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COLLEGE-CHOICE FACTORS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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COLLEGE-CHOICE FACTORS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT


College-choice research typically analyzed students based on a single perspective of their identity rather than from an intersecting perspective. However, such research fails to account for the experience of people with intersecting identities determining their college options. This study explores (a) the factors that contributed to the college-choice decisions of first-generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) and (b) how FGSWDs believed their first-generation and disability identities contribute to their college decisions.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, six participants were interviewed. Participants were those who experienced physical and mental limitations that significantly impacted at least one major life activity, who were the first in their family to pursue a higher education degree, and who had been first-year college students within the past ten years.

The results of the study showed FGSWDs intend to go to college, seek independence, and have disability- and financial-related concerns about college. Their identities influence their college choice based on feeling worthy of attending college, preserving pride and asking for help, and considerations about the community that they could join.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Not only do first-generation students and disabled students look at college as an opportunity less often than continuing-generation students and non-disabled students, but fewer students in the first two categories actually enroll. Cataldi et al. (2018) compared 2003-2004 high school graduation and college enrollment rates of first-generation students to their continuing-generation peers. They found differences between the first-generation and continuing generation students in high school completion (92% v. 98%), college enrollment within three months of high school completion (58% v. 72%), and college enrollment within eight years of high school completion (72% v. 93%). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported 69% of disabled students (NCES, 2019d) and 84.6% of non-disabled students (NCES, 2019c) graduated high school; however, of those who graduated high school, only 19% of disabled students (NCES, 2019a) enrolled in college while 67% of non-disabled students (NCES, 2019b) enrolled. First-generation students and disabled students also complete their college education less often than their non-disabled peers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Cataldi et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2009).

These disparities can be attributed in part to the students. First-generation students’ lower college enrollments may be reflect their perception of college as a greater economic risk (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2014). Even though disabled students participated
in more ACT or SAT preparation courses and private college counseling (Murray et al., 2018), like their first-generation peers, disabled students did not intend to attend college as often as their non-disabled peers (Murray et al., 2018). Students’ challenges in enrolling and completing postsecondary credential reveal themselves to be just as much a personal choice as a systematic barrier.

Given that first-generation students and disabled students share many of the same challenges, I expected to find ample literature on these students’ college-choice experiences, either respectively or combined. However, in a study of higher education literature, Peña (2014) found leading student affairs and higher education journals published research on students with disabilities only one percent of the time. The literature on first-generation students also lacks clarity. Thorngren (2017) acknowledges the label “first-generation” is not a one-size-fits-all description as it reflects a variety of experiences. Upon researching the topic, I found no literature on the college-search process for students with both first-generation and disabled identities.

**Statement of Purpose and Assumptions**

This phenomenological study explored how first-generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) enrolled in two- and four-year institutions made their college-choice selections. Additionally, the study explored how students’ identities contributed to the process. In this study, *disability* was defined as physical and mental limitations significantly impacting at least one major life activity and *first-generation* was defined as first in one’s immediate family to earn a baccalaureate degree. This research may assist higher education admissions officers in improving the recruitment of a more diverse student body.
Given the enrollment challenges of the individual groups navigating the college-choice process, this study explored whether those with intersecting identities experience the challenges of both individual groups and if FGSWDs experience more difficulty navigating the college-choice process than their continuing-generation, non-disabled peers. I expected there to be differences in the experiences of students attending different institution types. However, the focus of this study is on the college-choice process rather than on comparing the choices made to enroll in any type of higher education institution.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What factors did first-generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) consider when developing and narrowing their college choice list?
2. How did first-generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) feel their individual identities contributed to their decisions regarding college?

Research Design Overview

I approached this study from a constructivist epistemology and a basic interpretive approach. Researchers use qualitative studies to discover how their participants experience various phenomena without attempting to determine causality or likelihood (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies focus on participants’ response to life circumstances and how they make meaning as a result of these experiences. Thus, meaning is constructed through views of many individuals and interpreted by the researcher operating a study.

I conducted a phenomenological study, interviewing participants enrolled in both two- and four-year higher education institutions. Calls for participants were submitted
through social media, and interviews with each participant were conducted through web conferencing software once participants completed the initial demographic survey. The study was conducted according to the practices of phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Rationale and Significance

Students of either first-generation or disability background represent minoritized populations in higher education. In the United States, students of first-generation backgrounds account for 28.1% to 33.5% of the undergraduate population (Skomsvold, 2015). Ample research exists exploring the college choice experiences of first-generation students. Alternatively, students with disabilities account for 19% of undergraduate students (NCES, 2019a) but there is little research exploring this population’s college-choice process.

Regardless, single-dimension research ignores reality that people have multiple identities overlapping and influencing decision-making (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Museus & Griffin, 2011). The dearth of research demonstrates a neglect of the intersecting experiences. Research on the college-choice processes of FGSWDs will contribute to higher educational professionals’ study of intersecting identities as well as higher education professionals and guidance counselors providing information to FGSWDs applying for college.

Positionality

As a White man possessing physical disabilities since birth, I often recognize the feeling of appearing different from my family, peers, coworkers, and colleagues who have no visible impairments. I often received praise for any task I accomplished that most
other people would not have received, and people were impressed with my initiative. I also received a lot of questions about my disability that implied the inquirers considered disability to be unhealthy. I am very uncomfortable receiving attention for my differences. My parents saw this when I was a child; they sent me to a summer camp for kids with disabilities so I could have friends with disabilities. While I developed friendships with some of the kids, I found myself gravitating towards those who appeared able-bodied and required little or no assistance.

My parents expected me to go to college both because they wanted me to achieve more than they had achieved and because of my disabilities. My mother graduated from high school, earned a degree from a technical two-year college, and attended a for-profit institution to complete courses on operating small businesses. My father left high school before graduating and found skilled labor work in various industries, predominantly working in the livestock agriculture industry. My parents transitioned through various jobs during my childhood and adolescence, though my father eventually started a hog farm operation which allowed my mom to work part-time for different periods of my childhood.

As I neared my high school graduation, my mother and I discussed where I would attend, basing the discussion on my academic interests and the financial cost of attendance. My mother expected me to attend the nearest four-year institution, approximately 40 miles away from home, in order to qualify for an exemption of the institution’s live-in-residence policy, live with my grandparents, and save our family money. I initially selected three public, in-state four-year universities located 40 to 160 miles away from home and one private, out-of-state four-year university located 130
miles away from home; of the four, I attended college visit day events at one of the public institutions and at the private institution. Due to the perceived cost of the institution and the financial aid office’s nondescript discussion of aid packaging, I removed the private institution from consideration. I applied for and received admission to all three public institutions, and ultimately chose the institution whose visit day I attended. It also happened to be the furthest institution of the three; I felt like the distance would allow me to develop independence from my parents.

The concept of first-generation is complex. I considered myself first-generation because of neither of my parents earned four-year degrees, and TRiO programs at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) consider first-generation apply to students whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor’s degree (UWL, n.d.). After discussing the definition with my dissertation chair and researching this topic, I now have a better understanding of the complexity of the identity and I must consider how my background influences my research on FGSWDs. Although I strongly identify as disabled and working class, I recognize the privileges afforded to me that guided my college-choice processes. I received many benefits through state and federal social assistance programs through the resourcefulness of my mother, ensuring I had prosthetic aids that allowed me to attend school and that the money my parents earned could go to financing a house and feeding our family. Not only did I attend a four-year university immediately after high school, but I was able to focus solely on my studies because of the financial support from my parents. I graduated with both bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I am now privileged to be pursuing a doctorate degree while employed at a university serving students with disabilities, many of whom fit the label of first-generation. Although my
participants’ experiences may resonate with my own, it is imperative to my study that I center their voices and use their own words to explain how they understand their experiences (Jones et al., 2006).

My higher education colleagues inspired my research on the experiences of first-generation students with disabilities. While higher education values inclusion and accessibility, it is my experience that disability is often overlooked as a measure of diversity. The exclusion stems from “ingrained systems of knowing” (Milner, 2007, p. 389) with the implication higher education professionals fail to consider disability as a measure of diversity. I understand disability to be a result of the policies, practices, and environments created by an institution. As I consider higher education accessibility, I have come to define accessibility as the ability of students and their support networks to physically, cognitively, and financially navigate higher education systems.

**Definition of Terms**

Researchers often use the terms first-generation and disability in contradiction to the terms’ uses in policy initiatives. Common parlance defines first-generation students as students first in their family to attend college, but the federal Higher Education Act of 1965 (2018) defines first-generation as students whose parent or parents did not earn a bachelor’s degree. Thorngren’s (2017) survey of how four-year baccalaureate degree-granting institutions assessed first-generation and found, of the two-thirds who defined the category during the admissions process, the most common definition was “one or more parents who may have attended college but neither having earned a degree” (p. 52), while the second-rated definition included parents who completed high school but did not attend college. Meanwhile, Darrah and colleagues (2022) found several levels of first-
generation students, which span across families who may have some or no college attendance experience as well as siblings and extended family who have attended or completed college. To be inclusive of the different levels of first-generation identities, I used the Higher Education Act of 1965 (2018) definition of first-generation. Although this topic is well-researched, understanding disabled students’ experiences from a first-generation perspective emphasizes the importance of this research.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment significantly limiting one or more major life activities. However, significant criticism of medical and legal definitions provided opportunity for other conceptual models of disability (Haegele, 2016) to introduce the idea that the interaction of society, the impairment, and individuals’ self-conceptions of their impairment limited individuals with disabilities “from becoming full participants in interpersonal, social, cultural, economic, and political affairs” (Marks, p. 611). My definition of disability aligns with the ADA definition, though I will remain cognizant of how participants’ self-perceptions and the environment in which they live can impact the legal definition.

I intentionally use both person-first and identity-first language when discussing participants’ experiences in this study. Dunn and Andrews (2015) noted the evolution of language to respectfully refer to people with disabilities. They defined person-first language as centering and differentiating people with disabilities from others with disabilities, and identity-first language as centering the state of being disabled as a sociopolitical experience. The researchers also offered various suggestions such as using value-neutral forms (e.g., disabled or disabled people), using Disabled as opposed to
disabled to refer to a cultural identity, and using the terms people with disabilities prefer to use (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). The American Psychological Association (2019) indicated that both person-first and identity-first language are appropriate for discussing this population of people. Respecting both individual people and their minoritized identity, I intend to use both person-first and identity-first language to ease the flow of reading.

I defined the terms first-generation and disability as I intend to use them, but I must acknowledge their fluid nature. My participants may understand or define these terms differently as they apply the terms to themselves or have had applied to them by others. As I conduct my study, I intend to center the voices of my participants as a way of remaining cognizant of and respect the alternative uses and understandings of these terms as participants choose language to describe their experiences.

Chapter Summary

Data demonstrates diminished representation of disabled people and first-generation people among those with high school and college diplomas. First-generation students and disabled students individually attend college at rates far lower than their continuing-generation peers and non-disabled peers. However, students occupy several identities at once, and research must incorporate the perspectives of intersecting identities in order to deliver a cleaner picture of reality. Thus, it is important to study the college-choice processes of FGSWDs in order to determine what led each of them to successfully enrolled at the college of their choice.

Using my established definitions of first-generation and disability in order to select participants, I explored the college-choice process of FGSWDs and how their
identities affect their choice of college. I set aside my own experience as an assumed first-generation student with a disability by centering participants’ voices in the research in order to put forth their own conceptions of their identities through the experience. What participants divulged about their college-choice experience benefits higher education scholars studying intersecting identities and to higher education professionals and guidance counselors assisting FGSWDs interested in or applying for college.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review explores the college-choice experience for first-generation students and for students with disabilities. Although some research on first-generation college students with disabilities exists, these studies explore how the population seeks assistance to achieve academic success once matriculated at their chosen colleges. The dearth of intersectional research received criticism from researchers (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Myers et al., 2013). Such criticism highlights the importance of research on intersecting identities such as first-generation students with disabilities. Not only does intersectional research shed light on the oppression experienced by minoritized identities, but such research raises the voice of the people affected so personnel in high schools and higher education alike might address opportunities of inequity within their control.

Exploring the college-choice process with the concept of intersecting identities provides new opportunities for research. Various models of college-choice already exist, highlighting different aspects impact college students in general (Henrickson, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Existing research suggests students make their college choice based on (a) returns on investment (Henrickson, 2002), (b) information gathered from social networks (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), or (c) both (Perna, 2006). Most college-choice models focus on students as single-identity individuals instead of examining how multiple identities impact students’ experience.
Studies on intersectionality explore the social and political violence acted upon individuals with two or more minoritized identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectional research provides a detailed perspective on minority experiences more consistent with the experiences of real people (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015). First-generation students may experience social class challenges related to academic, social, family, and financial support (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Saenz et al., 2007), while students with disabilities may experience challenges with campus accessibility, financial limitations, and family support (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Murray et al., 2018; Schiavone, 1999). When co-occurring, first-generation and disability identities may compound the challenges potential college students face in choosing postsecondary education institutions.

This review covers the literature on first-generation and disabled identities separately and what factors students within each population consider when selecting a college. Next, the review explores the common models for college search to establish the method by which students choose an institution to attend. Finally, a discussion of intersectionality and its implications on this research concludes this literature review. This literature review will make the case for studying college-choice decision-making of first-generation students with disabilities and discuss opportunities for further research.

