996 by the National Center for Education stated, “thirty one percent of students” entering a four- year college were FGS (National Center for Education, 2001). In addition, the First Generation Foundation website, identified statistics from a Department of Education study published in 2010 stating, about “fifty percent of the college population” are first generation students (FGS) (Our opportunities, 2013). This data shows the steady increase of FGS entering the college campus, and one of the motivations behind doing so are for employment opportunities. There are a variety of definitions for FGS Chapman University defines them as, a student in which neither of their “parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have completed a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university ...[and] that you are the first in your family to attend a four-year [institution]” (Chapman University, 2014).

Many studies have established that FGS come into college ill prepared, this lack of preparation makes them doubt their academic abilities, less likely to persist, and typically take longer to graduate (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Thayer, 2000; Yeh, 2010). As a result of these hurdles that FGS face it is important for them to acclimate, or become familiar with their college culture to alleviate these inequalities. The following studies have examined the unique difficulties FGS face, but other studies have focused on supporting FGS in overcoming these hurdles. The various ways this support has been studied includes: how FGS can be “empowered” while in college, the importance of “self-concept in academic achievement”, and the importance of academic advising (Macias, 2013; DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). There are a number of different aspects of the FGS experience that can be studied; however, I am most interested in an analysis of how FGS become acclimated to their college culture.

Through a brief look at culture shock, which is a stage within the process of acclimation, a valuable understanding of acclimation can be extracted. When a novice enters a culture they can

experience confusion that the new environment is unlike their home. This confusion often leads them to learn new cultural symbols and norms to make sense of their surroundings. This sense of confusion is culture shock, and the process in which they bring understanding to symbols and norms is acclimation (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008).

This population of FGS is ripe for study because of their growing prominence on college campuses across the nation. The existing literature on FGS takes a more specific approach through looking at individual measures that are taken to support FGS such as the role of “academic self-concept,” how FGS negotiate the multiple identities they represent while in college, and how to retain students from low-income backgrounds (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Orbe, 2004; Thayer, 2000). These studies are valuable because they bring information to the people that support FGS in assisting support staff with the understanding of their unique hurdles to academic achievement. An understanding of the challenges of FGS can make the college environment equitable for all students. In my study I want to step back and look at the larger acclimation process that FGS complete, when encountering a new environment such as the college culture. Also I hope to build an understanding of the acclimation process that travelers complete and draw comparisons between the experiences of travelers and FGS. This understanding could then allow me and others to assist FGS with the transitions they will experience while in college.

The following research question will be utilized to guide this study.

RQ: How do first generation students acclimate themselves to the residential campus culture?

Literature Review

The transition of FGS into college can be compared to a person traveling into a different country. There are a number of signs, symbols and behaviors that people familiar to the environment consider as being common knowledge. However, FGS will find these differences in language, dress, and interests to be foreign. This disconnection between the FGS’s home culture and their new environment, college, suggests an acclimation process be completed for FGS to become comfortable in their new environment. The following review of existing literature will first define who FGS are and the complexities involved in

crafting this definition. Then acclimation will be defined, and the various stages to achieve this state of comfort. Lastly, the sources of support for acclimation to be achieved are discussed, including the void within the literature my research will attempt to fill.

Complexities of FGS Status. The term first generation student, is frequently used. However, it has many different interpretations. At first glance, FGS are defined simply as, “students whose parents did not attend college” or “those students who are the first in their family to attend college”, (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 5; McConnell, 2000 p. 75). However, these simple definitions become difficult to use for a wide population of students because some of their parents attended a four year institution but did not graduate. Other FGS’ parents attended a community college and graduated with an Associate’s degree. When a FGS had a parent who attended community college that parent is not able to tell their child about the difficulties of communal or dorm style living. Also when a parent did not graduate high school or ever enter college, they are less equipped to tell their child about the rigorous college application process. Therefore, the simpler definitions that do not include parents who may have entered college and were not able to finish do a disservice to the complexities that are present within the lives of FGS. For the purposes of this research study, I am going to embrace the definition provided by Davis (2010) which states, “individuals can claim first-generation status if neither one of their parents or guardians possesses a four-year degree” (p. 2) but I will also include additional criteria within my methods section to account for the unique nature of my study.

The difficulties that are unique to a FGS, suggest that the acclimation process be completed for the student to gain insight into the culture. Davis (2010) argues that “FGS are unfamiliar with the culture of college and... unfamiliar with what it means to be a college student” (p. 29). He goes on to say that this “insider knowledge”, which includes language and other communication signs such as body language is necessary for the FGS to learn to become a member of the in-group of college students (p. 29). The lack of a close relative to explain the unwritten rules of how to behave on a college campus can cause difficulties for the FGS. To achieve the goal of assisting a FGS with living on campus and gaining a better understanding of a new cultural environment, the acclimation process is utilized. This process will be examined within a later section of the literature review. Also the role that the acclimation process assumes

throughout the journey of an individual into a new culture, this is precisely what the FGS completes within their new college environment. Within this process the new student must pay attention to “a long list of symbols that determine in-group membership” (Davis, 2010, p. 71). As a result of a FGS not having been exposed to college life beforehand it will be very different from the home culture they previously occupied (Davis, 2010). These changes mandate that an individual adapt to meet the demands of their unfamiliar environment.

