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# Female First-Generation College Students: A Review of Challenges and Successes

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## Abstract

With increasing college access rates of underrepresented populations in recent years, first-generation college students (FGCSs), those who are the first in their family to attend college, have caught the attention of researchers and policymakers in the U.S. higher education system. This study focused on female FGCSs to identify the various challenges that are unique to this population. Through a systematic literature review, 13 studies were analyzed related to female FGCSs. Three themes were found from the analysis: role expectations, support systems, and socioeconomic background. These explain the challenges and self-identified strategies that female FGCSs discussed as contributing factors to their persistence during their degree attainment. Findings and a discussion of the data are presented, along with practical implications to better support female FGCSs and areas for future research.

**Keywords:** underrepresented students, student success, retention, female college students

## Introduction

The enrollment of first-generation college students (FGCSs) has increased across higher education institutions. In 2012, FGCSs comprised about a third of undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. higher education system (Skomsvold, 2014). While increasing the presence of FGCSs in higher education is a positive phenomenon, their success rates have not kept pace. Research has shown that FGCSs were not as likely to complete their degree compared to their non-FGCS counterparts (Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012); graduation and completion rates among FGCSs are 46.7% compared to 78% of students whose parents have earned at least a bachelor's degree or higher (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). Timeliness of graduation is also lagging, with only 40% of FGCSs completing their degree within six years of college entry (Radwin et al., 2013).

### ***First-Generation College Students***

For the student who is *first in the family* to attend college, the journey from college enrollment to graduation can be daunting. The persistence and retention of FGCSs have been an issue of great concern for almost 30 years (Brooks-Terry, 1988). During this time, definitions of *first-generation college* have multiplied as well, ranging from neither parent having attended any post-secondary education, neither parent having attained a post-secondary degree of any level (including associate degrees), or neither parent having completed a bachelor's degree. Some authors have also considered siblings' post-secondary educational pursuits in the formation of a definition. While these factors may seem like an insignificant distinction, Ishitani (2006) and Pascarella et al. (2004) demonstrated that varying levels of parental education have varying degrees of influence on FGCS persistence. In many cases, these students' families have limited experience in higher education settings. Due to this, pursuing a college degree can be a very overwhelming and lonely process for FGC students.

Other characteristics of FGCSs can interfere with their academic work and can impede persistence to graduation. They are more likely to be enrolled in classes part-time, working at least part-time, older, married, and from a low socioeconomic background (Lim et al., 2016; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Petty, 2014). Many FGCSs carry significant personal and family responsibilities (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Research indicates that they may also work more hours, leaving less time or motivation for pursuing extra-curricular activities or studying than their non-FGCS peers (Mitchell, 1997). They may also have less motivation to engage on campus, which may be problematic as these activities can be significant contributors to successful completion (Petty, 2014). There are many issues that may contribute to this lack of motivation: minimal support at home, low self-esteem, not feeling connected to the campus, and many other issues (Orbe, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Stebleton and Soria (2012) noted that FGCSs tend to face more challenges than non-FGCS peers in areas such as job or family responsibilities, practical study skills, or symptoms of depression and loneliness. FGCSs may also have family members who do not value their pursuit of education (Mitchell 1997; Terenzini et al., 1996). Thus, FGCSs may experience imposter syndrome, fear of the unknown, anxieties of potential failure, and other fears (Orbe, 2008).

### ***Female First-Generation College Students***

Existing research tends to view the FGCS population as a homogeneous group when describing their experiences gaining acceptance to, and completing, college (Ishitani 2006; Thayer, 2000). When researchers only focus on the fact that they are FGCSs, the impact of other aspects of these students' identities (such as gender) is potentially overlooked (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Examining gender, specifically females, within the FGCS population is increasing importance, especially given the current trends in higher education.

An analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera (2014) showed that female students are enrolling in higher education at higher rates than males, with 76% of females enrolling in higher education after finishing high school, compared to 62% of male high school graduates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), women are now also outnumbering men in graduate degree attainment. Still, females are also more likely to be a FGCS than a non-FGCS. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that female FGCSs are more

likely to drop out of college and face challenges than male FGCSs (Ishitani, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2013; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Ishitani (2003) found that when compared to males, females were 57% more likely to drop out in their third year and 61% more likely to drop out in their fourth year.

Thus, there is a need for a better understanding of this population; however, this review demonstrated that the experiences of female FGCSs are not adequately explored in research (Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), and more empirical evidence is critical for adequately meeting the needs, academic and otherwise, of this group. Furthermore, the literature often fails to consider the intersection of FGCS status and sex. For example, Wohlgemuth et al. (2007) explored the retention of a cohort of entering students over four years. They found females are more likely to be retained after the first year, although at a level that did not reach statistical significance. They also found that FGCSs are less likely to be retained after the fourth year than non-FGCSs. However, the analysis did not explore the extent to which female FGCS retention rates differed from male FGCS retention or from that of their non-FGCS counterparts.

Given that female FGCSs are dropping out at higher rates than male FGCSs, this study sought to systematically review the literature to identify potential contributing factors to the higher dropout rates of female FGCSs. An examination of the literature was conducted and focused primarily on studies within the United States that explored female FGCS experiences. The guiding research question for this study was: What are the challenges of female FGCSs, during their college experiences, that may have an impact on their retention and graduation rates?

## Methods

To complete a comprehensive and transparent review of the available research on FGCSs and female college students, we conducted a systematic literature review. Silverman (2011) states that a systematic review focuses on a specific question, defines inclusion and exclusion rules for articles, is structured, and defines the tools used to search for articles. These parameters were followed in this study. The following EBSCOhost databases were utilized for the review: ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and SocINDEX. Keywords included first-generation college student, female, and female college experience/dropout; keywords were used in the following manner: *female AND first-generation college student OR female college experience/dropout*.

The initial search provided 257 studies published between 2000 and 2016. We first reviewed each abstract, identifying studies using two inclusion criteria: (a) the study detailed college experiences of female FGCSs and/or (b) the study included a discussion of student persistence as it pertains to female FGCSs. We excluded articles that did not meet those criteria, and these processes yielded 150 articles. We then reviewed each article's introduction, methods, and findings to determine if the article helped answer our research question. Given that this study was primarily concerned with the breadth of research on female FGCSs, the review did not adhere to a specific definition of the term *first-generation college student* during the analysis. Most of the excluded articles did not discuss female FGCSs' experience or persistence while pursuing a higher education degree. While some discussed FGCS retention, they did not consider gender as a factor. Since these articles did not answer this study's research question, they were excluded from the review. This process reduced the results to 13 studies; 12 were conducted in the United States, and one was conducted in Australia. The search did not restrict the review to a particular type of higher education

institution. Of the 13 selected studies, 11 focused on female FGCSs attending a four-year college or university, while just two focused on female FGCSs attending a community college. Table 1 presents a summary of the studies included in the analysis.