**College Disposition Factors of First-Generation Students**

First-generation students experience the college-choice process differently than their continuing-generation peers, beginning with their self-identification. Educational endeavors amongst students vary as well depending on first-generation status (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011; Cataldi et al., 2018; Saenz et al., 2007). Students’ families play a
significant factor in students’ desire to attend college as well as plans to finance it (Langenkamp & Shiffer, 2018; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Additionally, the presence of peer social support influences students’ decision to participate in the college search (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011; Wohn et al., 2013).

To understand their college-choice process, researchers have examined how first-generation students’ academic preparation, such as study habits and courses completed, impacts college choice. First-generation students’ families also impact college choice as well based on their financial reality, the distance between home and school, and how the family-student relationship changes because of college attendance. Finally, the homogeneity of students’ social circle affects college choice.

**College Preparation of First-Generation Students**

First-generation students demonstrate a unique academic experience preparing for college compared to their continuing-generation peers. These experiences begin with study habits and grades. Saenz et al. (2007) used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program to report trends over the past 35 years of first-generation students. The researchers found that the percentage of first-generation students spending at least six hours per week studying or doing homework decreased from 42.5% in 1987 to 25.3% in 2005. The researchers compared these results to those of continuing-generation students, which decreased from 48.4% to 33.4% in the same period of time, demonstrating a growing divide in the time first- and continuing-generation students are studying from 5.9% to 8.1%. (Saenz et al., 2007). Cataldi et al. (2018) studied the course choices of high school students who graduated in 2003 and 2004. The researchers found first-generation students took college-preparatory curriculums less often and completed fewer
math courses than continuing-generation students (Cataldi et al., 2018). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) studied the impacts on college aspirations of students whose immediate family did not attend college. The researchers found students who perceived good grades as important were more likely to want to attend college. Although first-generation students are spending less time on homework and fewer students are taking courses that would prepare them for college, these students will tend to want to go to college if they value higher grades.

Students’ preparation also includes interest college-level preparation courses and exploring colleges. Cataldi et al. (2018) determined first-generation students earned Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits 18% of the time while their continuing-generation peers earned such credits 44% of the time. Studying first-generation students’ academic preparation, Bryant and Nicolas (2011) found that 12.8% of first-generation students took six or more honors courses, 53.5% of first-generation students took one or two honors courses, and 22.8% of first-generation students took advanced placement courses. Additionally, 27.6% of continuing-generation students completed six or more honors courses, 74.3% completed one or two honors courses, and 46.3% took advanced placement courses (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). Fewer first-generation students are completing academic-focused coursework in preparation for college than their continuing-generation peers. Bryant and Nicolas (2011) also found first-generation students attended college fairs less often and submitted fewer college applications than continuing generation students.

First-generation students’ college preparation clearly differs from their continuing-generation peers. First-generation students spend less time studying, earn
lower grades, are less likely to complete a college-preparatory curriculum, and complete
the SAT or ACT less often than their continuing-generation students. Family education
appears to play a part in the degree to which students choose to attend higher education,
indicating family involvement in the college-choice process.

Family Impact in First-Generation College-Choice Process

Toutkoushian et al. (2018) determined parental education impacts students’
preparation for higher education. The researchers found compared SAT or ACT (college
preparatory exams) completion between students whose parents’ highest level of
education was high school (60.7%) and students whose parents’ highest level of
education was a bachelor’s degree (84.3%) (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). The researchers
also found parents’ educational levels impact whether and where students applied to
college. Only 63.2% of students whose parents never attended higher education enrolled
in college themselves, compared to 81.6-93.3% of student students whose parents earned
an associate’s or bachelor’s degree (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). The more time parents
spend in college, the more likely their student is to attend college.

Using data from the 2000 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS),
McCarron and Inkelas (2006) studied the college aspirations of students whose
immediate family did not attend college. The researchers measured parental involvement
by how often parents help their students with homework, how often students discussed
school courses with their parents, how often students discussed preparation for the SAT
or the ACT with their parents, and how often students discussed going to college with
their parents. The NELS data included biennial assessments of students beginning with
the students in eighth grade in 1988 and ended in 2000. The researchers found parental
involvement was a stronger factor in predicting if first-generation students intended to attend college than if continuing-generation students intended to attend college (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). This finding demonstrates that family support for their first-generation students could influence students to engage in college preparatory activities. It also ignores the support of other caregivers and social influences in students’ lives.

First-generation students enrolled in higher education programs expressed concern about distancing themselves from their families due to changing social classes (Hinz, 2016). Langenkamp and Shifrer (2018) identified cultural frames comparing how first-generation students made meaning of their college experience differently than their continuing-generation peers. The first frame involved whether students went to college to be less or more like their parents. In focus groups, first-generation students indicated they wanted fewer hardships than their parents and going to college involved a separation of students’ experiences from their families’ experiences. In contrast, continuing-generation students attended college to be more like their parents and continue their family legacy. In a study on first-generation working-class students’ attitudes towards class transition, the majority of students expressed a desire to elevate their social class and maintain ties to their family (Hinz, 2016). Although their beliefs regarding social mobility varied, the students understood the effect college could have on their personal relationships with and support from their families.

Financial Impact on First-Generation Students

First-generation students also experience complications in their decision to attend college based on their families’ financial situations (Cox, 2016; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Smith, 2008). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found
socioeconomic status influences first-generation students’ intentions to enroll in higher education. This may be best explained by Cox (2016), whose study on high school to college transition intentions revealed the dilemma between staying the home lives and the college aspirations of high school students who identified as low-income and either Black or Latino. The participants’ financial instability and housing insecurity required the postponement of college attendance plans.

Paulsen and St. John (2002) noted the impact of college costs on college-choice decisions of students. The researchers found that, across income levels, 64% of participants chose a college due to low tuition and financial aid and 54% of the participants chose colleges close to home in order to save money on living expenses. Additionally, the researchers found students from lower-income families tended to choose lower-cost colleges and received more aid through loans and grants than their higher-income peers (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Although the study did not explicitly address the experience of first-generation students, it reflected the financial concerns of families.

Parents’ education and income not only affect students’ decision on whether and where to attend college, but also the awareness of the financial and social costs that drive the college-choice process. First-generation students seek futures with fewer hardships than those experienced by their parents. Parents who discuss options with their students contribute to the decision made to attend college, but students also make their decisions with the input of others outside their family.
Social Support for First-Generation Students

In addition to their families, students’ social circles also influence college choice. Bryant and Nicolas (2011) studied first-generation students’ college exploration behaviors, including discussing college with their peers. When responding to whether their friends intended to attend college, 63% of first-generation students responded affirmatively while 94.7% of continuing-generation students responded affirmatively. First-generation students indicated they felt pressured by their peers to not attend college. When asked about enrolling, 46.9% of first-generation students reported they were more likely to consider not attending college. However, first-generation students changed their decision when their community was less socioeconomically homogenous. Langenkamp and Shifrer (2018) noted the impact of continuing-generation students’ connecting with first-generation students. First-generation students in socioeconomically diverse high schools interacted with continuing-generation peers more often than first-generation students in socioeconomically homogeneous high schools. This contact allowed students in diverse high schools to learn about college from their peers.

Students’ social circles extend beyond the classroom when accessing internet technologies, which ostensibly introduces first-generation students to less homogenous communities that provide opportunity for information. Wohn et al. (2013) studied the impact of social media on first-generation students’ college aspirations. The researchers found interactions with first-generation Facebook friends affected first-generation students’ expectations to succeed in college, but interactions with continuing-generation Facebook friends made no difference. MacInnis et al. (2019) found that having many friendships with continuing-generation students can increase first-generation students’
imposturous feelings and lead to disengagement with the university environment. Although first-generation students seek information about colleges from their continuing-generation peers, they may feel more inclined to listen to someone like them already in college.

Students whose parents never attended college represent 24% of the total student body (NCES, 2018), and it’s clear why. First-generation students are less likely to prepare academically through appropriate courses (Cataldi et al., 2018), spend less time completing homework (Saenz et al., 2007), earn fewer Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits (Cataldi et al., 2018), and complete the SAT or ACT less often than their continuing-generation peers (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Additionally, students’ concern for their families’ socioeconomic situation can impact college-choice decisions (Cox, 2016; Hinz, 2016; Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). However, first-generation students who value good grades are more likely to consider attending college. When their families and college-going peers are also involved (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Wohn et al., 2013), first-generation students may have all the support to prepare for higher education and explore college options. In the next section, I provide a similar analysis of the college-choice factors for disabled students.

**College Disposition Factors of Students with Disabilities**

Like first-generation students, disabled students’ educational experiences during the college-choice process determines if and where they attend college. After the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was reauthorized in 2004, high schools held responsibility for assessing the educational needs of students with disabilities and
assisting students’ transition to postsecondary opportunities (Madams & Shaw, 2006). Madams and Shaw (2006) criticized the reauthorized law for increasing the age of students at which transition programming begins. The researchers found delayed discussions about transition reduced students abilities to develop personal, social, and academic skills needed for postsecondary education or employment (Madams & Shaw, 2006), impairing their preparation for either college or jobs.

When disabled students consider college, three factors emerge from the literature as relevant. First, disabled students’ academic preparation impacts their postsecondary opportunities (Mercer, 2012; Murray et al., 2018; Schiavone, 1999). Second, disabled students must choose colleges based on the limitations of their disability and colleges’ environments and support systems (Fleming & Fairweather, 2012; Murray et al., 2018; Rosenbaum, 2018; Wessel et al., 2015). Finally, students with disabilities rely on input from their families when selecting institutions (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Murray et al., 2018; Wessel et al., 2015). Just as with first-generation students, disabled students navigate many factors affecting their choice of college.

**Academic Preparation and Social Predisposition for Disabled Students**

The literature on students with disabilities provides a conflicting account of their preparation for higher education, with indications that they would not attend (Mercer, 2012; Schiavone, 1999) as well as scenarios in which they are well supported (Murray et al., 2018; Schiavone, 1999). Indirectly supporting the criticisms of Madams and Shaw (2006), Schiavone (1999) advocated for schools to begin transition services for disabled students in middle school. The researcher indicated this would give students more time to develop skills for employment or additional education. Mercer (2012) studied the
college-choice processes of disabled students attending community colleges. The participants indicated they had not engaged with transition activities and generally lacked support from their schools. This portrayal of academic support indicates disabled students generally lack support, though it is not always the case.

Murray et al. (2018) surveyed two cohorts of disabled students entering the University of Arizona to learn of their experience navigating the college-choice process. The researchers found that students with disabilities were more likely than their peers without disabilities to take preparation courses for the SAT or ACT, to learn about colleges from high school counselors, to have high schools that offered college counseling, and to go on college tours. However, disabled students’ SAT or ACT scores limited their choice in college more often than non-disabled students (Murray et al., 2018). It is important to note that disabled participants in this study came from neighborhoods where adults typically had college degrees (Murray et al., 2018) while the disabled students in Mercer’s (2012) study on college-choice process of community college enrollees considered the cost of college and the distance from home as factors in their college choices. It seems obvious that privilege through education and wealth are at play here, although that is outside the scope of this study.

**Disability Limitations in College Decisions**

Students’ intentions to enroll in college depend upon the presence, type, and severity of a disability. Fleming and Fairweather (2012) studied the college-choice decisions of students with disabilities. Using data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, Fleming and Fairweather (2012) found disabled students who considered college based on traditional predictors—such as parental education,
socioeconomic status, high school grades, and ethnicity—typically enrolled in four-year institutions. Students accounting for the functional limitations created by their disability, their independence, and their decision-making abilities more often attended two-year institutions. Rosenbaum (2018) also studied the impact of disability on students’ college-choice patterns. They found chronic, sensory, weight, and neurologic disorders negatively affected college enrollment (Rosenbaum, 2018). The presence of a disability in general may introduce some challenges, but a specific condition can create further barriers to the college-choice process.

In addition to the type of disability, students also consider how educational institutions support students’ disability needs. Wessel et al. (2015) conducted an ethnographic study of undergraduate students who use wheelchairs to review their college aspirations. Participants indicated they always knew they would attend college in order to achieve their vocational dreams or to pay for care providers and maintain independence. These students rated campus accessibility as one of the top reasons for enrolling in their chosen institution. Although they indicated other schools had better academic programs, the participants indicated accessibility of their chosen campuses held greater importance (Wessel et al., 2015). The research also included the perspectives of students’ parents, acknowledging that students with disabilities do not make college-choice decisions alone.

**Family Involvement in Disabled Students’ College Decisions**

Not only do disabled students seek input from their family on college-choice decisions, but the students also place great importance in family involvement. Murray et al. (2018) surveyed two cohorts of students with self-reported disabilities entering the
University of Arizona and how their experience differed from their non-disabled peers. The researchers found students with disabilities relied more on their parents’ and guardians’ knowledge of college than did non-disabled students.

Families’ concern for their students’ well-being is universal. According to Wessel et al. (2015), parents reported concern about their disabled students’ ability to live independently, develop a social life, and receive support at college. However, the parents participating in the study understood college to be the next progression in their students’ lives and strived to ensure their students received opportunities to participate and benefit from the higher education institutions. While the students using wheelchairs considered accessibility and availability of academic programs in their college-choice process, their parents made sure the students connected with the campus disability services and other support for wheelchair users (Wessel et al., 2015).

