First Generation College Student Transitions: Informing Counseling Practices for Emerging Adults

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Keywords
emerging adults, transition theory, career reflections, content analysis

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First-Generation College Student Transitions: Informing Counseling Practices for Emerging Adults

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Abstract
Using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (STT), we used a directive content analysis to explore the high school to college career transitions of 24 emerging adults who were first-generation college students (FGCS) with undeclared majors. A total of 153 phrases aligned with STT, highlighting unanticipated situations, psychological resources, and emerging adult development. Implications for professional counselors working with FGCS are provided.

KEYWORDS: emerging adults, transition theory, career reflections, content analysis
First-Generation College Student Transitions: Informing Counseling Practices for Emerging Adults

A college degree is necessary for many emerging adults entering the workforce given the current unstable economic conditions (Pew Research Center, 2014; Storlie et al., 2019). Students with undeclared majors (i.e., exploratory students) might experience financial setbacks and mental health concerns if graduation is delayed due to the lack of a declared major (Legutko, 2007). Undeclared students who are also first-generation college students (FGCS) have unique challenges throughout their college career (Storlie et al., 2019) while also navigating emerging adulthood. The most recent national statistics approximate that 24% of college students’ parents have not received post-secondary education, with upwards of 56% of college students whose parents have not received a bachelor’s degree (RTI International, n.d.-a). FGCS might lack critical financial (Duffy et al., 2020) and cultural capital necessary for collegiate success (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). In a 25-year longitudinal study, Glaessgen and colleagues (2018) found 33% of FGCS have undeclared majors; another 33% who had declared majors changed their major at least once. FGCS who are exploratory students might present with complex transitions from high school to college, influencing their career development as emerging adults. Professional counselors need insights in how to best work with this population in their transition from high school to college and beyond. The purpose of this study was to investigate the high school to college transitional processes FGCS experience at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (STT; Schlossberg, 2011) to better inform counseling practices and career development for emerging adults.

Emerging Adults as First-Generation College Students

Emerging adulthood is a critical and distinct transition in an individual’s life that is often met with newfound independence and responsibility (Repo et al., 2022). Navigating such a transition while attending college can be stressful and, if ineffective, could lead to serious financial consequences (Repo et al., 2022). Emerging adults transitioning from high school to college are often tasked with pressures in managing finances, adapting to college culture and expectations, and rebuilding social support networks (Repo et al., 2022). This transition into early adulthood can be even more complex when students are also FGCS.

FGCS and non-FGCS have salient differences in financial resources, credential attainment, conferred degrees, and the use of campus services (RTI International, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). The Center for First-Generation Student Success reports that the median income of FGCS households is roughly 46% of non-FGCS household incomes (RTI International, n.d.-a). Nationally FGCS tend to be predominantly female (60%), with 40% identifying as White, 25% identifying as Latinx/o/a, and 18% as Black or African American (RTI International, n.d.-a). Although upwards of 65% of FGCS enroll as full-time students in their first year, 56% of FGCS will have yet to obtain a degree after 6 years (RTI International, n.d.-b). FGCS across the U.S. use financial aid services on college campuses to combat financial hardship more readily than continuing generation students (RTI International, n.d.-c). Yet a lower percentage of FGCS have been known to use academic advising, health services, or academic services during their first year of college, which might provide additional transition support as they begin to develop as adults (RTI International, n.d.-c). Only 16% of FGCS take advantage of career services offered by their college or university (RTI International, n.d.-c).

First generation college graduates have reported transitional support from college peers, campus organizations, and faculty/staff as helpful in their persistence in college, in addition to extracurricular opportunities (Basset, 2021; McDonald et al., 2021). Participants in Basset’s study reported achieving academic excellence, career preparedness, and social exploration through hard work, managing time, and asking for help when needed. However, participants voiced a fear of judgment related to asking for help, believing it would negatively reflect on their family image (Basset, 2021). Other participants used counter-spaces (identity-affirming communities) and actively sought out extracurricular activities such as tutoring, financial aid, and access to nonprofit programs to obtain support in their transition from high school to college (Basset, 2021). Basset found a lack of support during the college transition led to increased isolation and a lowered chance of persevering to graduation, potentially affecting future employment options.