**Table 1. Summary of the 13 Studies**

Author(s)/Year	Methods	Participants	Key Findings
Braswell (2010)	Qualitative (autobiography timelines, interviews, reflective journaling)	5 African American FGCSs attending different post-secondary institutions in the southeastern United States	Four major themes of motherhood, personal influence, grade point average (GPA), and full-time employment. Wanted to set an example for children, maintained a high GPA, were personally influenced by others, such as family or friends, and worked full time increased their motivation to maintain their high GPAs.
Eitel & Martin (2009)	Mixed-Method (survey, focus groups)	204 female FGCSs at a university	Female FGCSs not financially literate.
Gibbons & Woodside (2014)	Qualitative (two phenomenological studies)	17 participants whose parents had no education beyond high school (11 women, six men); all from one southeastern state	For the women, these themes shaped their career and work experiences: perseverance, being a daughter/woman, support and encouragement, what matters, why chose, and limits and options.
Gloria & Castellanos (2012)	Qualitative (interviews)	7 Latina first-generation college students attending four-year research institution	The overarching theme was the role of the family and how their needs take precedence over individual needs. The family is critical to the needs of Latina FGCS academic success and coping.
Jobe (2013)	Qualitative (interviews, observation)	10 African American FGCS (low income, single parent, age 19 and older)	Findings show several themes: superwoman identity (taking on multiple roles), time management restraints, unprepared for college due to limited preparation and knowledge, under-resourced financially, coping with relieving stress through prayer and spirituality, and motivation to wanting a better life for children.
Leyva (2011)	Qualitative (in-depth interviews)	6 Latina FGCSs, MSW (Master of Social Work) graduates	Findings reflect on issues of belonging, intense feelings of serving others, particularly father and husband, anticipating others' needs, feelings of submission in the household.
Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder (2012)	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews)	10 women transitioning from childhood poverty to adult life	Facilitators of change, such as structured programs, contributed to well-being; mental health professionals, family, romantic partners, the pursuit of education, and stigma of poverty all influenced change; having a baby was the most significant influencer of coming out of poverty.
Neumeister & Rinker (2006)	Qualitative (interviews)	4 high-achieving female FGCSs	Emerging professional identity was a primary influencer on achievement.
O'Shea (2015)	Qualitative (narrative inquiry; semi-structured interviews)	17 female FGCSs	Differing types of cultural capital that students arrive with; female FGCSs do not lack cultural capital but have different capital (aspirational capital, familial capital, etc.). Female FGCS should not be stigmatized as lacking specific capital.
Parsons (2012)	Qualitative (interviews)	8 female FGCSs in TRiO program	The TRiO program gave FGCSs a place of community with other students who were also the first-generation. It helped FGCSs learn their worth, discover how to seek support and help, understand it is okay to ask for help, and learn how to foster individual achievement.
Rascon (2012)	Qualitative (small focus groups & individual interviews)	8 female FGCSs (undergraduates) from a university	Issues that FGCSs shared were related to family and peer support, society role-expectations, self-development, decision-making, health-related behaviors, emotional well-being, student engagement, and student support services.
Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert (2011)	Quantitative (survey)	339 women about to enter college (both FGCS and non-FGCS) at a university in southern California	First-generation students perceive less emotional and informational parent support than do continuing-generation students. FGCSs who perceive higher levels of parent emotional support have less stress than those who do not. Neither type of parent support significantly predicted stress levels for continuing-generation students.
Wilson & Kittleson (2013)	Qualitative (interviews)	10 female FGCS science majors	Common tensions included differing experiences in lecture and lab, managing time to work, studying, maintaining family relationships, and weighing their personal (family) priorities against the longer time.

*Note.* FGCS = First-Generation College Student; TRiO = Federally funded (U.S.) programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities

Using a thematic analysis based on a grounded theory approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we analyzed the findings from 13 studies. We identified common patterns, categories, and codes across the studies that appeared to influence the dropout of female FGCSs (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following a rigorous strategy emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2006), we thoroughly reviewed the 13 studies chosen, created initial codes, looked for themes within these codes, reviewed and revised them together, and finally described the codes to produce this review. These collaborative steps were undertaken as an iterative process and were not linear.