Families also want their disabled students to have the means of caring for themselves, including financing a college education. Cheatham and Elliott (2013) used the national Educational Longitudinal Survey of 2002 to assess how parents prepared for college costs of students who received special education services. According to the data, 60% of parents earned $50,000 or less, and 56% of students attended some form of higher education (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013). Students with disabilities attended college more often if their parents earned a four-year degree or earned more than $50,000 (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013).

Parents of disabled students care about the success of their students. Schiavone (1999) indicated disabled students were more likely to take the SAT or ACT and to go to college if their parents discussed these topics with them. The researcher suggested
disabled students need “to have the parents’ input as facilitator, problem-solver and source of information” (Schiavone, 1999, p. 42) in order to have the best opportunity to attend college. Murray et al. (2018) discovered students’ sources of information included their mothers or female guardians regardless of whether students had a disability. When considering parental support in funding college (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013) and in researching colleges’ ability to meet the disabled students’ needs (Wessel et al., 2015), family support seems to be a significant factor in the college-choice process.

Academics, disability limitations, and family support are necessary considerations for students with disabilities considering their college choices. The literature demonstrates a reciprocal approach whereby students engage in more pro-college behaviors due to family encouragement, which is impacted by parental educational and financial resources. Students with disabilities rely on their parents’ experiential and financial resources to make decisions about college. As students consider their futures, and how their identities as disabled and/or first-generation affects whether or where they enroll in college, they illustrate the complexity of college-choice processes. Research must explore the influence of multiple minoritized identities in research on the college student experience by uncovering the lived experiences of diverse students.

**Conceptual Framework**

To ground my study in a conceptual framework, I explored individual meaning-making of first-generation and disability identities and how they intersect with college choice and enrollment within existing literature. Research typically ignores the more complex experiences of people who inhabit multiple identities simultaneously. Critics pan research on individuals and groups that only explored single-dimension analyses of
people’s experiences (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Instead, the critics preferred research using an intersectional approach to “more accurately reflect the diversity in higher education” (Museus & Griffin, 2011, p. 9), giving voice to marginalized populations and uncovering perpetuated inequalities. Intersectional research may be perceived as “cumbersome” (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015, p. 333), but results of such research provide a detail-rich picture of FGSWDs’ lived experiences.

FGSWDs considering postsecondary education find themselves in a complex situation as they engage with the college-choice process. How the students respond to and internalize their identities (Forber-Pratt et al., 2018; Garrison & Liu, 2018; Johnstone, 2004; Martin et al., 2018; Svoboda, 2012) then integrate them as part of their whole identity (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al., 2007) affects the decisions they make during the college-search process. The college choices made by students typically fall into one of two models depending on whether students are concerned about the economic investment of college (Huntington-Klein, 2018; Skinner, 2019) or how their identities influence the process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006).

**Meaning-Making of First-Generation and Disability Identities**

Students’ develop meaning of their identity through an evolving context of internal reflection and external influences. In their research on meaning-making of identity, Abes and Jones (2004) suggested identity is developed through (a) contextual factors such as family, peers, norms, and policies; (b) whether the participants’ constructed their identity based on others’ expectations or personal feelings; and (c) what the participants understand that identity to mean. Abes et al. (2007) used the data from
the 2004 study to explore the effect of contextual factors on students’ identity development.

The researchers conceptualized meaning-making as a filter through which the contextual factors pass through. Factors, such as the culture, norms, and stereotypes of students’ family and peer group, affected meaning of identities salient to the students (Abes et al., 2007). As students’ perception of their identities developed and the meaning-making process became more complex, the degree to which contextual factors affected identity development changed. To understand the intersecting experiences, consideration must be given to how students make meaning of their identities.

Social Class and the First-Generation Identity

Although not all first-generation students are necessarily low-income or working class, low-income or working-class students tend to be first-generation (NCES, 2014). Therefore, it is important to note the connection between social class and the first-generation identity. Social class consists of “the values and beliefs an individual uses to understand their socioeconomic culture within a broader contextual environment” (Martin et al., 2018, p. 11). Social class is often contextualized within a system of inequality that gives preferential value to certain groups over others through institutional, cultural, and individual practices and beliefs (Garrison & Liu, 2018; Martin et al., 2018). Garrison and Liu (2018) suggested students’ assumptions about their own social class creates a view of the world. The researchers added this worldview is fed through “cultural messages and recognizing social class resources” (p. 24) which cement that view. Participants in Langenkamp and Shifrer’s (2018) study indicated they wanted fewer
hardships than their parents; they saw going to college involved a separation of students’ experiences from their families’ experiences.

In Heinz’s (2016) study on first-generation working-class students’ attitudes towards class transition, the majority of students expressed a desire to elevate their social class and maintain ties to their family. Although their beliefs regarding social mobility varied, the students understood the structural inequities of social class. Some indicated they would always identify as working class even if they earned college degrees while others aspired to change their social class. Regardless, all the participants understood that they would need to change habits including speech, clothing, and references in order to be accepted and advance in academic and social environments.

First-generation students’ understanding of the world and how they navigate seem to be modeled within Svoboda’s (2012) model of social class identity development, structured in three layers. The initial layer includes “the ways in which specific grounding or lifting behaviors push individuals towards poles” (p. 189), or deciding whether to remain in the original social class. The next layer involved the use of code-switching, or sliding between “the continuums of cultural integrity to cultural suicide” (Tierney, 1999, as cited by Svoboda, 2012, p. 189) based on the behaviors required of people to fit in with their original social class or their adopted social class. The final layer consisted of the advantageous and detrimental traits associated with the individuals’ original social class. Svoboda (2012) indicated these traits, both advantageous and detrimental, are continuously present.

_Disability Identity Development_
Forber-Pratt et al. (2017) described disability identity as “a unique phenomenon that shapes individuals’ ways of seeing themselves, their bodies, and interactions with the world” (pp. 203-204). Few models of disability describe identity development without exploring a particular type of disability. Three theoretical models inspiring research utility include Gibson’s (2006) stage model, Forber-Pratt and Zap’s (2017) psychosocial statuses, and Johnstone’s (2004) ecological model.

Gibson (2006) approached disability identity development from the lens of a therapeutic counseling practitioner. The researcher proposed a three-stage model where people with disabilities advance forwards and backwards in a fluid system. Within passive awareness, individuals with disabilities deny aspects of their disability while ensuring their medical needs are met. When they reach the realization stage, people with disabilities begin to perceive themselves as having a disability and struggle with the concept either by reacting in self-hate or anger, concern for how others see them, or by compensating by trying to do more than others. The third stage, acceptance, occurs typically in adulthood and involves people with disabilities incorporating their identity into their life and engaging with others with disabilities. Gibson (2006) acknowledged people in this model can revert to earlier stages when situational factors negatively impact them.

Forber-Pratt and Zape (2017) studied the identity comprehension and development of students with disabilities through a psychological healthcare lens. Collecting data through interviews and observations, the researchers found participants progressed and regressed through psychosocial statuses involving acceptance, relationships, identity adoption, and identity engagement. The researchers suggested
people with disabilities may resonate with each status at different points in their lives, particularly depending on how people’s disabilities impact them at specific times (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017).

Johnstone (2004) theorized disability identity as six separate categories. The first category, *externally ascribed, disempowering identities*, involved people with disabilities labelled negatively by society, who had few role models to help them navigate and overcome the stigma they feel. The second category, *overcompensating identities*, included people who fought social stigma by attempting to outperform people without disabilities. The third category, *identities that shift away from disability*, applied to people who created a community around commonalities with others with the same disability while shying away from the limitations of the group’s disability. The fourth category, *empowering identities*, involved people who see themselves inclusive of their disability and began to assert their autonomy as political beings. The fifth category, *complex identities*, applied to people who incorporated their disability status into their gender and racial identities and, ostensibly, other identities. The sixth and final category, *common identities*, included people who formed community around their disability identity; experienced the same oppressions, frustrations, and strategies to survive; and communicated with the larger culture in which the marginalized disabled culture exists. These identities categories, established through an interaction between individuals and their society, depend upon individuals’ interaction with their environment and operate separate from a unified model of identity development (Johnstone, 2004).

These three models of disability identity development gauge individuals’ self-acceptance from the perspective of therapeutic, healthcare, and academic lenses. Each
model envisions the state of acceptance differently, whether interpreting identity as a progressive set of stages, fluid states, or categories being gauging individuals’ reaction to their disability. How students with disabilities develop relies both on psychological processes and environmental factors and, as a result, no one model provides a comprehensive answer. Additionally, people with disabilities do not occupy just that one identity. As referenced by Johnstone (2004), people with disabilities engage with other identities and negotiate the fit of those identities as people make meaning of those intersections. A search for identity development models failed to find literature on first-generation identity development, but succeeded in uncovering information on disability identity development.

Intersectionality and First-Generation Students with Disabilities

Gopaldas (2013) defined intersectionality as the interaction between social identity structures and the creation of life experiences such as privilege and oppression (p. 90). Crenshaw (1991) disaggregated the concept into structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Through a review of Black women’s experience of oppression, Crenshaw (1991) explained how the three forms of intersectionality operated in tandem to disempower and silence Black women experiencing gendered racism and racialized sexism while simultaneously allowing Black men to demonstrate their experience of racism and White women to prove their experience of sexism.

Hulko (2009) discussed the complications of professionals engaging in social justice work, acknowledging their oppressions but ignoring their privileges. Hulko (2009) referred to the balance of privilege and oppression individuals experience due to their identities as social location and described it as a dynamic experience changing over time
with culture. Hulko (2009) called for acknowledging the fluidity of oppression and privilege as the value of social constructs shift in individuals’ salient identities.

Intersectionality explores the life experiences of people experiencing privilege and oppression because of their social identities. Privileges and oppressions experienced by individuals fluctuate depending on individuals’ salient identities and social locations, though the privileges are not readily noticed or admitted. Although my study does not focus on intersectionality as it pertains to systemic injustice, I discuss intersectionality as it informs my investigation into the experiences of students with intersecting first-generation and disability identities. Marfelt (2016) stated the purpose of intersectional research is to explore social phenomena and support policy and social change. Studying intersectional identities allows researchers to uncover unique phenomenon based on the identities studied and to advocate for changes to policies and practices. To begin a study on the intersecting experience of FGSWDs, research must also include a review of the established models of college choice.

**College-Choice Models**

College-choice models explore students’ methods to decide on a *choice-set*, or “a group of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 214). Each model of college choice demonstrates different factors students consider when narrowing their choices. Research on college-choice covered the economic model of human capital investment and the sociological model (Henrickson, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). The economic model prioritizes rational decision-making based on increasing students’ financial and human capital—wealth and skills—while the
social model considers how students make decisions based on their personal demographics. Perna’s (2006) proposed model combines the economic and sociological models. A review of the college-choice models aids in understanding which factors FGSWDs consider during their college-choice process.

**Economic Model of College Choice**

The economic model of college choice views college enrollment as investment opportunities in which individuals invest resources to acquire or develop capabilities (Huntington-Klein, 2018; Skinner, 2019). For example, Skinner (2019) studied student enrollment decisions during the mid-2000s to determine factors prevalent in students’ choice of colleges. Using data from the National(?) Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, which included students enrolled in higher education within two years of graduating high school, Skinner (2019) found the cost of tuition, distance from home, and the match between students’ academic abilities and the institutions’ academic rigor affected enrollment choices. The economic model holds value in reviewing student enrollment choices based on cost and experiential outcomes.

Research on finances and college choice demonstrate the effect of cost and financial aid on college choice. Hurwitz (2012) found financial assistance increased enrollment by 1.66% for each $1,000 offered in aid. Wood and Harrison (2014) found Black males chose to attend two- and four-year institutions that accepted credits from other institutions and provided more financial support, further underscoring the concern of college costs and benefits.

Jez (2014) discovered students’ wealth predicted whether students attended two-year, four-year, public, and private schools, if they attended any post-secondary
Students following the economic model also consider other risks and benefits as well. For example, Wood and Harrison (2014) determined Black males chose two- or four-year colleges based on the cost of attendance, whether the students could live at home, and if colleges accepted prior college credit. The researchers interpreted each of these factors as financial incentives.

Students may attend college to achieve their desired careers (Huffman et al., 2016), but filter through choices based on cost. Higher tuition and costs associated with living away from home can negatively impact enrollment decisions (Bradbury & Pitts, 2018; Skinner, 2019), and financial incentives and prior or transfer credit policies positively motivate students’ interest (Wood & Harrison, 2014). The economic model of college choice reduces college-choice decisions to cost-benefit analyses based on
students’ individualized means and interests rather than their racial, gender, or disability identities.