In order to understand the process FGS complete to adapt to a new cultural environment, a cultural adjustment model will be utilized. As outlined in a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, FGS are more likely than their non- FGS peers “to speak a language other than English at home” and more likely: “to come from low- income homes” (2001). These aspects of the identities of FGS are likely to be managed or reconfigured to acclimate to the college campus. However, before the stages within the adjustment model are explained the concept of acclimation needs to be defined to connect this transitional process to the experiences of FGS.

Acclimation Defined. Acclimation is a process through which a “novice” in a new culture gains, “the ability to fit in and execute appropriate and effective interactions in a new cultural environment” (Davis, 2010, p. 32; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 120). Therefore, as an individual spends more time in a new environment they complete a number of stages in which they gather information to execute appropriate interactions, the stages are as follows.

Stages of Acclimation. There are a number of steps that a person can complete to increase their level of comfort or familiarity within a new culture. Alexander (2010) asserts that “within acclimation, learners have limited and fragmented knowledge” (p. 11). The goal of a person entering into a new environment is for them to develop a sense of comfort and belonging. The behaviors and actions of people within the new environment can appear extremely confusing to an outsider lacking experience within this culture, thus prompting them to complete certain actions to increase their comfort.

The journey of a FGS can be compared to intercultural interactions and the stages that a person undergoes when they travel to a new geographical region, because of the transitions that are completed.

There are two widely used models to characterize this transition developed through intercultural studies. One is referred to as the “U- Curve Adjustment Model,” and the other as the “W- Shaped Adjustment Model” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, pp. 126-127). The U- Curve model contains only three steps: the “initial adjustment... the optimistic or elation phase”, the stressful or crisis phase, and then the “regained adjustment” or “settling-in phase” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 126).

In contrast, the more in-depth W shaped model is composed of seven steps that work to show more fully the transition of an individual, through a foreign culture (Ting-Toomey & Chung, p. 127). The first stage of the W- Shaped Adjustment Model is called, the “honeymoon stage” because it is when the individual is the most excited about their surroundings (p. 128). Everything appears to be wonderful and positive, and their outlook on the experience only focuses on the benefits of their new culture. The individual is eager to learn about their new environment and all it can offer them.

This second stage is referred to as the “hostility stage” because unexpected “emotional upheavals” occur. The novice can become upset about the way their expectations were not met (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 129; Maskil, 2012). During this hostile stage, an individual can be made more aware of the differences that they have in comparison to other travelers causing them to show anger or frustration while trying to navigate their new environment.

After the initial excitement wears off, the individual starts to feel stressed and culture shock can begin to occur. Culture shock refers to the stress that is experienced during a “transitional period” in which individuals are moving into an unfamiliar culture (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 116). Culture shock will be discussed in a later section because the implications of this confusing time can occur within any section of the acclimation process, and as early as the hostility stage.

Next, the third “humorous stage” occurs (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 130). This stage is when after experiencing strong emotional distress the novice is able to find humor in their confusion. People experiencing this phase are more equipped to take the good with the bad and move forward. In addition, “friendships and social networks” are beginning to form (p. 130).

The fourth stage is, “social acceptance and support” because individuals now feel more integrated in their community and can even refer to it as “feeling [like] home” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 130). The symbols and customs that once were unfamiliar to them now have a new meaning. This stage can promote excitement, as experienced during the first stage, because as individuals learn new information they might be motivated to mentor others, such as providing someone directions, allowing the novice to feel more competent within their culture.

Ting-Toomey & Chung (2005) refer to the fifth stage as the “ambivalence stage” (p. 131). This is when cultural members experience “sorrow that they are going home” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 131). Also emotions such as “grief, nostalgia, and pride” when thinking about returning home (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 131). Goodbyes that the individuals have to tell to their newly acquired friends, and excitement with telling their family about all the things that they have learned contribute to the emotionally confusing nature of this stage (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005).

The sixth stage is referred to as “reentry culture shock” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 131). The first experience with culture shock occurred in the hostility stage. However, now that individuals have to re-familiarize themselves with their home culture this can cause them to question, who they were before they left, and who they have become while away. Travelers can “feel more depressed and stressed than they did” previously (p. 131).

Lastly, the seventh stage is “resocialization”(Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 131). This occurs when travelers either assimilate to their home culture, choose not to blend in and make themselves stand-out, or use their new found knowledge to create changes in their environment (2005, p. 131). Whichever choice the individual decides to take it will require deliberation and reflection upon their experience. Each of these stages flow together in the service of understanding a travelers journey into a foreign culture.