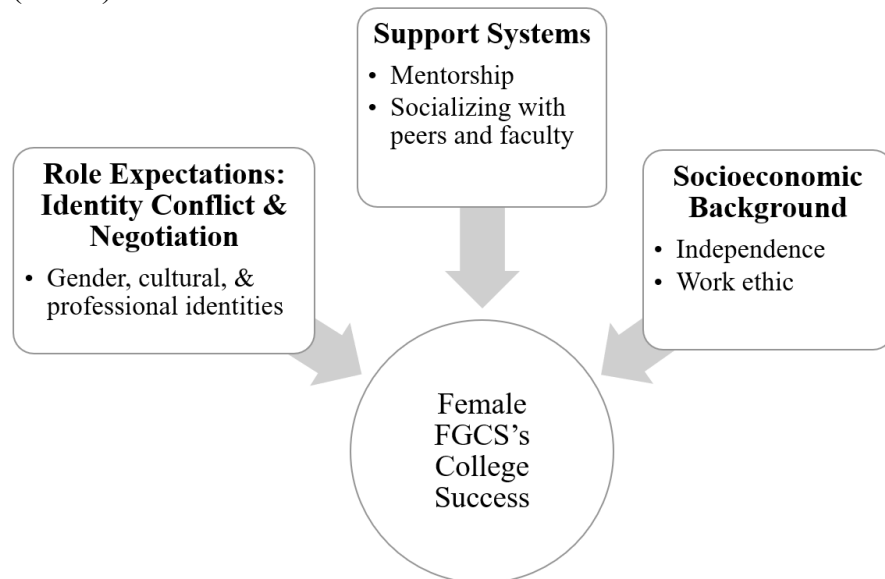
## Findings

An analysis of 13 studies identified three dimensions of challenges that the female FGCSs experienced while enrolled in college. As described in Figure 1, identity, support system, and socioeconomic status were identified across the selected studies. Specifically, key barriers shaped their college experiences, such as the multiple roles that female FGCSs fill, which led to challenges negotiating identity, insufficient support from family, friends, faculty, and low socioeconomic backgrounds. These challenges shed light on the possibility that the experiences of female FGCSs are distinct from male FGCSs, leading to more significant challenges and increased attrition. Importantly, for female FGCSs who were less supported than males by their family, institutional support was an essential contributor to college persistence (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Leyva, 2011; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). The following sections summarize the common narratives from the 13 studies, provide insights into the experiences of female FGCSs, and identify the factors that were related to female FGCS retention and degree completion.

### *Role Expectations: Identity Conflict and Negotiation*

A review of these studies demonstrated that female FGCSs come from a wide variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some female FGCSs are likely to have diverse family responsibilities, such as being caretakers of the home, or being wives, mothers, or single mothers, while others may have recently graduated from high school and aspired to pursue a different path than those taken by parents or siblings (Leyva, 2011; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Wilson & Cox, 2011). Many female FGCSs were found to pursue college to overcome poverty, experience social mobility, or improve options for their future and the future of their family (Leyva, 2011; Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2012). However, the various roles that female FGCSs were found to fill created challenges as they negotiated their experiences during post-secondary education. While female FGCSs who were younger found it easier to see themselves as college students, older female FGCSs found it challenging to adjust to their identity, given their various roles (O'Shea, 2011). Many juggled multiple identities due to the expectations of other family members, such as being a mother first, being a full-time worker, or dealing with the expectation that they maintain traditional gender roles (e.g., cooking, cleaning, childcare). These created additional cognitive load and time pressures for these students (Leyva, 2011). Some female FGCSs feared that pursuing an advanced education could create barriers and weaken their family ties; other females found that their college success was enhanced because they were willing to examine their identity (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Some female FGCSs never saw themselves as *college students* until after they completed college (Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2012). It was at that point that they recognized the process of assuming a new identity as a college student and then as a college graduate (Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2012; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2014).