**Sociological Model of College Choice**

The sociological model explores the college-choice process through students’ social group memberships, as these shape students’ experiences during the college search. Based on work by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), this three-stage college-choice model details a process that considers how students’ racial, ability, and economic backgrounds influence the college-choice decision (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). The sociological model consists of three stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

In the *predisposition stage*, students decide whether to pursue postsecondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students make their decision based on their own academic abilities, the messaging of their high schools, the input from significant members of the students’ lives, and educational activities. Students’ academic performance, socioeconomic status, and guidance counseling make a difference in students’ degree of motivation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). In addition to family wealth, students consider family experience when deciding institutions to attend. In a study on the effect an academic advising model and living learning had on major and career exploration, Workman (2015) found undeclared students rated their parents as positive influences in choosing colleges, academic programs, and career goals. Participants reported their parents offered opinions on how far students should go to college and what costs students should consider. Continuing generation parents suggested students attend parents’ alma maters to capitalize on a legacy status (Workman, 2015).
In the search stage, students engage with higher education institutions to learn more about different institutions (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Colleges market information about financial aid, academic majors, and career opportunities to remain in students’ choice-sets. Students begin to evaluate their options in the choice stage (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students assess their choice-set to narrow their choices based on the cost of attendance or financial aid packages. Students form their final decisions based on communication with the remaining institutions, such as any messages received from instructors in students’ desired major programs (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The social model demonstrates how students’ social identities can influence the criteria by which students look for colleges. Should they decide to attend, students look for information about colleges in order to understand what they are looking for, then begin to narrow the selection pool based on college features. However, it seems unlikely that students would make choices about colleges based solely on either the economic or social models. Additionally, both models are based on continuing-generation, non-disabled students of middle class socioeconomic status as the norm.

**Combined Economic and Social Model of College Choice**

Both economic and social models demonstrate different methods students use in deciding whether and where to attend college. Perna (2006) developed a conceptual model combining the two models into one to assess multiple influences on students’ enrollment decisions. This model positions interactions across four layers: (a) students’ socioeconomic status, beliefs, and attitudes; (b) school and community impacts on students; (c) the selectivity, cost, student outreach, and other policy effects of higher
education institutions; and (d) broader effects of social and economic forces and public policies. Additionally, these layers contribute to students’ cost-analysis assessment of whether the benefits outweigh the costs of attending based on students’ existing resources.

Students’ individual characteristics, as conceptualized within the first layer, initialize the series of choices through the other layers (Perna, 2006). The researcher identified the second layer, school and community resources, as the first occasion that students’ efforts are supported or redirected. Perna (2006) specifically acknowledged the impact that students’ social class could have on their teachers’ advising or gatekeeping behaviors. In the third layer, the researcher identified higher education institutions as agents in students’ college choice. Colleges affect students’ choice through messaging, institutional characteristics, enrollment criteria, and enrollment capacity (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) suggested the demand for education by well-prepared students could create a decline in spaces available for those students. The fourth layer applies the social, economic, and policy actions of society, shaping the higher education industry (Perna, 2006) through such initiatives as state funding of colleges and federal policy regarding college savings plans for families. The complexity of the model requires students to weigh the costs and benefits of attending particular colleges, and determine whether they have the financial, family, and community support to prepare for and attend higher education.

I used Perna’s (2006) combined conceptual model to focus on two important factors of the college search and decision: input from parents (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Toutkoushian et al., 2018; Wessel et al., 2015) and financial opportunities
(Hurwitz, 2012; Jez, 2014; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). A combined model provides a more thorough explanation of how students generally undergo choosing colleges. Centering FGSDWs in this process requires research that considers students’ socioeconomic status and the nature of their impairment within an environmental context. Given that individual FGSDWs have unique and complex identities, their ways of navigating the college-choice process may reveal more than one path.

**Methodological Context: Phenomenology**

A qualitative research design is best to explore the college-choice decisions of first-generation students with disabilities due to the design’s focus on students’ experiences. This design employs the researcher as an instrument to uncover how studied populations approach, understand, and create meaning from their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Its interpretive nature presupposes that knowledge is socially constructed from individuals with complex lives experiencing similar events from different perspectives.

Phenomenology as a philosophy is an essential component of qualitative research, consisting of how people describe their various lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Moustakas (1994) explained people objectify the world around them, creating subjective reality for and finding meaning from the experiences. As a research methodology, phenomenology is concerned with explaining the common experiences of a group of people (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Researchers dig into participants’ experiences to answer questions about specific phenomena, comparing the essences of the experience in order to find common themes to describe participants’ experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
A vital component of phenomenology involves researchers as instruments and engaging with participants through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Høffding & Martiny, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Høffding and Martiny (2016) described the interview as a reciprocal relationship between interviewer and interviewee by which interviewers are “empathetically present with the interviewee and at the same time…generate descriptions that are as detailed and clear as possible” (p. 561). Engaging in the interview allows interviewers to ask open questions that guide participants’ introspection to descriptions of experiences the participants have not yet consciously reflected upon. This allows researchers to gather more description of participants’ experiences.

Researchers must be objective, ignoring their presuppositions and judgments to avoid interpretations of the data that are untrue to participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) frames this approach as a way to investigate participants’ experiences “freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure…ego” (p. 33). Researchers must bracket, or set aside, their own experiences of the phenomenon to experience it through the senses of the individual participants. Researchers create transcripts of their interviews with participants to explore participants’ perspectives for descriptions of what actually happened and how participants responded to that experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology centers the experiences of participants as they reflect upon a particular occurrence in each of their lives. Researchers interview the participants to understand the actual as participants experienced it and the meaning it had for participants. As I sought to discover participants’ experiences rather than test or create
theories, I considered phenomenology as the appropriate methodological approach for this study.

Chapter Summary

This literature review covered the standard college-choice models and explored individual college-search experiences for first-generation students and students with disabilities. No literature exists on the college-choice process for students identifying as both first-generation and disabled. Studying students’ decision-making process gives voice to their first-generation and disabled experiences. First-generation status can be expressed in one way through socioeconomic status, particularly as students navigate their educational opportunity and relationship with their family. Researchers have described disability identity development, on the other hand, as a series of stages, statuses, or states of being reflecting individuals’ self-acceptance within their environment.

I intend to study the college-choice decision-making of first-generation students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions. This study will explore what factors influenced students’ search process and how students’ individual identities contributed to their choices, giving voice to participants’ whose individual journeys may or may not be reflected in traditional economic or sociological models of college choice. Focus on participants’ experiences as both first-generation and disabled during the college-choice process provides a foundation for future research on the higher education enrollment of first-generation students with disabilities.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the college-choice process of first-generation students with disabilities who enrolled in higher education institutions. This chapter explains the research design and research sample in addition to data collection and analysis. The chapter also identifies limitations and delimitations of the study, and concludes with ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and positionality.

The methodology for this study was chosen to answer the two research questions: (a) what factors do first generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) consider when developing and narrowing their college choice list and (b) how do first generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) feel their identity as first-generation or as disabled contributed to their decisions regarding college?

Methodological Approach

I selected a qualitative research approach using phenomenological methods to conduct this study. A qualitative approach allows for the collection of descriptive data regarding how people interpret the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016), particularly when exploring particular issues involved in college-choice decision-making. A quantitative study would only serve to support or refute hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). Since this study sought what factors were important in choosing a college, I determined a qualitative approach was best.
I chose a phenomenological qualitative method to examine participants’ common experiences in the college-choice process and to create a composite description of their uniquely lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The basis of this philosophy lies in the socially-constructed nature of the experience and the meaning-making in which individuals engage (Creswell, 2014). How students explore, research, and assess their college options is based on the information made available to them by people who have a vested interest in the outcome. As a result, the college-choice process is a unique experience for all and culminates in the “attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 167).

Qualitative researchers must avoid inserting their expectations while investigating the meaning-making experience and while uncovering themes. This is done through bracketing, or suspending researchers’ assumptions or opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This allows the researcher to focus the investigation on the research question(s) and participants’ experiences. Once completed, interview transcripts and recordings were coded for themes.

This research relies on the unique experiences of individuals engaged in college decision-making. As a result, the research design must rely on social constructions of knowledge in order to find meaning in a shared but individualized experience. Phenomenological qualitative research design allows for this construction and may help identify essential aspects of FGSWDs’ college-choice process. In the following section, I discuss how the conceptual framework influences one’s understanding of the college-choice process.
Role of Conceptual Framework

To understand the considerations made by first-generation and disabled students during their college-choice process, I used Perna’s (2006) combined economic and social model of college choice as a guide for questions during the semi-structured interviews. This model coupled students’ outcome-based concerns of college with their ability to understand and engage in the enrollment processes. College-choice decision-making within this multi-layered model begins with individual students’ personal characteristics, then becomes influenced by the impact of the individuals’ school and community (Perna, 2006). The next layer explores how well a community’s education system adds value to students of various backgrounds, which then determines how students choose whether and where to attend college. A third layer consisting of colleges’ selectivity, cost, and outreach (Perna, 2006) gives students additional considerations. Students in this layer conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine if the financial risks of attendance are worth the potential benefits of achieving an academic credential. Finally, a fourth layer of social and economic forces and public policies (Perna, 2006), such as financial aid programs and similar state or federal support programs, further shapes college choice. The use of this model will aid one outcome of this study in determining how participants decided their college choices.

Perna’s (2006) combined economic and social model is also useful for identifying the college-choice impacts for particular identities, such as first-generation and disability. First-generation students construct their view of the world based on the cultural messaging and resources available to them as a result of their social class (Garrison & Liu, 2018). Undoubtedly, these characteristics would reflect the decision-making students
made in the first two layers of the college-choice model. Similarly, students with disabilities navigate college-choice processes with consideration given to their perceived limitations and desired career prospects. This study contributes to research literature about college choice by extending Perna’s (2006) combined college choice model with a focus on FGSWDs.

**Research Sample**

I used purposeful criterion sampling coupled with expert nomination to identify first-generation students with disabilities who enrolled as first-year college students at any point in the past. Purposeful, criterion sampling allows researchers to gain the most insight by selecting and filtering a participant pool (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This provides a pool of individuals who can provide rich, detailed information about a topic. Sampling criteria for this study evolved over time due to the initial specificity in participant criterion. Additionally, due to the nature of the sampling changes and the length of time that had past, I submitted two revisions to my expedited review Institutional Review Board application.

Initial criteria for sampling included current students with disabilities who had begun college within the past year and whose parents or guardians never attended college. Calls for participants were sent with permission to a regional professional association of disability services providers (see Appendix A), with a request that members forward the call to their student clients. The call was sent in November 2019, just before a major U.S. holiday, and again before the end of the academic term. Although three institutions indicated they forwarded the call, only one qualified participant responded to the initial inquiry. It is assumed that the timing of the call, being
so close to breaks in the academic calendar, negatively impacted the response rate of participants. Eventually, I ended this strategy due to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused institutions to work remotely and create additional stressors on students engaged in remote learning. Another call for participants went out in Summer 2020 and included regional TRIO Student Support Services offices whose clients included students with disabilities. I received no responses to this request. A colleague who works in TRIO notified me the criteria was too restrictive to include any of their students.

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I revised the participant criteria to include individuals who had been first-year students within the past ten years and whose parents or guardians had never completed a bachelor’s degree. I also changed outreach strategies by sending the call through social media. I created a series of images with information about the study and uploaded the images to a photo album on Facebook. The photo album was be pinned on my social media wall; visible on connected users’ news feed; and shared to special interest groups involving higher education, disability, and graduate program cohorts with whom I am personally connected. It was also shared on Instagram and Twitter.

I requested interested candidates review an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). The form notified potential participants of their rights as well as what they could expect to happen during the course of the study. Participants were also notified they would receive incentive for their participation in the study. The funding for the incentive was a research grant awarded by the Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education academic department at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The informed consent form was also discussed in initial interviews.
Data Collection

Philosophically, phenomenology examines the subjective experiences of people and what meaning is made from their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As research methodology, phenomenology compares the meaning participants’ make of their experiences in order to find commonalities (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). This method relies on researchers as instruments to engage with participants through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Høffding & Martiny, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Through the interaction, participants’ perceptions of an experience are unveiled, and researchers compare those perceptions to find and describe commonalities, using participants’ words verbatim to demonstrate those commonalities.

Data was initially collected through a questionnaire (see Appendix C) attached to the informed consent form. The questionnaire asked participants to identify their race or ethnic identity, their gender, and their family income levels. I included these questions in order to create an intentionally diverse sample of participants in case the sample was overly represented by a particular identity. The questionnaire also asked how far away students’ chosen colleges were from their hometowns or family homes. I intended to use this question to further diversify the participant pool. Because of the small response by interested participants, I did not reduce the participant pool. A sample size of six participants falls within Creswell and Poth’s (2018) suggested range for a phenomenological study.

After collecting information through the questionnaire, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant. See Appendices D and E for the questions that guided each interview. The questions were based on Perna’s (2006) combined
economic and social model of college choice. Important information in interviews included how students perceived their disability and first-generation identities, the influence of their family and secondary school on college decision-making, preconceptions about college, and the experience of researching and applying for college. Centering the questions on these topics allowed participants to share stories of their college search process and reflect on the influence of their communities through the lens of their perceived self-identities.