Culture shock. As described by Maskil (2012), “Culture shock is the syndrome that is brought on by the stress that results from the loss of all the familiar signs, symbols, and surroundings that we have grown up with and taken for granted when we plunge into a totally unfamiliar environment” (Cultural adjustment to US, 2012). Culture Shock is important to note and describe because it can occur during any

point of the acclimation process. This phenomenon is most likely to occur within the second and seventh stages (hostility and reentry culture shock). As a result of this loss of familiar symbols it becomes increasingly important for FGS on campus to find “a place to go, [and] a place to be themselves, when they begin their college career” (Davis, 2010, p. 72). In an effort for FGS to retain some level of autonomy finding their own place allows for individual growth, and provides a time to process the changes that are occurring. The following section detailing the different avenues to achieve support is essential to alleviating culture shock and facilitating the acclimation of the FGS.

Social support. There are three major areas of support and strategies that FGS have utilized to become more integrated into their campus. These areas include developing relationships with faculty members, finding support through mentors and peers, and developing comfort through use of campus spaces.

Support of Faculty. The support and dedication of faculty members to FGS success is vital for that student to persist in college. Mark Orbe (2004) states faculty support needs to be within the discussion about how to support students because of the closeness faculty members have to students (p. 146). Jeff Davis (2010) asserts, “the more they [faculty] are involved in the life of the campus, the more likely these students [FGS] are to persist and achieve a timely graduation” (p. 72). Areas such as retention benefit from a FGS developing a relationship with their faculty members as established by Davis. Also Filkins and Doyle (2002) claim that “academic performance” and “personal growth both improve when this relationship is built” (Davis, 2010, p. 79; as cited in Davis, Filkins & Doyle, 2002, p. 14). When entering the college classroom, this is an entirely new space for FGS to understand because of their lack of background knowledge about the college environment. If not given the proper amount of care and attention with figuring out the bureaucracy or structure of the classroom, FGS can begin to feel unwelcome and faculty members have the influence to make the FGS feel integrated or as an outsider.

Support of mentors. In addition to the relationship that FGS should seek out with faculty members, they should also develop mentors to help them with events that occur outside of their academic responsibilities. Harrell and Forney (2003) conveyed these relationships should be made a priority

because, “It is essential that advising be an ongoing proactive process that is coupled with a strong mentoring program” (p. 151 cited in Davis, 2010).

The people that FGS surround themselves with play a vital role in their adjustment to the college campus. Jeff Davis (2010) introduces the concept of a “guide” rather than an “expert” to assist with the acclimation process of the FGS (p. 32). An expert is someone that knows all of the aspects of a particular issue. However, a FGS needs a guide rather than an expert because guides “introduce [FGS] to the culture of college” in a more understandable way (p.32) A guide has either been in the position of the FGS or can more easily relate to FGS. A peer can serve as a guide to a FGS because “students feel that interacting with peers with different academic backgrounds helped socialize them to the norms and expectations of college life” (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 32). No matter how students receive social support, it is necessary for FGS to develop these relationships to gain familiarity on their campus which leads to acclimation.

Claiming of campus spaces. The final major area of support is claiming spaces on campus. The idea of claiming a space brings to light the difficulties people face when they are limited in their social and academic achievement, because they either do not know where to find, or access resources. Upon claiming a space on campus the FGS can develop comfort in their new college culture. Maskil (2012) stated that students need to be able to “deal with stress as it arises” and “ask for help if [they] need it” (Cultural adjustment to US, 2012). However, if students do not know where to go to initially request help they will never be able to access it. The Pell Institute research study (2006) insists that students who had experience within their college environment and knew where certain primary buildings were located such as: the health center, and the library were more comfortable in their new space than others who did not. Even if students knew where a building was located they had to be directed on how to use those resources (Davis, 2010). Claiming spaces is not supposed to mean that FGS necessarily have a special place on campus to study and call their own. It refers to a sense of comfort achieved when knowledge is increased about where to go on campus to obtain support.

Understanding Norms and Values

In addition to the concept that students need to be able to locate tangible buildings and resources, FGS also need to be aware of certain behaviors and language that are used by people within their new culture. If a student claims that their work was not difficult and a FGS is struggling with their coursework this can distance the FGS from what they perceive to be the norm and lead to their isolation from their peers. Hartshorne (1943) brings to light a widely talked about phenomenon that is often hard to delineate. “Informal group norms” are the values that members of a group uphold, represent, and mandate others to follow if they want to be a part of their group (p. 324). For instance, these changes in behavior that include values can appear in a student’s willingness to minimize the academic work that they put into completing an assignment or test. Students achieve this by saying they received their grade through luck or that it was not hard. This minimization of academic work, when told to a FGS can cause them to doubt their academic competence. No matter what choice the FGS makes, they will need to be aware of signs and symbols within the culture to make appropriate informed decisions.