**Figure 1.** Emerging Themes That May Contribute to Female First-Generation College Students’ (FGCS) Success



### *Role Expectations*

In several studies, the expectations these female students had for themselves and the expectations of an extended family had an impact on their experiences in college (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Jobe, 2013; Leyva, 2011). For female students who were older and married with children, it was hard for their family to understand why they were attending college; the family felt they should be at home with their children and taking care of the household (Leyva, 2011). In her study of first-generation Latina graduate students, Leyva (2011) explained that her participants found it very emotionally taxing to balance the expectations of their husbands and boyfriends. This was mainly due to the embedded cultural values that the role of the female was to anticipate the needs of the household and be submissive in their relationship. In another study, O’Shea (2014) interviewed a participant who described her husband’s disinterest in her pursuit of college, while another participant felt that her husband was a bit threatened by her decision to enroll in college. This participant also mentioned that she intended to keep her family life and school life separate, mainly because her husband was not supportive of her choice to attend college (O’Shea, 2014). In Gibbons and Woodside’s (2014) study, a participant stated that girls in her family were not expected to go to college while boys were forced to pursue higher education by parents. Gender role expectations and stereotypes appeared to create tension between parents and female FGCSs when they decided to go to college.

On the other hand, when younger female students attended college to provide themselves with a better future, some mentioned the internal struggle with personal goals and academic goals. In the Wilson & Kittleson (2013) study, which focused on two white female FGCSs majoring in science, one participant mentioned that her mother felt as though her priorities had been misplaced. Her mother did not understand why she was holding off on starting a family and felt that she should focus on family-related goals rather than academic goals. Another participant in the study stated she felt that “not only her social class position but also her gender made weighing the importance of her academic and personal goals more complex” (Wilson & Kittleson, 2013, p. 817). She

recognized that continuing her education in science meant delaying the start of a family. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) found that their participants resisted the gender role expectations their families valued, valuing their own career goals over starting a family. Overall, the female FGCSs who participated in these studies seemed to be aware of tensions covering multiple dimensions, such as gender roles, culture, and professional identities.

### *Negotiating and Developing Identities*

The process of identifying oneself as a college student is vital to the student's sense of belonging and a sense of fit within the university. This process looked different for the female FGCSs in some studies (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2011, 2015). For younger females who did not delay college enrollment, this process often seemed quite critical, more so than for female FGCSs who delayed college enrollment (O'Shea, 2015). Some of the older female participants mentioned their tendency not to tell people they were a college student for fear that others would think they were bragging. In contrast, others found it difficult to call themselves college students due to their feelings of being an imposter (O'Shea, 2011). For those who were 21 or older, because their university identified them as *mature-aged students*, some females found it even more challenging to find a sense of fit in the university landscape (O'Shea, 2015). Most female participants mentioned how exploring their identity as a college student and future college graduate with a profession helped them develop their perceptions about their lives and their values as college students (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2011). Many believed that allowing themselves to explore their identities, away from those given to them as a mother or a wife, also helped them to gain a sense of belonging at college, which ultimately resulted in their success throughout the college experience (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2011, 2015).

### *Support Systems*

Throughout the analysis of this study, research on female FGCSs support systems—or lack thereof—was a recurring theme. Several studies cited the value of family support, building a network of educated peers, and mentorships (Leyva, 2011; Green, 2015; Olson, 2010; Parsons, 2012; Porter & Dean, 2015). Others mentioned the importance of academically minded friends and faculty relationships for support during these students' educational journeys (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2014; Rascon, 2012).

### *Family Support*

Twelve of the studies analyzed in this review revealed that female FGCSs often reported limited support from their family (Leyva, 2011; O'Shea, 2014; Wilson & Kittleson, 2013). One participant in Rascon's (2012) study mentioned that the minimal support she received was due to her family members' lack of knowledge about college, rather than not supporting her decision to go to college. For those whose family members had no college experience, it was hard for students to share the meaning of going to college and the norms and culture of being a college student with their family. Some female FGCSs were scolded by family members who did not understand the pursuit of education over buying a home, marrying, or starting a family. Others indicated that their family members suggested that attending college was an attempt to avoid working (Leyva, 2011). Sy et al. (2011) explored the first-year transition experiences of female FGCSs and non-FGC female students. They found that female FGCSs reported significantly lower levels of parental emotional



and informational support than non-FGCSs. For the female FGCSs who had parental emotional support, this helped alleviate their stress. However, it did not significantly influence the stress of non-FGC female students during the first year of college.