Parental involvement is highly influential in the academic trajectory of FGCS despite lack of parental academic achievement (McDonald et al., 2021). McDonald and colleagues (2021) uncovered that cultural influences related to gender and social class could contribute to a lack of parental understanding of FGCS’s transitions in higher education and career choices. Duffy
and colleagues (2020) also highlighted multicultural considerations of FGCS, including those from underrepresented populations and their respective experiences of marginalization. Often a fundamental goal of FGCS is to improve social mobility for themselves, their families, and future generations through future employment (Kim et al., 2021). However cultural and social barriers can decrease FGCS’s level of self-efficacy toward achieving these goals (Duffy et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2021), negatively affecting their development as emerging adults.

**Exploratory Students**

Declaring a college major is influenced by practical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors (Dunn et al., 2010; Orndorff & Herr, 1996). According to National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 77.3% of students under the age of 25 enrolling in 4-year institutions had an undecided/undeclared major. This age group defines the time of emerging adulthood where additional lifespan development issues might also arise. Universities, students, and parents devote vast resources to incoming college students. Yet, both declared and undeclared students are at risk of dropping out within their first year. Undeclared students might be more at risk if they view their status as a disadvantage compared to their declared counterparts (Pickenpaugh et al., 2022). Pickenpaugh and colleagues (2022) found that exploratory students’ GPAs were lower than those of their declared peers. Despite declaring a major being required to obtain an undergraduate degree, little research has been done on FGCS students who are exploring their career options (Storlie et al., 2019).

Colleges and universities have invested in career services for exploratory students (Cohen & Johnson, 2018) with hopes to increase student retention rates and decrease the financial costs of college for students with undeclared majors. Considering the limited cultural, social, and financial capital with which FGCS often present upon entering college (Glass, 2022; Richards, 2022) and the feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty in a future career among emerging adults with undeclared majors (Orndorff & Herr, 1996; Storlie et al., 2019), we introduce STT (Schlossberg, 2011) as the theoretical framework for this content analysis.

**STT**

STT (Schlossberg, 2011) includes three distinct stages: (a) understanding transitions through Schlossberg’s four S’s, (b) coping with transitions, and (c) applying the model to work-life transitions (Anderson et al., 2012; Barclay, 2017). Schlossberg (1984) wrote that transitions help to facilitate change among universal experiences such as relationships; routines; assumptions; or roles in settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics.

**Schlossberg’s Four S’s.** The influence of a transition is determined by the degree to which it alters daily life. Schlossberg (2011) hypothesized that a transition is not necessarily a matter of the changes made, but rather the individual’s perception of the change. Schlossberg’s four S’s (situation, self, social support, and strategies) highlight the complexities of a transition.

**Situation.** Schlossberg (2011) identified three types of transitional situations: (a) anticipated transitions that are predictable or scheduled, (b) unanticipated transitions that are not predictable or scheduled, and (c) non-events when expected transitions do not occur. Within each situation, an individual considers factors that might affect their transitional state (timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, and assessment).

**Self.** Intrapersonal factors affect individuals’ ability to cope with a transition. Schlossberg (2011) classified this into two categories: personal/demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal/demographic characteristics include socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, commitment, and values. Psychological resources affect how individuals perceive transitions and worldviews.

**Social Support.** Support from others influences how an individual perceives and copes with transitions. Positively perceived interpersonal relationships that can influence a transition include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions, and communities (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg hypothesized that social support is key to handling stress.

**Strategies.** According to Schlossberg (2011), strategies refer to the methods individuals chose to cope with transitions. Coping strategies are divided into three areas: those that modify situations, control the meaning of the problem, and manage
stress in the aftermath (Schlossberg, 2011). Strategies that modify the situation aim to alter them through negotiation, optimistic action, and exercising self-potency over helplessness. Controlling the meaning of the problem is accomplished through strategies such as positive comparisons, selective ignoring, and substitution of rewards. Strategies to manage stress effectively in the aftermath of a transition include emotional discharge, self-assertion, and passive forbearance.