Each participant was interviewed twice in order to collect rich data saturated with description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Høffding & Martiny, 2016) until the information collected results in redundancy of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One participant was only interviewed once due to scheduling conflicts, but the data from the initial interview was rich in description. Interviews were conducted over Zoom web conferencing software due to its accessibility features for those with impaired hearing and vision and to help produce transcripts for data analysis. Hammersly (2012) noted opposing views on whether the researcher who completed the interview should transcribe it. I used Zoom’s built-in transcription feature to produce transcripts so that the integrity of participants’ words could be analyzed. I then compared each transcript to its audio pair to ensure accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

Each of the 11 interviews were recorded with participants’ permission. I used Zoom’s automatic transcription to generate transcripts, then evaluated and edited each transcription for accuracy. Each participant was provided a copy of their interview transcription so they could check the accuracy. I then reviewed the transcripts to note
significant statements, such as quotes that describe participants’ experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Textual and structural analysis require researchers to find patterns of significance (Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). A textual analysis examines the specific words and phrases within each interview while a structural analysis explores broader discussion between interviews. To code consistently, I themed the data by using phrases that explain the purpose of meaning of a piece of data (Saldaña, 2016). This allowed me to find patterns in the sentences and significant phrases. Through additional analysis, I was able to engage in a second round of theming the data and help connect strongly affiliated identity concepts to particular experiences.

**Ethical Considerations**

Confidentiality and researcher positionality were paramount ethical considerations within this study. Participants were assigned a pseudonym from a list of the most popular names in the United States in 2021 as reported by the Social Security Administration. Additionally, references to names or locations of participants’ colleges were also kept anonymous. Zoom’s automatic transcriptions were used to provide an additional layer of anonymity by avoiding the use of third party transcription. All questionnaires, recordings, and transcriptions were stored on an external hard drive, locked in a file cabinet when not in use. Additionally, questionnaire responses were kept electronically in a password-protected Google Drive and Zoom recordings and transcriptions were kept in the password-protected Zoom Cloud account until the conclusion of this study.
A vital component of phenomenology involves researchers as instruments and engaging with participants through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Høffding & Martiny, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). As a result, researchers can influence the analysis due to their own experiences. Moustakas (1994) called for researchers to bracket their experiences, setting aside their own expectations in order to experience the participants’ perspectives of the phenomenon as though the researchers were experiencing the phenomenon for the first time. Although my history as a first-generation student with a disability drove my interest in this study, I occupied an identity as a college graduate, disability services office professional, and doctoral student when developing the interview questions and questionnaire. I attempted to remove any assumptions from questions, so participants could report on experiences as they made meaning of them. It was also important that questions were phrased with neutral value to avoid implications that participants’ experiences were lacking or that I was making any judgments about participants’ lives.

As discussed in my positionality in Chapter I, I identify as a first-generation person with a disability and needed to bracket my expectations and anticipations of what participants would contribute. I did not identify myself as a FGSWD during calls for participants; however, I identified myself to participants as a person with a physical disability impacting my mobility and fine motor skills. I emphasized to participants that despite having my own experiences I wanted to hear about theirs. My phrasing of the questions allowed participants to feel more open to share their experiences learning about higher education and to share how their first-generation and disability identities.
Researchers must also guarantee the accuracy and validity of their studies in order to have an impact on practice within a field. To ensure accuracy, Creswell (2014) recommended rich, thick description; member checks; and clarifying researcher bias as approaches to ensuring accuracy. Rich, thick descriptions were achieved by interviewing each participant twice and seeking clarification when participants’ statements were unclear. The descriptions provide readers with enough information to understand the researcher’s perspective in the study’s themes (Creswell, 2014). Member checking was conducted by reviewing transcripts for the comments that participants made and then providing them with my interpretation of their thoughts and experiences. Participants clarified by providing additional information or their own interpretation, which ensured their thoughts and experiences were accurately reflected. Finally, by clarifying the researcher’s bias, the researcher demonstrates their positionality during interpretation of the findings. I provided an overview of my experiences as a FGSWD in my positionality statement in Chapter I. To listen to participants’ stories and learn about their experiences, I suspended my preconceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groenewald, 2004) of what their experiences contained. This allowed me to reflect on what I learned about the participants and helped me find commonalities in their experiences.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study explored the college-choice experiences of first-generation students with disabilities and how their first-generation and disability identities affected their decision-making. The study focused solely on people with disabilities who were enrolled as first-year students in an institution of higher education within the last decade and
whose parents, guardians, or other primary care providers never completed a bachelor’s degree.

However, there were several limitations to this study. First, participants were required to have access to web conferencing technology in order to be eligible. The computer or phone technology available and the degree of service given by their internet service provider could prevent many otherwise-qualified participants from participating. Second, the incentive offered could have impacted the participant pool. Williams and Walter (2015) noted that financial incentives impacted participation by skewing the socioeconomic diversity of participants. I felt it was appropriate to offer participants electronic gift cards as gratitude for their time and insight; however, some participants indicated they looked forward to receiving the incentive in order to pay for textbooks or gas. I review additional limitations in Chapter V.

Chapter Summary

In a phenomenological study, researchers explore participants’ perspectives of a shared experience and the personal meanings derived from that experience (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). This study explored how first-generation students with disabilities made their college-choice decisions and how their identities impacted those decisions. Providing participants of the study with the opportunity to discuss their experiences allowed for the exploration into how first-generation students with disabilities make their college-choice decisions.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to understand what considerations first-generation students with disabilities make when exploring their college options. Additionally, I wanted to understand how these students’ first-generation and disability identities contribute to their college decisions. Using a qualitative research approach and phenomenological analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants who had been first-year students within the past ten years and who completed an initial survey regarding their demographic information and their chosen higher education institution. The participants were asked open-ended questions about their pre-college lives, their preconceptions about college, their experience exploring and applying to colleges, what support they had in their search and application process, how being disabled affected their search, and how their parents’ or guardians’ lack of college experience affected the college search. See Appendices D and E for the interview protocol.

Table 1 provides demographic information about the participants in the study. The participants represented different ethnicities, disabilities, family income, and length of time since high school graduation (or equivalent completion programs). Most of the participants identified as women and attended college more than 50 miles away from their family homes. Participants rated their family income as either low income or middle income; none selected the upper income category.
Table 1

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Self-Described Family Income</th>
<th>Year College Search Began</th>
<th>High School or Equivalent Completion Year</th>
<th>Distance from Chosen College to Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Middle Income ($52,200-$156,600)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>25-50 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Physical disability</td>
<td>Middle Income ($52,200-$156,600)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>50+ miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Chronic disability, Mental health, Physical disability</td>
<td>Low Income (&lt;$52,200)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>50+ miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Low vision/blindness</td>
<td>Middle Income ($52,200-$156,600)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>50+ miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native American, Caucasian</td>
<td>Specific learning disability</td>
<td>Low Income (&lt;$52,200)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>50+ miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American, Caucasian</td>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Low Income (&lt;$52,200)</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>50+ miles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I processed the transcripts by theming the data, pulling forward key phrases from participants’ experiences. I grouped codes with similarities, allowing themes to emerge.

**Emerging Themes**

Several themes emerged through the coding of participant interviews. The first research question of this study addressed what considerations first-generation students with disabilities make when determining what institution to attend. The interview questions used for this research question were intended to identify the factors considered by participants during their search. The following themes emerged as factors in their
college choice: (a) anticipating college, (b) seeking independence, and (c) considering disability and finances.

The second research question addressed how participants considered their disability and first-generation identities to have contributed to their college decisions. Interview questions focused on disability, first-generation status, and family in order to reveal participants’ perceptions. Three themes emerged as influences of identity on college decision-making: (a) reflecting on worthiness, (b) preserving pride and asking for help, (c) and considering the community.

Factors in College Choice

Participants spoke about college as an anticipated opportunity to explore their interests and grow as individuals. They discussed exploring opportunities available in college all the while learning how to be independent. Participants also discussed their disability and financial concerns they and their families had about attending college.

Three themes developed for research question one: (a) anticipating college, (b) seeking independence, and (c) considering disability and finances.

Anticipating College

Most participants reported that going to college was expected or was at least one of the few options available to them. As Ava described,

College just seemed like kind of the next step. After high school, I didn't really know what I was going to go in for or study or what would come out of it, but I just knew that that's what I was going to.

Most participants indicated that their family expected them to go to college. Emma, Liam, Charlotte, and Olivia shared that their parents wished a better life for their
children than what they had. According to Emma, she and her siblings “were expected to go to college, just to be better than our parents. They wanted a better life for us. My parents really wanted us to have more than they could provide for us.” Liam shared that his parents pushed him to explore particular majors and institutions due to his parents’ projection of their own interests, but—like Charlotte’s parents—they were ultimately supportive of any type of higher education institution. Emma stated that her parents pushed for her to learn about college because careers like theirs were no longer attainable without a baccalaureate degree.

Most participants indicated their high schools offered various levels of support preparing for college. This included engaging with high school counselors, taking advanced placement courses, participating in dual enrollment programs, or belonging to learning communities. Olivia, Ava, Charlotte, and Sophia indicated they had completed either advanced placement courses or dual enrollment. Additionally, Liam shared his high school’s celebratory tradition involving senior students wearing college gear, and discussed how it led to discussions amongst students regarding why they chose the colleges they did.

Finally, the participants also discussed the types of higher education institutions they anticipated attending. All but one participant in this study attended universities. Olivia indicated she chose to explore universities because she had taken classes at the local community college through a dual enrollment program and believed continuing to attend a community college would be like continuing in high school. Olivia and Charlotte both discussed concern about credits from their local community colleges being accepted at universities. Emma indicated that she wanted to make sure she had many options for
academic programs in case she no longer felt interested in her initial program. She expected universities to have more variety of programs than community colleges.

**Seeking Independence**

Participants in this study spoke of college with a great deal of excitement. Participants in this study tended to find value in selecting colleges that were located further away. Olivia saw the opportunity to go to college as “the time to flee the nest” and considered colleges nearly 1,700 miles away, but reconsidered the effect her family had on her life and chose a college 100 miles away. Sophia, however, decided to cut ties with her family so she could focus exclusively on her academics 1,200 miles away from home.

Emma shared that her brother returned to college at the same time that she was starting college. Emma felt like her family would have made her responsible for her brother’s well-being and success if she attended the local university with him. Liam shared that staying near home would have stunted his own self-discovery:

A lot of what I was going through, it wasn't anything that I felt like I could talk to anyone about. A lot of it was internalized which I think also played a heavy part in my mental health, just internalizing like almost everything that is causing you concern about yourself was definitely rough. So, I think that is what really led to me wanting to leave to explore myself without the judgement or without having to explain anything to anyone…I knew that staying around, I wouldn’t have been able to do that, whether I stayed at home, whether I stayed nearby.

Charlotte similarly wished to get away from her hometown to explore her own independence. She shared that leaving home would allow her to “think for myself, because [my parents] are telling me how to think and what to believe and what to feel
about everything.” Charlotte did not feel the need for extremes as Emma and Liam did and felt comfortable looking at colleges that were within 100 miles so that her parents were close if she needed them.

**Considering Disability and Finances**

Although they shared a lot that excited them, participants in this study also shared their concerns that arose as they explored college. Most participants indicated concerns about the limitations in the college experience they would have because of their disability. Additionally, all participants expressed concern about what kind of college experience they could afford.

**Disability-Related Concerns.** Three participants’ disabilities had a significant impact on the types of institutions explored. Olivia was concerned about her physical mobility limiting her ability to navigate colleges with widespread campuses and no transportation. She felt that it was important to her to “stay at one place and not have to learn a new place” and how to navigate it with her mobility limitations. As a result, she chose to consider only universities so that she could start and finish at one institution.

Olivia’s main concern was whether she could navigate from class to class without exhausting herself. She had considered her local university because her parents could drop her off at the buildings in which she would have class. However, the institution was not desirable because Olivia had participated in the dual enrollment program there and it did not offer her the academic programs she sought. Olivia toured campuses, some of which offered accommodations and some that did not. She shared her reflections on a flagship university of her home state’s college system:
I actually really wanted to go to [the state university flagship institution], but when I went to go visit before I applied, I was like, ‘This is a big school, I don't think I can walk around the entire thing,’ because campus tours, you know, you go inside each building, walk around, or …you go do the whole campus, and it's a bigger campus. I can't physically walk around the whole campus. So how can we design a tour that I can use? They were not helpful; they were just like, ‘Well, we don't really do that,’ and I'm like, ‘Then I’m not going there.’

On a tour of a private, urban university, Olivia shared, “I couldn't see myself walking that campus all the time, especially when it got cold and snowy out and…I don't know if I could, like, physically do that. It's a more spread-out campus.” She also shared concerns about using the bathing facilities in residence halls, and what accessibility features colleges had in place. Ultimately, Olivia chose her institution because of the university’s accessibility response. She shared that the university drove her to each building due to the distance, but she ultimately felt that she could walk the campus as well. Although all the institutions Olivia toured included a visit to the disability services office, the tour at her chosen institution had a different experience:

It felt kind of like “if you have a disability, we will accommodate you” kind of thing, almost like that compliance aspect—which [my chosen institution] definitely had, but I felt like they were more welcoming about it, being, like, “Oh, you know, we have so much to offer you and…you have so much to offer us and here's how we can support you.”

Olivia felt that her chosen institution not only honored its accessibility obligations under federal law, but that the institution also valued Olivia’s presence and contributions.
Emma had similar concerns about the accessibility of campus while dealing with a chronic medical and physical disabilities and a mental health disability. Due to how her chronic disability affected her physically, she sought out universities near medical facilities:

I knew I needed to be close to hospitals, to a large infrastructure of medical staff, not just, you know, oh, there's a county hospital down the road. …If I needed a cast, I could get there quickly. If something happened where I needed, you know, surgery, I could get it [medical attention] in close proximity to where I was living.