### *Socializing With Peers and Faculty*

Several studies showed that it was important for female FGCS to surround themselves with the right group of peers to gain support. Female FGCSs interviewed by Wilson and Kittleson (2013) indicated that when they went to college, the support of their friends changed. One participant mentioned that the outlook of her high school friends, who did not attend college, was different from her emerging outlook; she was afraid that these friends might impede her from accomplishing her goals. On the other hand, when female FGCSs spent time with educated/high-achieving peers, they developed an expanded perspective; different from the perspectives that surrounded them while growing up (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Having friendships with these high-achieving peers helped female FGCSs develop professional identities, set a high standard in their academic work, and establish role models while they pursued their academic and career goals (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006).

O'Shea's (2015) study on female FGCSs entering their first year of college brought attention to another critical attribute of these students—their age. Many female FGCSs are nontraditional and older; they are either returning to college after a break or entering college for the first time. These older female students mentioned the importance of seeking relationships with other females in the same age range as themselves; merely knowing that others like them were going through the college experience provided a sense of support.

In addition to peers, faculty advisors were also viewed as a critical component in female FGCSs systems of support. In Rascon's (2012) study, a participant expressed the importance of having faculty and college peers available for emotional support by stating that she would not be where she is without the guidance of one of her faculty advisors (Rascon, 2012). In Gibbons and Woodside's (2014) study, a female participant stated that having professors who encouraged her to engage in academic work helped motivate her to succeed and persist.

### *Mentorships*

For the female FGCSs who did persevere to graduation, mentorships appeared to be a common factor in promoting the success of these students. Several studies cited that having a mentor was a critical factor for female FGCS success in college (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Green, 2015; Leyva, 2011; Olson, 2010; Parsons, 2012). In many cases, a mentoring relationship with a FGCS who had experienced some success encouraged future success and provided tangible evidence that it was possible to forge a path through college (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Leyva, 2011; Parsons, 2012). Leyva (2011) found that one-on-one guidance, which addressed the specific challenges faced by female FGCSs, was very beneficial.

For the female FGCSs who graduated, the transition from college to work was challenging. However, Leyva (2011) argued that finding a mentor from a similar cultural background can be helpful when students begin their professional careers. Specifically, Leyva (2011) highlighted that Latinas who were able to connect with a Latina mentor in a similar line of work benefited from

the relationship as the mentor understood the cultural challenges surrounding the choice not to stay home and instead enter the workforce. Leyva (2011) posited that this mentoring supported and empowered the female FGCS graduate in their decision to become professionals in a specific career.

### ***Socioeconomic Background: Challenges Become Strengths***

While female FGCSs are often assumed to be disadvantaged by their socioeconomic backgrounds when pursuing higher education, Benoit et al. (2018) found that coming from a working-class background shaped students' identities and the way they navigated their journey through college. Regarding this, Lubrano (2004) discussed the tensions between life/work and study that can arise for individuals from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. Some female FGCSs who were interviewed in selected studies indicated that their working-class background helped them succeed in college because they started working for pay at an early age and often shared the financial burdens of their family (Lubrano, 2004). This helped them develop a strong work ethic as well as independence, two characteristics they felt were important contributors to their persistence in college (Braswell, 2010; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Olson, 2010). In Neumeister and Rinker's (2006) study, one participant mentioned that she had to work while she was in high school and thus had been financially independent long before entering college. It was commonly mentioned that working was a higher priority than studying because of financial burdens (Eitel & Martin, 2009); time management was also seen as critical for balancing their studies while working full-time (Wilson & Kittleson, 2013).