**Rationale**

Researchers have identified the unique experiences of FGCS and exploratory students while adapting to a college environment, including what has been effective in helping them persist (Basset, 2021; McDonald et al., 2021; Storlie et al., 2019). Yet, gaps remain within the literature related to suitable frameworks to support professional counselors in their work with this population while they navigate their development as emerging adults. We explored the career reflections of FGCS with undeclared majors through a directive content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005) to provide important insights about their transitions from high school to college. The following research question guided this study: Using STT, what transitional processes are found within the narrative reflections of FGCS?

**Methods**

**Positionality Statement**

The first author is a Latina associate professor in counselor education and supervision who was an FGCS and has published on the topic of FGCS, career development, and advocacy for various marginalized populations. The first author has considerable research experience with various forms of content analysis and has been a research supervisor for two doctoral research labs, one of which the second through fifth authors were members. During the development of this manuscript, the second through fifth authors were in their second semesters of their doctoral program in counselor education and supervision. The second author identifies as a non-binary White female, and the third and fifth authors identify as White cisgendered females. The fourth author identifies as mixed Indian and White cisgender female. During the first research meeting, two members of the research team discussed their experiences as FGCS and the barriers and challenges it presented them during transitions. As a research team, we acknowledged our positionality and the power dynamics between authors to support transparency before engaging in data analysis.

**Participants**

After approval from the institutional review board (IRB), participants were recruited from a career navigation course at a PWI in the Midwest United States with an average of 32% of FGCS. For many colleges and universities, post-modern, exploratory career programming has helped students in their reflexivity as they move forward in their academic journey (Busacca & Rehfuss, 2017). The career navigation course associated with this study was based on the tenets of the career construction model of adaptation (Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al., 2018). The course was designed with experiential activities to challenge and support students in gaining valuable personal insights and knowledge of the complex world of work to inform their decision making and action taking (Lara et al., 2011). A total of 91 students was enrolled in a course designed for students with undeclared majors in the second semester of their first year. We used purposeful sampling (Flynn, 2021), which yielded 24 volunteer exploratory participants who identified as an FGCS (parents did not attend a 4-year college or have conferred bachelor’s degrees). Participants completed a career reflections assignment (see Appendix A) developed by the first author to explore their lived experiences as they reflected on their career development and transition from high school to college. Participants (7 male, 17 female) were aged 18-20 years ($M = 19.25; SD = 0.52$); 75% identified as White, and 25% identified as Black/African American.

**Content Analysis Method**

Content analysis is an empirical method of analyzing data that allows researchers to better understand the information with which they work (Krippendorf, 2019). Situated in both qualitative and quantitative traditions, a primary benefit of using content analysis methodology is its ability to condense vast amounts of data into a solidified nature that is understandable and meaningful (Storlie & Woo, 2021). We chose a directive content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005) which included using an existing
theoretical framework, STT (Schlossberg, 2011), to provide structure to the overall analytical process. The use of existing categories assists researchers with coding and analysis (Storlie & Woo, 2021). Directive content analysis has utility in supporting and extending an existing theoretical framework in a deductive nature (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). Unlike a conventional or summative content analysis, themes do not emerge from the data; having a facilitator/auditor review the predetermined categories enhances the accuracy of the coding process (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

Data Collection

Course instructors for a career navigation course distributed consent information to all undergraduate students and explained the study. The career navigation course met twice weekly for 50 minutes during the 16-week semester. Students interested in participating returned all consent forms in a sealed envelope which was given back to the first author; course instructors were not aware of students’ participation status. In Week 5 of the spring semester, students completed the career reflections assignment, which centered on the transitional processes from high school to college. The first author collected the data through the university’s online learning management system.