An aspect missing from this debate of the development of FGS that my research will add is the importance of a residential experience that some FGS complete during their first year of a four year college residential campus. There has been research published that focuses on the experience of non-traditional FGS that choose to attend community college later in life. These students are typically older than most traditional college aged students, predominately women, and commonly have a full-time job (Nomi, 2005, p. 1). It is valuable to examine the experiences of a variety of FGS to gain a better grasp of the entire spectrum of students we refer to when using the term FGS. However, most studies that research college aged FGS do not require that they live on campus and then analyze their experience through that perspective. The implementation of the residential component into my research is valuable because there is a wealth of information for students to gain from one another while experiencing communal living.

Through a review of the existing literature it is evident that FGS are a unique population to be studied, they can be compared to travelers because of the transitions they both complete, and the acclimation process details the steps that an intercultural traveler undergoes. I am particularly interested

in the ways that FGS navigate the campus culture through an analysis of the W-shaped adjustment model. Special attention will be paid to the residential aspect all my participants will have achieved to analyze how their experience affected their acclimation.

Methods

My study relied on qualitative methods to investigate my research question, “How do first generation students acclimate themselves to the residential campus culture?” Since I am more concerned with the personal, in depth experiences of a few students, qualitative research methods are the most appropriate to guide my study. Sarah Tracy justifies why the usage of these methods are valuable and most relevant for qualitative studies because of their three core concepts. These concepts include: self-reflexivity, the “immersion of oneself into a scene”, and thick description (Tracy, 2013, pp. 2-3). Self-reflexivity refers to the researchers’ awareness of how their personal “experiences, points of view, and roles” directly impact the research they are completing (Tracy, p. 2). As a member of the population of FGS and Hollins, it is imperative for me to keep my judgments in check about the experiences of others so that I can acquire the most unbiased data. However, my proximity to this group also allows me to immerse myself in the scene and relate to the subjects of the study and receive richer data.

Thick description is when “researchers immerse themselves in a culture, investigate the particular circumstances present in that scene, and only then move toward grander statements and theories” (Tracy, p. 3). My personal knowledge about this population of FGS allows me to gather thick description. This additional experience allows me to set the research scene that participants are present within. After getting a more rounded view of the lives of my participants, I am able to make better informed generalizations based on my research. All three of these aspects of qualitative methods will assist my research because each component builds on one other in the development of my research question.

An advantage of using qualitative methods is that the findings allow the researcher to situate themselves within the context. Through a use of qualitative methods the research can help you “make sense of [the context]” through a collection of first-hand accounts (Tracy, p. 3). These findings can then allow the researcher to formulate educated interpretations of a larger phenomenon. For example, within

my study on acclimation and FGS through the experiences that I will gather and analyze, I hope to be able to make generalizations for steps that other FGS can take to become familiar with their college campus. This has important implications for this field of study because in-depth interviews allow researchers to gain personal insight into the specific context that is being studied which is one main objective of my research.

Data

The data for my study is “purposeful” and has guidelines to ensure that I gather participants that could potentially answer my research question (Tracy, p. 134). Only FGS with upper-class standing will fit the criteria for my subjects. For the purposes of this study it was important that my participants are not first years in college so that they had ample time to reflect upon their college experience and provide thorough reflections. My sample population will be convenient because I am only concerned with students that currently attend Hollins University. I utilized the snowball sampling method to gather participants. This method is used when a population can be considered hidden or their characteristics aren’t easily identifiable (Tracy, 2013). The participants are strictly voluntary and no special incentives were given to those that choose to participate.

Five current students that live in a residential dorm on the campus of Hollins University were interviewed. One participant Elizabeth is white, a junior, and a Communication Studies Political Science double major. The other participants are Black, and sophomores. Ariel is pursuing a double major in Sociology and Psychology, Makiyah is a Biology major, Blue is a Dance and Studio Art double major, and Janell is also pursuing major in Biology. Each person was from the east coast of the United States, and either Virginia or Maryland. It was interesting that I was able to gather participants from a wide variety of majors; this diversified my findings by allowing them to speak about their experiences in how they think they were assisted or neglected when seeking out academic help.

Data Collection and Analysis

To guide the participants a semi-structured, open-ended, interview guide was utilized. This means that the questions asked will be “organic in nature” and used to “stimulate discussion” instead of probing the participants to answer in a specific way (Tracy, p. 139). This method is valuable because the people interviewed guided the research.

The students that fit the above outlined criteria were interviewed while being audio recorded, and then the findings were analyzed to identify salient themes. Coding is “the active process of identifying, labeling, and systemizing data representing some type of phenomenon” (Tracy, p. 186). The interviews were transcribed and open coded with an emphasis placed on significant themes that answer my research question. Open coding is defined by Strauss, A. & Corbin (1990) as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” in order to extract themes (p. 61). This method will add greater organization and deeper meanings within the data analysis. As introduced by Owen (1984) a theme is considered significant if it displays three characteristics: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (p. 275). The steps to acclimation were utilized to structure the codes used to organize the data, to see if the stages that the participants completed to accomplish acclimation within college life could be compared to what exists in the literature about general cultural transitions.