Not only were they financially independent, but female FGCSs also tended to be accustomed to supporting themselves at a young age. Another participant in Neumeister and Rinker's (2006) study mentioned that because her parents had to work to support their family, she was often left to make decisions for herself. Most of the participants emphasized the mindset that their parents instilled and the importance of taking care of themselves. As a result, they felt these values helped prepare them to solve problems and persevere through college (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). The consensus among the female FGCSs in these studies was that they did not see their socioeconomic background as a disadvantage; instead, they reflected a working-class background as a reality that allowed them to figure out what it meant to work hard and develop the traits and strategies to navigate the college experience (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006).

### **Discussion**

Although FGCSs face similar challenges and share similar characteristics, our study found that female FGCS-related research articles provided an insight that these factors may not be easily observed or considered in college environments. In particular, female FGCSs experienced conflicts across multiple identities and struggled to balance multidimensional identities or role expectations from cultural or family contexts. Female FGCSs tended to advocate for their aspirations for higher education within their family, which added to the pressures that female FGCSs experienced; this was especially true if they felt unsupported by family members or social networks. This was even more prevalent for female FGCSs, compared to male FGCSs, because of the unique expectations of *female* family and societal roles as well as financial pressures to begin work immediately in order to provide for their families. The latter was particularly true for single mothers. As a result, academic responsibilities were not prioritized (Leyva, 2011; Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder,

2012). Thus, the pressure for female FGCSs to fulfill various roles and responsibilities could be contributing to lower rates of college degree attainment. As Covey (2013) suggested, the urgent (e.g., cooking, cleaning, managing the family) often interrupts the important (e.g., school responsibilities, career development). Juggling these various roles can be confusing and may not leave much spare time or margin for negotiating complex roles. This could further limit female FGCSs' participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that have been shown to promote student success (Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004).

This study's findings revealed a unique pressure that female FGCSs face: the complex dynamics of family support for FGCSs. For some, the family may not understand the drive their child (or sibling) has to attend college. In other cases, the family may be enthusiastically supportive of the student's pursuit of college but unaware of the time that students need to spend outside of class to complete assignments or to participate in career-building activities. Many working-class families are strongly committed to work (Benoit et al., 2018). Therefore, at times, the choice to pursue higher education is seen as an attempt to avoid work, even if their child is working while attending school. Time spent in school may be seen as neglecting parental or housekeeping duties. These conflicting priorities can further raise the stakes on an already stressful choice (i.e., returning to college), adding pressure and feeding doubts these students may already feel about what they are choosing to do with their life. Also, female FGCSs' choices of academic majors may create confusion or tension if the student's family does not see a clear connection between that course of study and *real* work (Olson, 2016). While the desire to obtain their education may remain stable, female FGCSs navigate a wide range of challenges during the pursuit of their degree. For some, this strengthens their resolve. However, for others, the barriers seem insurmountable, which can lead to a decision not to persist in their education.

Overall, female participants in the selected studies commonly mentioned the importance of interacting and socializing with peers and faculty within their collegiate institutions. Thus, continued emotional support and encouragement by these individuals may improve the success of female FGCSs. This study's findings also highlight the importance of opportunities for these students to network, not only with other female FGCSs but also with female FGC graduates. Providing direct opportunities for mentoring to occur, where these students can connect with other females who have gone through the process of college and faced similar barriers, should be a priority in collegiate programming and curriculum development (Kim & Hwang, 2015; Kim et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2015; Porter & Dean, 2015).

### ***Academic Implications***

This systematic review indicated there are multiple aspects to the identity of female FGCSs. Throughout the analysis, a recurring theme emerged; female FGCSs face unique challenges during their educational journey, and their attrition rates are higher than that of their male FGCS peers. While it is apparent that these unique challenges could be a factor in their higher attrition rates, existing research has not analyzed this from a feminist perspective.