Analysis Procedures

STT (Schlossberg, 2011) directed the coding process because it represented the complex transitions we understood FGCS faced upon entering college. The first author created a table in Microsoft Excel to track the consensus phrases from the career reflections assignment that aligned with the various facets of STT and provided a pseudonym to each participant. The team developed the initial codebook (MacQueen et al., 1998) based on Schlossberg’s theory. The codebook included brief and full definitions of each tenet, guidelines, example words, and phrases to indicate a code to support team consensus. We chose to analyze the participants’ career reflections assignment because it provided a historical context into the transitional processes from high school to college.

Consensus Meetings

The research team met seven times for approximately 60 minutes over the course of a semester. During the first meeting we discussed our positionality in reference to the topic under investigation. We enhanced credibility and dependability by using inter-coder agreement with direct discussion of discrepancies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) throughout the process. We returned to the codebook to add to and refine its development in the first two meetings. During consensus meetings when coders were not in agreement, the first author asked for (a) detail from the raw data as to what supported the coder’s decision, and (b) a collective review of definitions and descriptions from the codebook.

The second through fourth authors individually pilot coded 10% of narrative career reflections by marking the presence of an STT tenet (Schlossberg, 2011) aligned with the codebook in the Microsoft Excel table with a direct quote from participants’ career reflections assignment. This process required coders to use a deductive approach to provide uniformity when engaging with the raw data. The individual codes were then placed side-by-side in Microsoft Excel, and the first author, who acted as an auditor, facilitated a consensus meeting among the four coders, moving line-by-line through each tenet of STT with each of the 24 narratives. The second consensus meeting included examining an additional 20% of the cases, and the first author again served as facilitator until all four coders reached consensus. The remaining meetings continued in this fashion until all the career reflections had been analyzed.

Findings

After analyzing the 24 narratives (47 pages of data; 9,651 words), we found 153 phrases/statements that aligned with STT. Areas most strongly aligned included the following tenets: trigger, psychological resources, family units, institutions and communities, control, role change, and assessment (Table 1).
First Generation Exploratory Students’ Career Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (STT) Tenets</th>
<th>SUM</th>
<th>% Present</th>
<th>Cumulative $f$</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigger</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Change</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>32.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Stress</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>50.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Demographic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Resources</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>79.17</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>67.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate Relationships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>67.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Units</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>79.17</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>80.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks of Friends</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>83.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions/Communities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45.83</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>90.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Modify the Situation</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>94.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Meaning of Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>99.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid in Stress Management</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 153$ statements reflecting STT across participants from 24 narratives. SUM is the total number of narratives that had at least one statement aligned with the STT code. Percent Present is the percentage of the narratives where a code was present. Cumulative frequency displays the total number of statements reflecting STT across participants. Cumulative percentage was calculated to ensure accuracy. Results can be interpreted by the higher the SUM and percentage indicates greater relevance across participants.

Situation: Trigger

In STT (Schlossberg, 2011), the situation refers contextual factors such as financial transitions, anticipated or unanticipated transitions, and internal and external factors. Within the situation construct, a trigger refers to what precipitated the transition. Trigger ($n = 24; 100\%$) displayed the highest frequency of phrases from participants that aligned with STT. Trigger phrases included “have to/had to” in relation to the transition; exposure to a life event, such as “seeing grandma in the nursing home and the people who were in charge of the recreational activities”; “break[ing] the cycle”; and exposure to career assessments, career days, college visits, flyers, or different career paths through personal relationships such as “working with my dad for his landscaping company.” Trigger phrases alluded to a source of motivation or inspiration to engage in the transition to college.