The institution that she chose was part of an academic medical center that provided convenient and free or affordable care to students. Emma appreciated the convenience and affordability and compared it to the medical offerings in her home region:

If I broke a finger in my sleep, I would go to the sports medicine doctor and be like, ‘Hey, Dr. Morgan, can I get an x-ray? I think my finger’s broken,’ and she’d be like, ‘It is.’ It was $12 to get an x-ray. So, like, it was very convenient, the medical support that was in the area… I had to drive 45 minutes away when I lived [in my home area] to get anywhere.

Additionally, due to the chronic nature of her disability, Emma wanted to be sure other opportunities were available. She used a wheelchair for a period of time and wanted to make sure the surrounding community was accessible:

I needed a place that, like, if I wanted to go to Walmart. I could either take the trolley, take a bus, or just walk to Walmart. Like, my dorm was within walking distance to Walmart when I was ambulatory. With my wheelchair, big difference,
but when I was ambulatory, it was in walking distance to Walmart, and if it was raining, I could take a trolley. Like, I would look up the bus routes.

Without accessible transportation when her disability was active, Emma assumed she would be stuck. She also felt concerned about the residence hall experience while navigating a mental health disability. She recalled looking into whether students had roommates and the style of bathrooms available:

I did not want community-style bathrooms because I have a lot of anxiety and I was like, “Showering with other people, no thank you!” So, I was looking for schools that, like, they might have community-style bathrooms, but predominantly don't.

Emma shared that when she chose the institution that she would attend and had requested student housing, she was assigned to a residence hall with a community-style bathroom. She researched ways to get a new living option and found that she could be assigned to a new building with private bathrooms.

Charlotte was concerned about support for her disability. She said her high school recommended she not pursue higher education due to her disability. Charlotte shared that she “was nervous because of, like, having a hard time with, like, reading comprehension. Like, it takes a while to read things. And then I was, like, afraid that I'll just like fall behind if I didn't have time.” She also sought institutions with smaller class sizes because “like noise and stuff, like, I got sidetracked real easily.” When Charlotte and her family toured schools, they made sure to visit the disability services office to ask if the institutions could provide program adjustments similar to the 504 plan she received in high school. Charlotte noted a distinction:
The public ones are like a lot more willing to do, like, the 504, like, match it or…give extra. …At least in [my home state] but then, like, the private ones, they weren't as willing to provide accommodations for different things.

Charlotte also wanted to know that the campus community was supportive of students with disabilities. When she asked about disability support during her tours, she noted a change in behavior at some institutions:

Some of the people were, like, really nice, but then after you ask them about their disability stuff, they just turned, like, opposite, and, like, they weren’t really, I guess, like willing to help with anything. Like, they just like changed and weren't really friendly or anything.

Charlotte wanted support for her disability so she had an opportunity to be successful. Like the aforementioned participants, she also wanted to feel that she belonged despite her disability, that she was welcomed as a student with learning challenges. However, one other concern was apparent for the participants as well: how would they afford college?

**Financial Concerns.** The cost of attending college was a significant factor in determining where participants might attend. Although Sophia was encouraged to go to college by her high school, her family also relied on her to contribute financially. She had no question as to how she would contribute:

I was really resourceful; I was looking for ways to get out of the situation. And so, I would be involved in programs that were state-sponsored for people on welfare. And then I also sought out ways to get help at high school. But I also would look, you know, for jobs in the community and so I would do office work and be a file
clerk, work fast food, you know, whatever I could do to help my family out and help me out.

In order to support for her family’s income and go to college, Sophia looked at colleges close to home. Her family could afford only one vehicle, so Sophia needed a college that was close to her jobs and home along a bus route. Additionally, Sophia knew that she couldn’t spend any of her family’s income and looked for colleges that would be free:

They had a Board of Governors grant in [my home state], so that covered all of the tuition and fees. So, if you were low income and you wanted to go to the community college, and you qualify for financial aid, the state would come in and pay all of your tuition and fees, everything.

Sophia needed a community college that was along a bus route. She also thought it should be close to her jobs and home to reduce her time commuting. That narrowed her options to one local community college.

Ava had similar concerns. Although she insinuated that her family did not regularly worry about money, Ava said college would have been a heavy financial burden. Like Sophia, Ava participated in a government program that provided financial assistance. Ava was a client of her state’s department of vocational rehabilitation (DVR) for the blind. The program paid all academic costs such as tuition, fees, and textbooks up to the greatest cost of attendance in her home state. Ava’s chosen out-of-state college was cheaper than most institutions in her home state, which meant that she saved money on tuition. However, DVR did not pay for residence life costs. “I remember, kind of, comments like, ‘Well, I'm not sure how we'll do this if the price goes up this semester,’”
Ava said. “I figured that if it was going to be too expensive, I could take out student loans or something along those lines.”

Emma’s concerns about cost started earlier in the process. She described herself as poor most of her life and went about the college-exploration process as “wanting the most bang for my buck.” During her interview, Emma indicated her family did not have money to visit and tour colleges, so she relied on web browsing to find information on tuition, fees, residence life, and available scholarships. If information on cost was too hard to find online, she would remove the college from consideration. She also leveraged existing supports to apply for and pay for college. Emma indicated that she only applied to four schools, “because that’s what I could afford” and because she could send her ACT placement scores to four schools for free. Although she did consider a private college, the tuition was too high even after scholarships were applied, and she did not see it as a rational choice. Ultimately, she stayed in state due to government support for students who achieved high ACT scores.

Liam shared his financial struggle in choice of college. He shared that he was an average student until late in his high school career, which hurt his eligibility for academic scholarships. Liam understood the dilemma of how finances would impact his college experience:

I knew that it was kind of late for me to apply for scholarships. I knew what my financial aid packages were, and I realized that based off my financial aid packages I would basically be living on campus but I wouldn't be able to get around anywhere because I didn't have a car at the time. Obviously, I could buy one if my parents were supportive of me leaving [home].
He indicated his parents wanted him closer to home and would help him financially if he did so. Liam struggled with the desire to be independent and the desire for financial support:

Do I go to a school, struggle a little bit financially, not be able to get around and do as much, or... is it just simpler or easier just to stay at home, have the support, and still go to college? That's ultimately when it came down to.

Liam mentioned that, looking back, he might have made other college choices:

I don't think it was until I realized that my parents weren't going to be supportive that I probably really should have considered financial aid just a tad bit more, and maybe looked into, like, private scholarships and things that I could do to also, like, support myself. ...I probably would have been more open to applying to private schools. Just because I know that they are a little bit more generous with their scholarship offerings and, especially being, like, an African American male and seeing how, like, a lot of schools do have scholarships that do try and bring in, like, that diversity piece to their campus.

Liam’s concern about cost of college revolved around his desire for a quality experience and independence rather than access.

Olivia said she had a small college fund that would have covered no more than a year, so she and her parents worked together to learn what college was going to cost. They worked together to determine what the costs of attendance for various institutions would be:

We didn't know what, like, student fees were. Like, student fees? What's that? We knew housing was going to be a big cost because housing is the housing and the
meal plan. But then going into student fees and there was like athletic fees. And then, you know, then the textbooks, which they put…in that [cost of attendance] calculator of how much it's going to take.

Olivia similarly recalled sitting at their family computer for hours to figure out what financial aid was and how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. She explained that her parents considered it “part of their job as my parents” to pay for her college. Although her parents anticipated taking out and paying back loans for her education, Olivia indicated that she still had responsibilities to help lower their financial contributions. She shared that her mother explored and organized scholarship applications that Olivia would complete. Olivia also felt obligated to consider how connected she felt to institutions she was considering. When she saw the cost of attendance for institutions, her began prioritizing her choices:

By the time I was actually going to apply, it was, like, all this is real. I actually have to write a check, you know, for that amount, and I'm like, ‘I can’t do that, I don't make any money. I can’t, like, I’m not going to be so much in debt.’ So, I'm like, ‘No, I can't justify that for a place that I wasn't like absolutely in love with.’

This consideration of value ultimately led Olivia to excluding most colleges due to out-of-state tuition costs and private colleges who did not offer enough scholarships. Although she did choose to go out of state, Olivia indicated that the college’s cheaper tuition helped to make her decision easier.

The impact of their disabilities and the cost of attending college were significant factors that limited participants choices. However, the thrill of attending college and exploring their independence prevented the aforementioned limitations from diminishing
participants’ excitement. These participants chose to attend college not in spite of being first-generation or disabled but rather because they knew the importance attendance and earning a degree would have. In the next section, I discuss how participants considered their first-generation and disabled identities as they conducted their search.

Influences of Identity on College Decision-Making

The second research question sought to understand how disability and first-generation identities influenced participants college decisions. Participants were asked how they experienced disability, what it meant to be the first in their family to attend or graduate from college, and how their family factored into decisions. Three themes emerged as a result: (a) reflecting on worthiness, (b) preserving pride and receiving help, and (c) considering the community.

Reflecting on Worthiness

The participants all reported feeling that their self-worth was connected to attending college. Emma, Ava, and Liam shared that their identities as first-generation students or disabled students affected the type or selectivity of institutions they explored. Emma shared that she applied to a nationally-prestigious private university in her home state “for shits and giggles” despite the cost and high selectivity. She saw it as an achievement:

It was ‘go big or go home,’ I guess. ‘You're going to do this thing, and you might as well see if this level of elitism cares about you as well. Like, yes, you're going to get a degree, but your first gen and a woman and from our county.’

She also wanted to know if she was good enough for the institution:
I really didn't intend to go there. Okay, I wanted to know if I could get them. I had no intention of going to [that university] because it was so expensive. I wanted to know if I could get in, like, did I have the chops to do it, and then, if yes, I still wasn't going to go.

Ava shared a similar drive. As a person with a vision impairment, she felt that others often had to take responsibility for her. Ava knew she wanted to work and contribute, so going to college meant adding value and developing her identity beyond being just a person with a disability. She sought an institution that would give her the authority to pursue her own career:

I don't know if I was trying to prove to myself or my family or the world that I could do it, or that someone with a visual impairment could do it. I don't know if just I wanted to shoot for the stars, I guess, and that felt like a four-year university would get me there.

Liam was concerned that his mental health in early high school affected his academics and prevented him from being accepted to the more prestigious land grant universities. He indicated that he experienced imposter syndrome in high school, and as a result, “I had to work two times harder to be just as good as everyone else.” He did not want to risk rejection. Since he could only afford to send a limited number of applications, he preferred to look at the colleges in the state system with higher acceptance rates. To appease his parents who wanted him closer to home, he sent an application to one local land-grant university:

Is there a high likelihood that I’m going to get into the school? What does their acceptance rate look like? …Out of all the schools that I applied to, [the closest
land-grant institution] would probably be the most likely to, like, deny me, so a part of me was doing it in hopes that I got denied.

For the participants, attending college was a symbol of status in itself. Pursuit of a type of institution only added to participants feelings of their worthiness and meant a degree of status that allowed them to feel secure in their belonging. However, it also mattered how they got their acceptance and whether they received assistance along the way.

*Preserving Pride and Receiving Help*

Emma shared that she was “insecure” regarding how to evaluate colleges. She said she was raised to “suck it up and get over it” and find solutions for herself because “it’s the real world where no helps you ever…nobody ever helps.” In her experience, “When you are from a lower socioeconomic status, when you're from a family who got married young, had kids young, didn't have a lot of support in the community to even exist,” it was solely her responsibility to find her own solutions. Emma worked independently to learn how to apply to colleges. She avoided asking for help so that she could preserve her self-worth and avoid allowing others “to think that I am less than” continuing-generation students:

I knew that I was going to be at this like level that I just needed to figure out how to even the playing field…I got to do this myself. I wanted to make sure that I didn't feel like I was already less than others, [and] knowing that I was bringing in all of these conditions, like, knowing I was bringing in mental health concerns.
Olivia described her disability identity less salient when she was young because it was only an issue when she was at the hospital. She indicated her family and teachers automatically made adjustments for her:

I don't think I really got a disability identity until I was in maybe late high school, honestly, because it was just kind of who I was. I don't ever remember being told that I had CP [cerebral palsy], I just kind of always knew that I have that which meant like, oh, I'm just going to have a lot of surgeries and have to go to the hospital a lot and have like special doctors and things like that.

Olivia indicated that she never had to discuss her disability with anyone. This allowed her to maintain a social boundary of when she identified herself as disabled. Olivia said that her mindset changed when she began looking at colleges. She realized she needed to consider how her disability would impact her education.

What am I going to need in college? I had no idea…like, I'm going to need to talk to someone and see what accommodations are available and what services [are available] because I was like, I don't know what's happening in college. All I know is what I had in high school.

Olivia ultimately chose her college because the people at the institution made her feel welcomed. She recalled that the tour guide, a professor in her program of interest, and the disability services representative knew her name. She also felt like they wanted her at their institution and that they would offer support beyond what they were required to provide because they valued her presence.