Findings

The data was coded based on the seven stages of acclimation as outlined in the literature review and introduced by Ting-Toomey & Chung (2005). This model brings to light the intercultural connections that entering the college culture has for FGS. Each step of the acclimation process will be outlined and then supported through the data gathered.

The Stages of Acclimation. The honeymoon stage is the first stage of the acclimation process and is characterized by excitement and positive emotions are usually observed. This stage was shown in the data in a number of ways, and it can occur throughout the entire time the students spend at Hollins. Elizabeth displayed excitement about how college had positively impacted her. She mentions her sister’s experience in college and how it wasn’t good. This perspective made her think that Hollins would not be as great. However, she says, “I have gotten a lot more confident in myself... [and] I have gotten a lot

more passionate about things” (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21 , 2015). Positive emotions were also displayed by other participants through the career opportunities that college opened up. Makiyah and Janell both wanted to go into the medical field: one as a surgeon and the other as a doctor. Therefore, they were lured to come to college because of the promise of career opportunities.

The next stage is hostility when emotional distress occurs as a result of expectations not being met. There is a wealth of data in this section because this phase is where most participants spent the most time reflecting on their experiences. Blue mentioned that when she interacted with the admissions office she was told information about Hollins, but then when she got here the support they guaranteed was not displayed. She stated, “I just figured they would actually correspond to me with dance” (J. Blue, personal communication, October 15, 2015). In this case she had expectations about people assisting her with her desire to be a dance major. However, when she came here she did not think adequate help was given to her. Also Makiyah was told during her college tour that Hollins was a diverse campus but when she got here she was surprised by how little diversity she experienced. She reflected on this let down in her expectations by saying, “I literally had a Bio class last semester, and I was the only Black person in there.” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). She also expresses disdain about not being told about the racial tension of Hollins’s campus, “I wish someone would have told me there is racial tension here; they sugar coat everything when you are getting the tour” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1 , 2015). The honeymoon stage worked to show the excitement the participants had about Hollins; conversely, the hostility stage displayed emotional dissatisfaction of the FGS.

The third humorous stage was reported the least, this is when an individual is now able to laugh about the false expectations or mistakes that they made while still having very limited knowledge about their new culture. For a person to laugh at themselves they need to have a sense of confidence to not be embarrassed by their previous mistakes. When asked during their interviews if they spoke up in class, most of them (four out of five) said that they were mainly silent. Ariel the Sociology and Psychology major mentioned that she had difficulty understanding certain course materials. “So until I can fully understand what we are talking about I don’t talk” (A. Tucker, personal communication, October 14, 2015). When asked about her class participation, Blue spoke about the positive faculty support that

encourages her to speak in class. “I’m more of the one that the teacher picks on... she knows my strengths and weaknesses.” (J. Blue, personal communication, October 13, 2015). This trust in the relationship she has with this faculty member provided her with more confidence, and is directly contributing to her comfort in the Hollins community.

The fourth and second most focused on stage within the interviews was the social acceptance and in-sync stage. During this stage individuals’ social support networks of friends and faculty members are formed. Individuals strive to be seen as insiders within their new culture. Participants displayed their social growth by talking about the benefits of the new relationships they have formed. Makiyah when asked about how her friend group helps her said that one of her close friends is involved in contemporary social issues, and these conversations increased her knowledge about this subject. Makiyah has also been made more aware of the help that she needs from faculty members for advising and selecting classes. This is a display of academic support that she has reached out for. Similarly, Elizabeth said that she gained necessary independence through the help of her friends that encourage her to make decisions on her own without parental involvement. Elizabeth says, “My friends... are really good at calling me on my crap... they have helped me become more independent and less dependent on my mom” (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21, 2015). It seemed pivotal that after such emotional stress in the hostility stage that the participants sought and received help. This stage works to increase the connections that FGS have with the Hollins community.

The fifth stage is ambivalence, during which people typically experience sorrow that their cultural interactions are coming to a close, common feelings are also nostalgia and pride. This step did not come up very often because of the cyclical nature of college. All participants were asked about their experiences when interacting at home during university breaks. All of them expressed that they were able to go home frequently for breaks. Makiyah spoke about how she did not enjoy going home because of financial limitations on family, lack of support emotional and academic, and differences in opinions which caused tension between her and her mother. She stated, “I really don’t like going home, me and my mom have this really awkward relationship so ...it’s always a hassle” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). These issues have caused her emotional stress. Because of the grade levels of the participants, it was not surprising that more of them did not express feelings of sorrow or grief that they

had to go home. If seniors were interviewed it would make sense for more of these emotions to appear because they would not be able to return to their college culture.