Self: Psychological Resources

The construct of self in STT is classified into two categories: personal demographic and psychological resources. Psychological resources ($n = 19; 79.17\%$) includes ego development, outlook, commitment, and values. Phrases that indicated a psychological resource as defined by STT and the codebook discussed: strengths, resiliency, not having anyone or seeing self as support,
ambivalence, not letting others down, and a positive outlook. Strengths were identified with phrases such as “I always excelled in math” and “I love learning.” In the context of the career reflections, these phrases were commonly found in paragraphs describing why the individual feels they can be successful in college. The career reflections also offered phrases that alluded to resiliency through a positive outlook of their employment outcomes. Examples of resiliency include “doorway is open to more opportunities” and “I’m not terribly worried about finding a job.” The participants who saw themselves as support indicated that they must “do what’s best for me,” sometimes despite outside opinions and pressures. Phrases that indicated the participant as being self-motivated include “I know that if I work really hard, I can get through it,” and “I am a very determined person that likes to get things done.” Ambivalence examples were “I’m not really sure what career path I want to go down,” “I’m very picky and indecisive,” and “I’m just really confused.” Ambivalence phrases often referred to college majors and long-term career paths. Participants who were concerned with not letting others down made references to “want[ing] to make a difference in someone’s life”; those with a positive outlook were identified with phrases such as “I would like to share that I can’t wait to finally decide on a career and begin my journey achieving my goals!” Overall, the psychological resource phrases referred to the participants’ belief in themselves to persevere through struggles and confusion.

Social Support: Family Units and Institutions/Communities

STT indicates social support to be positively perceived interpersonal relationships, broken down into four categories: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities. Family units (n = 19; 79.17%) and institutions/communities (n = 11; 45.83%) were most frequently mentioned. Family units were identified as mom, dad, parents, grandparent(s), aunts, and uncles. Examples of phrases that indicated positive perception include: “[they] know my strengths and weaknesses,” “[they] honor autonomy,” and “supports me.” Institutions and communities included college resources such as academic advising, clubs, Greek life, and high school and college and employment counselors. Examples of positive perceptions included: “my counselor helped me” and “had a huge impact.” Family units were referenced in the career reflections as a source of ongoing support. Institutions/communities were more often referenced as support prior to and in preparation for the transition to college.

Situation: Control, Role Change, and Assessment

Situation includes contextual or environmental factors which might include financial, anticipated or unanticipated transitions, and internal and external factors (Schlossberg, 2011). Phrases related to participants’ sense of control of the transition (n = 10; 41.67%) referenced individual interest versus others, family history of career paths, competition in the field, and sense of choice. Example responses include, “Nursing is challenging,” “beat out by freshman with better GPA,” “hate it but I have to,” “the biggest challenge I have to face is to make sure I make the right decision,” and “beating the other competition in that field.” Many participants indicated a sense of grappling with making the right choices throughout their transitions. Role change (n = 10; 41.67%) phrases were identified when participants associated themselves with a major, a transition from child to adult, a responsibility to not waste money, self-exploration, work or unemployment, a switch in jobs, an independent fiscal responsibility, and an undergoing actionable change. In their career reflections, participants described uncertainty through changing roles. Examples of role change include, “I can actually see myself being either a counselor or an academic adviser” and “take the next step with engineering.”

Assessment (n = 10; 41.67%) in STT relates to who or what is seen as responsible for the transition and how the individual’s behavior is affected by this person. Words or phrases to indicate assessment include role models, parents, family, aging/development, and taking on responsibilities. Examples from the responses were “driven me to break the cycle of poverty,” “parents have been the most influential people in helping me find a career path,” and “I am going to have to say myself because no one else has exactly helped me in a positive way.” In these examples, poverty, parents, and self are seen as the driving force for the transition to college.

Discussion

Professional counselors working with FGCS (and those that have undeclared majors) can gain important insights from this study, particularly related to the transitional nature of emerging adulthood. The counseling literature currently lacks scholarship
attending to the unique experiences of FGCS transitioning into college as emerging adults despite some attention to college-to-career transitions (Lane, 2014). This study might provide some insights for early intervention strategies using STT (Schlossberg, 2011) as a theoretical model.

All participants identified a trigger that motivated them to attend college, despite the challenges of not having a declared major and having parents who did not attain a college degree. Professional counselors can recognize and work with FGCS regarding the meaningful precipitating events that influenced their decision to attend college and how that supports their development as adults. Professional counselors should encourage FGCS to reach out to career services offered by their college or facilitate the connection between career services and their FGCS clients before the transition to college. Professional counselors initiating a connection might strengthen institutional and community support networks through campus services. Moreover, professional counselors can explore internal (e.g., anxiety or fears) and external (e.g., financial or social) pressures FGCS experience and help them to transfer healthy coping skills to future transitions. In review of the findings related to unanticipated situations, it is critical for professional counselors to remind clients, especially FGCS who have yet to declare a major, to work with what is within their control, because they will not be able to predict all outcomes in their academic journey.