Ava knew that it would be important to have a degree or some kind of credential. However, she did not know if her drive to go to college came from a proving her
capabilities as a disabled woman. She mentioned in her interview that she did not know where to go for resources or support. Ava indicated she used mostly computer-based resources, which presented its own set of challenges:

With a visual impairment, computer access is a little bit difficult at times without the right assistive technology and reading can be fatiguing. So, I think in that aspect. I was doing the research and kind of learning…but I don't think it was probably the most extensive research because I can't sit and spend hours and hours and hours looking and reading between eye fatigue and neck strain and those kinds of things.

Ava’s information search focused on size of the institution and its classes. She did not want to rely on anyone to help her navigate campus like she relied on friends and family to give her rides in high school. Having been trained on how to learn a new environment with a visual impairment, Ava knew that a simple layout of buildings would help her navigate the campus more quickly. She also wanted smaller classes sizes to get more help from the instructors.

I just wanted to make sure that I would have the accommodations that I needed and that professor or teacher would be, like, thinking about me as they're presenting, and they would have time to meet my needs or have a discussion with me as needed. ...I was looking for smaller class sizes, where I wouldn't just Get forgotten. I was looking for a smaller teacher-to-student ratio so that I could actually form relationships with the teachers and they would remember me in their, you know, lesson planning and that kind of thing.
Although she wanted to get out of her hometown and experience her independence, Ava understood that she would still have to depend on others to help her as she grew accustomed to her environment and the expectations of being a college student. Ava stayed as independent as possible to maintain her pride and relied on small class sizes to feel more confident that her instructors would design course experiences in which she could participate as independently as possible.

**Considering the Community**

Four of the six participants discussed looking for communities in which they could belong. Emma felt that “a lot of first-generation students are just looking for a place to feel like home. Like if they're leaving their home, if they're going far away, that might have been their whole support system.” Emma grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other and engaged in gossip. Emma wanted to be anonymous and separate herself from gossip while she explored her independence, so she sought a large public institution. She thought that private schools were small and small schools did not offer many opportunities. Emma wanted to attend a large institution so that she could be anonymous while exploring different communities and find one in which she fit: “If I didn't fit in one section, like, you go to a different club. Like, you joined a different organization. …I was constantly searching, like, what club can I join to make a family?” She ultimately chose her selected institution in part due to the collective school spirit surrounding athletics and how it brought the entire institution together.

Charlotte similarly desired to find community. As a single child with few friends, she wanted opportunities to socialize:
I was, like, concerned about, like, fitting in, because I didn’t really know people when I first got there or like at any college, really, and I was like worried about like trying to meet people because I didn't really have much social skills, because of being alone all the time.

Growing up in a small town, Charlotte knew everyone and considered everyone to be the same. When looking for higher education institutions, she wanted to learn at a school with a diverse student body. She considered institutions that were “a large school and I could like meet different people but then it was still small enough that you, like, know everybody.” Charlotte felt that she would be lost at a large university and preferred to look at smaller institutions where she felt she could find fit.

Liam sought new community to explore his own identities. He shared his experience of attending campus tours:

As a Black person, like…where would I fit and feel comfortable? Because, I remember, on campus tours and, just like, friend-wise, I was like I don't really see any Black people like on college campuses so, like, what is their experience like?

Am I going to be, like…on my own, like, struggling?

Liam thought that any school he looked at would provide the same kind of academic program experience, and he focused his attention on what opportunities for connection his choice institutions offered. Liam used YouTube to explore campus life, the kinds of people at the campuses, and what student organizations existed.

Sophia looked for institutions that reflected her home community. She “wanted to know about schools that…the student population and the staff and faculty really understood what it was like to struggle, as a first-generation, low-income, disabled
student.” As a student who sought services that assisted students with disabilities and faculty and staff who looked like her, Sophia prioritized her search for a public institution: “some place close to home, you know, where you know they [colleges] valued students that are diverse and disabled and other things.” She felt that the private institution she had seen did not focus on the needs of low income and first-generation people, that it “was mostly concentrated on the academics, but not the social support.” Sophia summarized her feelings:

if you're talking about a private university--where it's farther away and, you know, I don't know anybody there, I don't relate to anybody there—compared to a local community college where it's close to home, it's cheaper, you know. It was just a no-brainer, I’m not going to go to a place where I don't feel like I belong, or I [don’t] relate to anybody.

Participants like Sophia wanted to find a community in which they could belong, both to have people they could spend time with and explore their own identities. They were eager to go to college to show their value to the people around them and to discover their own abilities and interests.

**Chapter Summary**

This study sought to determined what factors first-generation students with disabilities considered when exploring college options. Three themes became clear: (a) anticipating college, (b) seeking independence, and (c) considering disability and finances. Most participants indicated that there was no question that they would go to college, and that they looked forward to being independent and finding new communities with which to connect. They tended to consider colleges that provided them with
disability-related access to facilities and support in classrooms. They also considered colleges that were affordable with scholarships and grants.

Another goal of the study was to uncover how these participants’ first-generation and disability identities influenced their college decisions. Interviews with participants uncovered the themes of (a) reflecting on worthiness, (b) preserving pride and asking for help, and (c) considering the community. Participants applied to prestigious institutions to see if they could get in. They were also concerned with their identities of disabled or first-generation. They sought to rarely disclose these identities and looked for opportunities in which they were welcomed as disabled or first-generation.
CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Through this study, I sought to understand the factors first-generation students with disabilities (FGSWDs) consider when they develop and narrow their college choice list. I also explored how FGSWDs thought their first-generation and disabled identities contributed to their college decisions. Participants considered institutions that allowed for the exploration of independence and new community, while still offering measures of accessibility and affordability for the participants and their families. Participants also shared that how worthy they felt to attend college and how difficult it was to maintain their pride while sometimes asking for help contributed to institutional qualities they sought. Given the dearth of research on this intersectional identity population and their college-choice patterns, the findings of this study bring enlightenment to the field of higher education and can deliver new recruitment strategies.

I used a qualitative methodology and phenomenological approach to center the college-choice decision-making of FGSWDs. I used models of identity meaning-making and college-choice models as a conceptual framework to explain the college-choice decision-making and the influence of participants’ individual first-generation and disability identities. An analysis of participants’ experiences uncovered three factors led to their college-choice decision-making: (a) participants anticipated going to college, (b) they saw college as an opportunity for independence and community, and (c) they chose colleges that were accessible for their particular disabilities and that were affordable. In
In addition, participants’ first-generation and disabled identities caused them to make application decisions that affirmed their worthiness to attend college while also allowing them to preserve their feelings of pride and autonomy, especially when asking for help.

In the following sections, I explore the findings in further detail. I explain how these findings affirm or extend existing literature on college-going decisions and the impact of disability and first-generation identities on college choice. I also explain how the findings contradict existing research. Consideration will be given to the limitations of this study, as well as additional recommendations for further research. Finally, I will conclude with recommendations for practice.

**Findings Affirming Existing Research**

In this section, I explore the major findings from the semi-structured interviews that affirm the existing research. It is important to note that the participants either graduated from college or were near completion. The participants already achieved high grades or participated in advanced placement or dual enrollment opportunities due to expectations of going to college, which is consistent with Perna’s (2006) combined economic and social model of college choice. The participants held good grades in high esteem (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006); as a result, they spent a significant amount of time completing homework and studying (Saenz et al., 2007) or participating in advanced coursework via advanced placement or honors courses (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011; Cataldi et al., 2018) in order to prepare for college.

This is due in part to family expectations that the participants achieved greater means of supporting themselves. Much like Toutkoushian et al. (2018) and McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found in their studies, parents present in the college-choice process
ensured that several participants enrolled in college. Several participants’ parents considered college to be the next logical step, which is aligned with the research done by Wessel (2015). They anticipated the monetary and other benefits associated with attending college would offset any expected costs, consistent with Perna’s (2006) conceptual model. Emma’s parents, for example, saw college as the next opportunity for Emma in order to obtain an office job with duties commensurate to her physical abilities. Liam also indicated his parents saw college as the next step for him, and would have given him grief for not doing better. It was important to Emma, Charlotte, and Sophia that they go to college in order to have fewer hardships than their parents (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018), and anticipated a separation in their shared experiences as a result. Liam and Emma specifically desired to change their social class and anticipated changes to their habits in order to fit in with their new community (Hinz, 2016).

Several participants indicated that they had significant help from their mothers, who researched application processes, scholarship opportunities, and college resources for their students to use. For example, Emma mentioned that her mother organized scholarship applications and arranged for visits with the disability resource office during visits. This is aligned with the existing research that parents, and particularly mothers (Murray et al., 2018), of students with disabilities are involved in ensuring their students have access to academic and social supports (Wessel et al., 2015).

Family also contributed to the consideration of affordability of colleges for four participants, consistent with research done by Paulsen and St. John (2002). For example, Ava discussed her parents’ concerns about the consequential costs of attendance, such as housing and dining plans, despite her tuition being covered by her home state’s division
of vocational rehabilitation. Likewise, Liam’s parents pressured him to attend a more local institution in exchange for financial support. Participants’ limited resources for understanding college increased the importance of their family in making decisions about college.

Limited resources also played a part in where and when participants could attend college. The economic situation of Sophia’s family precluded her from attending college after high school, and support for Liam’s college choice was contingent upon attending an institution closer to his parents. This is consistent with Cox’s (2016) finding that college aspirations may be interrupted by financial instability. Additionally, families with fewer financial resources are less able to support their students’ college enrollment (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013).

**Findings Extending Existing Research**

This study extends existing research on the college-decision choices of FGSWDs. One study on the college choices of students with disabilities found that college tours were highly valued (Murray et al., 2018). Four of my participants indicated they attended college tours. According to Perna (2006), this recruitment tool provides potential students an experience of the expected benefits for attending. Charlotte and her family made a trip of it, visiting several area colleges to determine fit, while Sophia attended visit days as part of high school trips. However, four also said that they used the internet to conduct their own research. Ava sought credible third-party sources to assess her college choice list, determining if the student-to-instructor ratio was acceptable and whether the cost of attendance was worth the return value. Emma used Google Maps to evaluate travel routes to off-campus coffee and medical resources. Liam confessed to “falling down a rabbit
hole” on YouTube to see student life programming. Although students continue to seek out formal sources of college marketing such as tours, they also examine less formal colleges’ recruitment materials to get an informal feel for various institutions (Perna, 2006).

This study also elaborates on the impact of social relationships on college choice. Langenkamp and Shifrer (2018) found that continuing-generation students can positively influence first-generation students’ decisions to go to college. Similarly, first-generation students are more likely to attend college when interacting through social media with their already-attending first-generation peers (Wohn et al., 2013). Emma discussed her college choices with her best friend, a continuing-generation student. She also discussed her college choices with one of her high school teachers who attended the same college that Emma was considering. Liam similarly spoke regularly with a first-generation friend enrolled in college. Liam was able to anticipate his college experience through regular phone calls to and social media photos from his friend.

**Findings Contradicting Existing Research**

Although this study supported and extended existing research on first-generation students and disabled students, there were some significant contradictions that make this study exciting. One study on the college choice-making of students with disabilities found that the presence of a chronic, sensory, or neurologic disability for students reduced the likelihood of attendance (Rosenbaum, 2018). Four participants in my study had one or more disabilities that could be labelled as chronic, sensory, or neurologic, and yet all four attended college. According to Perna’s (2006) combined economic and social
model of college choice, the participants determined the expected benefits of attending college outweighed the expected costs.

Additionally, five participants attended college over 50 miles away from home. This contrasts sharply with a study that found that students considering cost did not choose colleges located farther away (Skinner, 2019) and that students with stigmatized health conditions limit their endeavors to two-year colleges (Rosenbaum, 2018). Only two participants in my study explicitly stated wanting great distance between their home and their chosen college. Additionally, four of the six participants disclosed disabilities that align with Rosenbaum’s (2018) predictor of two-year college enrollment. However, all but one participant managed to achieve a distance of greater than 50 miles from their hometowns.

Lastly, five participants in my study chose to attend four-year colleges. According to existing research, students with disabilities tended to choose two-year schools close to home (Mercer, 2012), and lower family wealth predicted students would choose two-year colleges (Jez, 2014). While one of my participants did choose to attend a community college, the remaining participants attended universities despite their disability and/or financial means. Charlotte’s case demystifies this as the disability-related resources provided by her chosen college as a result of the college’s interpretation of a public policy. This interaction between social, economic, and policy contexts and higher education contexts (Perna, 2006) gave Charlotte additional information to weigh the expected benefits and costs of attendance. Though other resources contributed to the participants’ choice institutions, the idea that the majority of these participants defied expectation is noteworthy.
Limitations of Study

This study examined the experiences of six participants who had been first-year college students within the past 10 years. As a result, participants may have forgotten details of their experiences that would have been significant data for the study. Additionally, the participants self-reported general ranges of family income and no scrutiny was conducted to determine the degree of impact that wealth had between the participants. They also reported ranges in distance based in miles from their hometown. Literature on distance indicates that the cost of attendance increases as the distance between students’ chosen college from home increases (Mercer, 2012; Skinner, 2019). Distance also impacts students’ connection to their families (Hinz, 2016) and what support students could expect from their family beyond college choice (Cheatham & Elliott, 2013; Schiavone, 1999) Based on the data from my participants, 50 miles may be an insignificant distance to gauge the effect of distance on choice.