Reentry culture shock, when students have to re-familiarize themselves with home is the sixth stage. This stage is sometimes difficult for students to navigate because while in college they create a certain personality, and often times undergo changes from the person they were when they left home. However, at home they are viewed as being the same as before they left. While home each participant has to decide if they will make changes to meet or go against the expectations of their family members. Makiyah has been called fake by friends from home, and her family does not understand what she is going through since they have never experienced college culture. When asked about how her family supports her she said, “They don’t know what to say so they just try and say the safest things possible” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). Janell says that she smiles less because people around her at home do not smile as much as they do at Hollins. Also she is goofier at home because that is the way she was before she left home. She says, “I see a difference when I go home because the people are different; people smile at me when I’m at Hollins, and when I go home people aren’t going to smile at me” (J. Casmore, personal communication, October 28, 2015). Elizabeth states, “Oh my gosh it’s so weird going back home” (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21, 2015). The stress or ease of returning to their home culture directly affects the way they interact with the college culture. Makiyah is typically excited about coming back to Hollins because of stress at home. She says, “I know there’s weird tension on campus but I just like being away from home, so I like when I come here (to Hollins) it’s like I have my own space” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015).

The last stage is resocialization and this stage is often a turning point for individuals existing between two cultures because they need to determine if they will assimilate with the new culture, go back to the ways of their old home culture, or create a new persona. In order to bring a piece of home with her to Hollins Janell says that she “brought a lot of things that reminded her of home,”(J. Casmore, personal communication, October 28, 2015). These items included three stuffed animals she has had since infancy, an old tag from her dog, and her tv is arranged at Hollins as it would be at home. In contrast, in terms of assimilating to the new culture Blue was accused by her mother over the phone that she “sounded white” (J. Blue, personal communication, October 15, 2015). In this situation Blue has to negotiate if she

will change the ways she speaks with her mother or adopt the language patterns of her new college culture.

Discussion

Overall, there were two stages the participants reflected the most on: the hostility, and social acceptance stages. It was enlightening that my participants provided the most rich data relating to these stages because they work together to answer my research question. How do FGS acclimate to the residential college campus? The answer is displayed within the social acceptance stage, which is through the support of faculty, and friends. However, when students did not obtain the necessary information they needed from their avenues of support this caused them emotional hostility.

The hostility stage was experienced more frequently because of misdirected and fragmented expectations FGS created based on a lack of knowledge about college life. This conclusion was drawn because while coding more behaviors and statements that conveyed emotional distress were displayed. Elizabeth stated, “I had the roommate from hell, ... she would not keep clean, I didn’t see her brush her teeth” (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21, 2015). Since this is not something that guardians of FGS would know to prepare their student for, the difficulties of communal living, it makes sense that this situation caused Elizabeth emotional distress. These instances of fragmented or completely absent areas of knowledge, possessed by my participants, typically manifested themselves within the data through roommate situations, and through misdirection of academic expectations.

There was an additional lack of information the participants displayed during the hostility stage; FGS were uninformed about the academic difficulties associated with college life. Not being guided before college and during the early stages of their college career, caused my participants to be shocked either by the lack of academic support they were given at Hollins and/or the rigor of their college course work. Janell expressed that she wished that she was informed previously about the requirements of a liberal arts education especially, “all of the skills and perspectives” (J. Casmore, personal communication, October 28, 2015). Since this participant’s mother enrolled in a community college and was not able to complete her degree, there was little way for her to be informed about these requirements. In addition, Ariel commented on the difficulty of her coursework: “Academics were hard, especially when you are going straight from high school into a college course ...the work level is different I barely scraped by

with a D” (A. Tucker, personal communication, October 14, 2015). Before coming to Hollins included in the campus tour, it could have been enlightening if Janell’s tour guide went over the general education requirements of a liberal arts institution, and for Ariel’s tour guide to have identified campus resources for academic help. Their emotional hostility was easily preventable if they were provided with the necessary information.

The root of these issues can be linked back to the students’ first generation status, and their difficulty with accessing the information vital to their success. In addition to not being provided the necessary information before coming to campus my participants struggled with obtaining direction on campus. The guidance that faculty members provide students with is especially important for FGS, as mentioned within the literature review. Davis (2010) stated that this type of support is linked to a “timely graduation” (p. 72). Also the relationship between a FGS and faculty member is linked to the individual growth of the FGS (as cited in Davis, 2010 Filkins & Doyle, 2002). Makiyah being a Biology major, a difficult academic track at Hollins, stated that she was in desperate need of academic support: “It’s just me doing everything alone and I just need some help, at this point I just really need help.” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). This lack of academic information affects the academic success of FGS, and through FGS directly asking for this help it is made evident that type of support is a vital component of their acclimation process.

In support of my claim that FGS become acclimated to college life through the support of friends, Elizabeth attributes her knowledge to the guidance of her friends. Davis (2010) states that FGS do not have the insider knowledge necessary to gain in-group membership. Elizabeth did not have this knowledge initially, but she gained it through watching upper-class students. When Elizabeth was asked about her relationship with her social group she said, “I figured things out cause I was watching other people that had it figured out” (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21, 2015). In this instance, she became in-sync with her community through observing the actions of students with more knowledge than her. Through the application of this new knowledge, she became one step closer to achieving acclimation.