Participants in this study also remained hopeful about their future and pulled on their psychological resources, even during periods of confusion and ambiguity. Professional counselors should know that FGCS might already possess the necessary tools for collegiate success. Their psychological resources should be supplemented with and nourished by support, engagement, and opportunity (Basset, 2021; McDonald et al., 2021). Likewise, as social support was strongly aligned with STT (Schlossberg, 2011), college and employment counselors can work with their universities to develop continued supportive programming for this unique subset of students, as Basset (2021) suggested. Engagement with parents (McDonald et al., 2021) might also prove successful; several participants highlighted the importance of family and extended family in their transition to and persistence in college.

We noted that several participants outlined minimal involvement from their high school counselor when transitioning to college. To better prepare FGCS without declared majors, professional counselors can work with high schools to implement programs that assist students in the application process, understanding how to get funding, and gathering information about college classes for certain majors (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). According to Uy et al. (2019), having explicit information on college financial requirements supports students and increase their likelihood of success, easing some of the financial role changes that occur as high school students to become college students.

Professional counselors should know that challenges FGCS experience might reach beyond the academic setting, and that being culturally responsive in their approaches might foster a sense of belonging. Narrative approaches can also help with FGCS reflections on transitions and those related to their past and future career pathways. Narrative approaches such as journaling or the use of values card sorts (Storlie & Byrd, 2016) in session could further help FGCS expand their skills in working through college and career transitions.

Limitations

We consider the biggest limitation of our research to be the sample. Although our sample represented the ages often identified as emerging adulthood, upwards of 30% of FGCS are thought to be over the age of 30 (RTI International, 2019a). We also did not specifically inquire into participants perceived parental support through the career reflections assignment, and we recognize this information could be instrumental (e.g., McDonald et al., 2021) as we consider the relational dynamics of parents and FGCS. We further acknowledge that our sample was derived from a PWI and, while representative of the current demographics, did not adequately capture the voices of commonly underrepresented populations in higher education. Future scholars should consider repeating this study with a multicultural and social justice focus to investigate the unique experiences of currently and historically oppressed and underrepresented groups.

Readers should interpret the results with caution to not overgeneralize the results of this study but to use transferable implications for similar settings and environments. Additionally, as a research team, we agreed not to code any data as aligned with STT (Schlossberg, 2011) if there was not 100% agreement among coders. Coders found the construct of “self” the most difficult to differentiate and sporadic disagreement among coders was often a result of the coders’ acclimation to pre-existing categories defined by the codebook. We adhered to intercoder reliability practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), but recognize if we had set consensus at 75%, this would yield different results. We chose to remain aligned with the tenets of the existing theory at 100%.
Conclusion

Using STT (Schlossberg, 2011), professional counselors might better understand the needs of FGCS as they transition into college, particularly as it relates to triggers, unanticipated situations, psychological resources, and role changes. With only 20% of FGCS having a conferred bachelor’s degree 10 years after their sophomore year in high school, compared to 42% of continuing generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017), college and employment counselors can be instrumental in helping students persevere and excel through their transition to college and beyond.
References


Appendix A

Career Reflection Assignment Questions

1. Describe 2 – 3 experiences you have had, prior to college, with regards to your career development or exposure to career interventions.

2. Discuss the role your high school counselor had in your career planning/development.

3. Prior to this course, explain the ways in which you were exposed to career options/choices.

4. What life events have motivated you towards a specific career path?

5. Who has been the most influential person in helping you develop your career path? Why?

6. What barriers or challenges do you envision on your way to obtaining a career?

7. What else would you like to share regarding your experiences of challenges or supports to preparation for your occupational and life success?