It should also be noted that a lenient definition for first-generation was used. Original consideration was given to define first-generation as candidates whose primary caregivers never attended any college, but the initial call for participants resulted in no respondents. The definition was relaxed to the standard set by the Higher Education Act of 1965 in order to cast a wider net for more participants. As expressed by Darrah et al. (2022), the first-generation community consists of many different makeups and experiences. Employing a broader definition in my study allowed for greater inclusivity of experience but lost the experiences of those whose social capital is less privileged. For example, Olivia had assistance in applying for college from her mother, who had taken some college courses but never graduated with a degree, and Liam shared that he
received some direction from extended family who attended college. However, Charlotte and Sophia did not have family that attended and relied on the knowledge from their high schools.

Finally, the search for participants occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. I initially called for participants who were first-year students who had a disability and were the first in their immediate family to attend college. I sent the call to disability service offices and TRIO college student support programs in a specific geographic region in order to limit the participant pool. My call for participants did not generate eligible participants. Due to social distancing mandates and pandemic response plans, I was unable to meet in person with expert nominators or their eligible participants. I eventually expanded the geographic region to include more institutions, but still had no participants. I finally expanded outreach efforts beyond my professional networks to include my personal networks through social media platforms.

Although this study had a smaller sample size, the number of participants still fell within an acceptable range for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the qualitative design and methodological suppositions on which I based this study, I intended to discover thoughts and feelings from a set of eligible participants who had experienced a particular phenomenon. I did not intend to generalize these findings to the entire population of first-generation students with disabilities.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The research generated by this study provided insight in how the intersecting identities of first-generation and disability contributed to students’ college-choice process. Within this section, I provide suggestions for improving or expanding upon this
research. Further research will give greater clarity to experiences of this unique population and provide greater direction for educational systems to support these students.

The first suggestion is that future studies on this population center on students from a particular geographic area. Narrowing focus to a particular region would specify the types and availability of resources within a school district and community, as well as identify what structural supports and barriers exist for FGSWDs (Perna, 2006). For example, state or local funding may be available to provide some high school students with opportunities such as Advanced Placement and dual enrollment, while no such funding is available for a school in another state. As education policies and practices can vary state to state, wealth disparities across communities can create variable conditions for college counseling support and dual enrollment programs. Gathering participants whose experiences are based in similar policies or offerings can be helpful in determining how such supports compare to family input when comparing the experiences of different disability identities or first-generation backgrounds.

When focusing the study area, an important caveat to consider is the policies of and the available resources within state programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Although Ava financed her education in this way, not all VR programs may be allowed to support a singular student beyond textbooks, assistive technology, or other lower-cost items. VR may also not be an option for students who either do not have a clear vocational goal or who are not limited by their disability in their career endeavors. Reducing a future search for participants to those from a particular state would improve the generalizability of findings and provide policymakers with better guidance.
A final suggestion is to clarify the intended participant pool, as the definitions for first-generation and disability can vary widely. As Darrah et al. (2022) explained, there are at least four different kinds of first-generation status as defined through the Higher Education Act of 1965 that can explain the social support students receive. As a result, participants have different college-search experiences and expectations and yet still meet the criteria of being first-generation. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) gives a broad definition of disability to include “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” People who might be labelled as disabled based on the above definition may not consider themselves disabled due to outdated views of disability. Additionally, someone who experiences blindness would have a different college-search experience than someone who experiences deafness, mental health challenges, or physical or mobility-related challenges. Future studies may find greater insights if recruiting for specific first-generation and disability identities to identify how demographic characteristics contribute to economic decisions about attending college (Perna, 2006).

**Considerations for Professional Practice**

Ava and Olivia similarly evaluated the college search process as one that required an inherited set of knowledge in order to understand the process of choosing colleges. Ava felt she had to already possess a certain level of understanding about higher education in order to evaluate her choices. She understood college to be the next developmental step but lacked information to understand the difference between a community college and a university, how each could support her, and explanations of the terminology they used. Olivia thought it would be helpful to have a guide explaining
college admissions to first-generation applicants. It is recommended that an early introduction of first-generation students to higher education would inspire them to continue their education after high school (Dockery, 2012; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). This is also aligned with the recommendations of Madaus and Shaw (2006) and Schiavone (1999) that earlier transition planning for disabled students would lead to improved outcomes. My study’s participants indicated that their college counseling in high school was not effective largely due to inconsistent staffing. Participants indicated that counselors would change every grade, or that the counselors would be newly hired at the beginning of one school year and leave by the end. Investments in a consistent staffing pattern that served a cohort through to graduation would be helpful in ensuring consistent, goal-focused counseling for special populations (American School Counselor Association, 2016). Additionally, participation in TRIO programs such as Upward Bound or Talent Search (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.) could provide additional formal and informal counseling for FGSWDs considering higher education if students are fortunate to have such programs available locally.

Early planning with students is not enough. Ava, Olivia, Emma, and Charlotte indicated they and their parents felt lost trying to navigate admissions and financial aid processes. The American School Counselor Association (2016) recommended counselors involve disabled students’ families in educational processes. Dockery (2012; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013) likewise advised involving families of first-generation students due to the degree of influence parents made on students’ college decision-making.

Liam, Olivia, Emma, and Ava also made it clear that they used institutional and third-party online resources to make their decisions. This included exploring financial
costs, discovering social opportunities, and mapping community resources. They mentioned being knowledgeable of the community was also important. Using websites to share information about cost based on degree (Martin, 2020) may help students make college-choice decisions faster if they feel an institution is within their price range. I intend to work with partners at my institution to report retention and degree completion data to the state department of higher education. This information would aid FGSWDs’ exploration for the right college.

All the participants considered fitting in and finding community to be important. Emma and Liam wanted opportunities to discover themselves; Charlotte wanted to discover diversity; and Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, and Ava sought to connect with their potential colleges’ disability services offices as soon as possible to determine what kind of support could be offered. Allowing students to engage in dual enrollment opportunities while they are still in high school can allow students to become familiar with the services and opportunities available within a local college community. Martin (2020) recommended bridge programs to give students an early sense of belonging to a choice institution. Such an opportunity could also allow FGSWDs to meet people and find community early. Such bridge programs could provide an orientation to an institution and financial aid procedures and policies (Martin, 2020) as well as introduce the social opportunities on campus and medical and recreational resources within the community.

Summary

Within this chapter, I discuss the findings of my study as they affirm and extend existing research or contradict others’ findings. Positive academic performance in high school tended to lead participants to go to college, as did when their parents were
involved in college attendance discussions. Research on why fewer applications were submitted as well as why fewer students attended college fairs was extended. Finally, my research contradicts the idea that FGSWDs typically attend community colleges, and that they typically attend colleges closer to home.

I explored the limitations of the study, and provided several suggestions on how this research could be expanded. I closed the chapter by offering recommendations as contributed by my participants. Greater involvement on behalf of middle and high schools to discuss college with FGSWDs and their families can lead to goal-directed actions with an intent on enrolling in higher education. Additionally, providing information about institutions such as cost and the community in which they belong can give people a clearer sense of the cost of attendance and available resources. Ultimately, giving students a sense of belonging can influence students’ choice in institution.
REFERENCES


Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.).


APPENDIX A

LISTSERVE PERMISSION FROM COWY AHEAD
Dear Justin,
The eboard met and discussed this yesterday. You are welcome to use the resources that COWY has (listserves, member lists, etc.) to gather data for your dissertation. COWY AHEAD supports your continued education, but also wants to make sure you work independently with each school you connect with to gather data as you both see appropriate. Does this work for you? Good luck!
Best,
Sara

From: Hiniker, Justin J
Sent: Thursday, November 7, 2019 2:13 PM
To: Sara Rotunno; Lawey, Shannon; Moses Hinojosoa; jdhannon@coloradomtn.edu
Subject: COWY-AHEAD - Dissertation Research Permission?

This email originated outside Colorado College. Do not click links or attachments unless you know the content is safe.

Dear COWY AHEAD Executive Board,
I'm attending a doctoral program in student affairs administration and leadership through the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and I am currently working on my dissertation proposal. My focus will be investigating the college-choice experience of first-generation students with disabilities. I intend to solicit the COWY AHEAD membership to inform their students, and interview students who meet the criteria and give consent.

COWY AHEAD's bylaws don't mention any process or method for requesting access for studies, so I'm emailing you to ask 1) if I need to submit any formal proposal to COWY AHEAD in order to receive permission to reach out to the membership and 2) if so, what information would be requested in such a proposal?

I understand that the Executive Board may need time to discuss this. I will wait patiently for your response.

Thank you for your time,
Justin Hiniker

Justin Hiniker, MA, ADAC | Director
Disability Resource & Support Center (LARC 169)
Pronouns (he/him/his)
Appointments: 719.549.2648 or SCHEDULE ONLINE | Fax: 719.549.2195
Disability resources / Colorado State University-Pueblo
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION FORM
Consent for Participation

You are asked to participate in a dissertation research study titled “College-Choice Processes of First-Generation Students with Disabilities.” This study is being led by Justin Hiniker, Principal Investigator and doctoral student in the Student Affairs Administration & Leadership program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Tori Svoboda, Associate Professor in the Department of Student Affairs Administration at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

About the Study
The purpose of this research is to explore the choices of first-generation students with disabilities when choosing colleges.

Participant Responsibilities
You will be asked to meet with the Principal Investigator for at least two interviews regarding your experience in choosing and applying to college. Each interview is expected to last no longer than 90 minutes.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research.

Benefits
There are no direct or indirect benefits from participating in this study. However, your participation will help professionals better assist first-generation students with disabilities choosing colleges.

Compensation for Participation
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Audio/Video Recording
All interviews will be conducted and recorded through Zoom, a web conferencing platform. The Principal Investigator intends to use the recordings to generate transcripts and to check the transcripts for accuracy. After completion of the study, the recordings will be archived indefinitely.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security
Your participation in this study will be kept confidential, and any reporting of the study’s results will keep your identity anonymous. This will be done by changing your name and disguising any details of your interview which may reveal your identity or the identity of people you speak about. Disguised extracts from your interview may be quoted in the Principal Investigator’s dissertation, conference presentations, or published papers.

Recordings of interviews will be stored on an external hard drive. Once the video files are uploaded, the Principal Investigator intends to only use the external hard drive on a computer with no internet access in order to check the transcripts for reliability and to assist with data analysis. When not in use, the external hard drive will be secured within
the Principal Investigator’s office. No one other than the Principal Investigator will have access to any identifying information.

Transcription of the interviews may be conducted with the help of Rev, a company not affiliated with UW-La Crosse and with its own privacy and security policies that you can find at its website. It is anticipated that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet.

Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through e-mail could be read by a third party.

Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. We cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties.

**Future Use of Identifiable Data in This Research**
Your information or biospecimens will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation is voluntary. Answering the questions posed in the interviews is required as a condition of participation. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue participation at any time, or refuse to answer any question with no penalty or consequences of any kind.

**Follow Up Studies**
You may be contacted again to request your participation in a follow up study. As always, your participation will be voluntary and you will be asked for your explicit consent to participate in any of follow-up studies.

**Questions and Concerns**
The main researcher conducting this study is Justin Hiniker, a doctoral student at UW-La Crosse. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Justin at jhiniker@uwlax.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at 608-785-8044 or access their website at [https://www.uwlax.edu/grants/human-subjects-review-institutional-review-board-irb/](https://www.uwlax.edu/grants/human-subjects-review-institutional-review-board-irb/).

You will be provided a copy of this form to remain informed of your rights.

**Statement of Consent**
I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.
COLLEGE-CHOICE FACTORS

Your Signature

Date

Principal Investigator Signature

Date
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Age:

2. Race and Ethnicity:

3. Disability Type:

4. College Type:
   a. Public 2-year
   b. Public 4-year
   c. Private – 2-year
   d. Private – 4-year

5. Are you:
   a. From the same state as your college
   b. From a different state as your college

6. Distance from college to parents’ home or your hometown:
   a. Within 10 miles
   b. Within 20 miles
   c. Within 50 miles
   d. Greater than 50 miles
APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW 1
1. Tell me about your pre-college life.
   
a. What was it like to have a disability?
   
b. What was your home life like?

2. What were your preconceptions of college before applying?
   
a. How did you come to this conclusion?
   
b. How did you decide to go to college?

3. Describe your experience looking into college.
   
a. How did you decide to go to college?
   
b. What factors were you considering?
   
c. How did you learn about colleges?
   
d. How did you narrow your college choice interests?

4. Describe your experience applying for college
   
a. What assistance did you have when applying?
   
b. How did you narrow your college choice selections?

5. What made you choose the institution you’re attending?

6. What have I not asked about your experience that you hoped I would ask?
APPENDIX E

SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW 2
1. Reflecting on our first interview, is there anything you would like to share or add as we begin the second interview?

2. Describe your life at the time you were looking into college.
   a. What was going on in your life at the time?
   b. How did you feel college was going to affect your circumstances?
   c. What assistance did you have when exploring college options?

3. What does going to college mean to your parents/guardians?
   a. How did they react when you were accepted?
   b. What support did they provide you throughout the process?

4. What other support did you have when searching for and applying to college?
   a. What did your friends feel about attending college?
   b. How did they react when you were accepted to college?

5. How did having a disability affect your search for colleges?

6. How was your college search affected by neither of your parents/guardians having experience going to college?

7. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experiences as we conclude this interview?