During the fourth stage, in-sync and social acceptance, participants commented about the benefits of their friend groups. FGS were able to extrapolate how their social support groups improved their lives. Makiyah said that because of her friend group she is “aware of certain things and more informed” (M.

McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). In this dialogue Makiyah goes on to say that her politically active friend shares knowledge with her, and this has benefited Makiyah. My participants felt uncomfortable with the unknown through academic difficulties and roommate drama which made them skip ahead to these feelings of comfort experienced when a social support network is formed. Contrary to Makiyah's responses, Ariel spoke of her difficulties in transitioning into a friend group. Early within Ariel's first semester as a college student it seemed as if most people had their friend groups formed. She reflected on this time by saying, "It took me a little while to find the group I'm with now, so I was really by myself for the majority of the time." (A. Tucker, personal communication, October 14, 2015). However, once she was connected to her current group of friends she felt more integrated into the campus community. She soon saw the benefit that her friend group played within her life which was encouraging her to study and socialize more.

The first four steps of this process (honeymoon, hostility, humorous, social acceptance) provide a valuable way to directly analyze the data collected. However, because of the revolving nature of college in which a person enters and exits the campus environment multiple times, the W-shaped model does not provide an accurate framework to account for this transition. The transitions the participants underwent were primarily mentioned in conversation about university breaks. When the participants were asked about breaks Makiyah and Elizabeth spoke about changes to their language and behavior they had to complete to assimilate back to their home culture. For example, Elizabeth told a story about how her actions are never questioned at school in terms of when and why she chose to do certain things. However, when she goes home if she wanted a sandwich at "9:52 pm" she would be questioned by her mother (E. Trout, personal communication, October 21, 2015). This behavior displays certain actions that are not acceptable at home, not noticed at school, and have to be renegotiated when in either environment. Makiyah mentions having to change up the language she uses at home. She displays this renegotiation of her language within the comment, "I mean when I'm talking to my mom I don't try and use certain words because I'm like seventy five percent certain she might not understand" (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). However, when Makiyah is at school it is encouraged to use more academic language.

The last stage is resocialization and this phase serves as turning point in which an individual has to determine if they will stand out, create changes, or assimilate with their present cultural environment. Data gathered showed that the participants overcompensated for the knowledge they did not have through employing rigorous studying techniques, and efforts to gain a social group in an attempt to fit into the college culture. These behaviors are slightly different from the original definition of resocialization because the intercultural framework assumes that the individual does not return to their new culture. The behaviors of a traditional traveler are contrary to the actions of college students because FGS continually move through both cultures and have to continue to recreate their identity. For example, Makiyah has now assimilated to the culture of college by employing more intense studying habits: “Last semester I didn’t do what I was doing; I didn’t recopy all of my notes” (M. McArthur, personal communication, November 1, 2015). Ariel also spoke about all of the time and energy that she had to put into making friends. “I learned everyone’s name on my hall, because when I saw someone new I would introduce myself” (A. Tucker, personal communication, October 14, 2015). Whereas if my participants had not left their home culture and experienced college these behaviors might not have been changed.

My research question was answered through the hostility and social acceptance stages of acclimation. My participants showed that they acclimate to the college campus through the support of faculty and friends. The first-hand accounts my participants provided of the necessity of faculty support bolsters the claims made by previous researchers (Davis, 2010; Orbe, 2004). It is evident that FGS need the support of faculty because the participants that did not have this support experienced emotional hostility as a result. My research brings to light connections between how a FGS can be compared to a traveler entering a new culture through use of the intercultural W-shaped model.

Conclusion

To date, FGS research has focused on a number of different aspects of the experiences of FGS. For example that FGS come into college ill prepared, this lack of preparation makes them doubt their academic abilities, less likely to persist, and typically take longer to graduate (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Thayer, 2000; Yeh, 2010). While other studies have focused on supporting FGS in overcoming these hurdles including: how FGS can be “empowered” while in college, the importance of “self-concept in

academic achievement”, and the importance of academic advising (Macias, 2013; DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013).

The lens of a cultural traveler is a valuable way to access the experiences of FGS. Since FGS have to enter a new culture, build a support network with faculty and friends, and change their behaviors and language that is similar to the stages an intercultural traveler makes. Without support from faculty in terms of navigating academics this causes stress with the FGS. FGS experience the bulk of their emotional hostility because they are not given sufficient information about college on which to base their expectations. Also without proper guidance FGS are less likely to persist in Higher Education (Thayer, 2000).

My findings displayed that my participants complete a transitory process of acclimation similar to one of an intercultural traveler. The major highlights of my research include FGS are in need of academic support from faculty members and social support from their friend groups, to ease their transition into the college campus. Also when FGS are not provided the necessary information in terms of academic guidance, social integration, or cultural expectations that causes them to experience hostility.

This study had two primary limitations: a prematurely constructed interview guide, and the structure of the W shaped model. I was not able to accurately grasp the signs and symbols that the participants understood as a result of their time at Hollins because of a poorly constructed interview guide. This lack of depth in my interview guide limited my discussion because it dictated the type of information I was given. It was evident that the participants had a better understanding of college since being in this environment. However, I was not able to fully draw connections to how my participants gained their knowledge because I neglected to directly ask. In a follow-up study, if a similar interview guide was utilized, it would be interesting to focus more on the feelings that the participants experienced. Instead of asking questions such as ‘what do you do in your free time?’ The guide could be restructured and ask them how they felt when they left a meeting with their academic advisor. This could better gauge their relationship with their advisor and the effectiveness of the advising skills for that student since it has been established that the relationship between FGS and their advisors is pivotal.

In addition, the W-shaped model does not account for the revolving nature of college. This model assumes that the individual enters a new cultural environment and then returns home. However, the nature

of college is that you enter and exit this culture multiple times. FGS reconfigure their behavior and language as frequently as they come home from break then back to campus. Therefore, when analyzing the data the last three steps of the acclimation process (the ambivalence stage, reentry culture shock, and resocialization) had to be modified from their original intention to fit the experiences of the participants. I enjoyed the comparison of a FGS to a person in a new culture; however, there may be a better intercultural model to account for the complexities of a FGS. If such a model does not exist the W- shaped model could be modified to account for the cyclical nature of college. Also I deviated from the interview guide in the appendix and did not ask questions from the career section because of time constraints.

Hollins University incorporates social support into its programs through the student position of the orientation leader (O-team). This person guides new students through their first few weeks on the Hollins campus. Next, the SSL or Student Success Leader attends the seminar class with new students weekly, and provides academic and social support as needed. Lastly, additional social support can be found through numerous avenues including: other faculty members not instructing that student, peers met within their dormitories, clubs and organizations, or even staff members that work in student support centers such as Student Affairs, and tutoring centers. However, since these support systems were not frequently commented on by the participants this could mean these services need to be better revised to meet the unique needs of FGS.

Future studies could include larger groups of participants, a variety of colleges and universities and possibly give FGS a survey assessing their knowledge about college when they first entered, and then again as they are about to graduate. I think this comparison method could produce results in showing the amount of information they gained, also provide a better understanding of how FGS have developed since entering college.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Demographic Information:

1. Do you self-identify as a FGCS?
 - a. What makes you classify yourself as a FGCS?
2. What is a pseudonym you would like to accompany your data in my research?
3. Age? Race? Class year? Major/ Minor/ Certificates desired?

Before College:

4. Why did you come to college?
 - a. Why did you choose to come to Hollins?
5. What were your general expectations of how Hollins would be?
 - a. Were your expectations let down, met, or exceeded? If so in what ways?

First Year:

6. What was a difficult or challenging lesson you learned during your first year at Hollins?
 - a. How have you grown as a result of that challenge?
7. Can you explain how your roommate situation was during your first year?
 - a. Did you have a roommate?
 - b. Generally was it positive and negative and why?
8. What were some valuable pieces of information you were given during your first year?
9. What is something (if anything) you wish you would have been told before you came to Hollins?

Social:

10. How has your friend group shifted or remained the same during your time at Hollins?
11. Do you feel that you have created lasting friendships here at Hollins?
 - a. If so how do you know?
12. In what ways do you benefit from your friend group(s)?
13. What do you typically do during your free time?

Extracurricular Activities:

14. What clubs or organizations are you involved with on campus?
 - a. Why did you choose to get involved with those organizations?

15. What type of non-mandated events do you attend on campus? Ex. Poetry readings, theater productions, dance shows?
 - a. How do you hear about these events?

Academics:

16. What type of relationship do you have with your academic advisor?
 - a. If this is not positive or productive is there another community member that has served as your mentor?
17. How much do you participate in the classroom?
 - a. If this is frequently, why? If not so frequently why not?
18. Do you utilize professor's office hours?
 - a. If so what do you typically do during office hours? If not, why haven't you?
19. How have you developed a relationship with your professors?
20. How have you grown academically since coming to Hollins?

University Breaks:

21. Do you typically go home during breaks? If so how frequently?
22. Can you compare and contrast the ways you are at home with the way you are at school?
 - a. Do you change your language or behavior?
 - b. If so, why?
23. How much do you talk about school while at home?
 - a. What do you tell people when they ask about school?
24. How do you describe Hollins to others?
25. How is life like back at Hollins when you get back from breaks?

The Future

26. What are your career goals?
27. How did you formulate your career goals?
28. Do they differ from what plans you entered college with? If so, how?
29. Do you feel comfortable on campus?
 - a. If so when did you reach the realization that Hollins was familiar or comforting?
 - b. If not, why is that?
30. What are some steps that you took to become acclimated to Hollins?

Wrap- Up

31. Is there anything else you would like to add?