Moreover, current research does not adequately consider the overlapping identities of female FGCSs. For instance, when grouping FGCS statistics, research mentions that FGCSs, in general, are more likely to be married or have children, but it does not consider specifically how these other roles may affect FGCSs. As this review demonstrates, these other identities and roles that female

FGCSs fulfill could impede their college success. Orbe (2004) argued that studies concerning the FGCS population should focus on identity negotiation among these students and:

Acknowledge that the salience of FGC student status will vary among participants. Research that takes such an approach can apply and extend current communication theories regarding identity negotiation, as well as offer practical guidance to educators who are interested in maximizing the educational experiences of all of their students. (p. 133)

For this reason, an intersectional approach regarding female FGCSs could be beneficial to truly understanding how their overlapping identities as females and FGCSs may shape their college experience. Taking an intersectional theory approach would allow researchers to understand even more thoroughly the impact of the multiple aspects of female FGCSs' identities, the multiple oppressions they potentially face, and how these factors influence their experience during and following college (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). This approach could lead to better resources to meet these students' needs, potentially increasing their retention and graduation rates.

### ***Practical Implications***

Because this review aspires to encourage the exploration of what female FGCSs need, it is essential to heed the research findings that have emerged thus far. This review focused on what research has shown to help female FGCSs succeed in college, including developing mentor relationships, establishing connections with others who also identify as FGCSs, and exploring their identity as a college student. By focusing on these areas, universities can begin to implement specific resources that could contribute to the retention and graduation completion rates of female FGCSs. Indeed, an emerging body of research that seeks to understand student resilience as a factor in student success may support faculty and student affairs professionals seeking to effectively meet female FGCSs' needs (Houston et al., 2017; Robbins et al., 2018). An essential first step would be to promote training and development around these issues, both the challenges faced by female FGCSs and the potential for those challenges to be reframed as strengths for faculty and staff alike.

Centers at universities that provide resources to all FGCSs should be intentional about pairing mentors with female FGCSs. They should increase the opportunities for these relationships to occur and consider making their participation a requirement for female FGCSs. As part of their programming, mentors could discuss how to manage time effectively, help the students develop a schedule that balances their multiple roles, offer general encouragement for success, and provide a familiar perspective as someone who understands what the students are going through. Mentors could also help these students recognize, and better utilize, their unique skills as female FGCSs, such as a strong work ethic or the ability to function independently.

Providing resources and information to female FGCSs about the process they may go through as they explore their new identity as a college student may encourage reflection on this process; the literature suggests this could lead to improved success in college (Neumeister, & Rinker, 2006; O'Shea, 2011, 2015). Lubrano (2004) suggested FGCSs may not be familiar with particular social and professional norms (e.g., building a professional network or navigating office politics). Therefore, institutions that seek to provide comprehensive support for FGCSs should look for ways to help students develop both networking relationships and essential soft skills as they begin their careers. Career Services offices and Alumni Relations departments can play a crucial role in

connecting female FGCSs, particularly with alumni who are skilled in these areas who also desire to support the next generation of graduates.

Embedded in each of these suggestions is an acknowledgment of the often-unspoken rule that culture of origin may affect the experiences of female FGCSs. Leyva (2011) and Gloria and Castellanos (2012) highlighted the impact of cultural expectations regarding *home* and *family* that shape the educational aspirations and experiences of Latina FGCSs; these cultural norms likely have an impact on students from other backgrounds as well. Institutions who seek to support their female FGCSs will strive to be culturally responsive to these needs when advising students, matching mentors with mentees, and creating supportive programming.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

There is currently a lack of targeted research to provide evidence of the unique needs of female FGCSs. Currently, the literature focuses on the broad population of FGCSs. While this broad research is needed, future research on female FGCSs should also explore the experience of these students at various types of institutions and programs, such as elite institutions, community colleges, and trade/certificate programs; as well as various types of living situations, such as living on campus or commuting.

Most critically, perhaps, the studies reviewed here rely primarily on qualitative approaches and small sample sizes. While these designs allow for a nuanced understanding of the experiences of female FGCSs, they also limit generalizability. Researchers should pursue quantitative and mixed-methods studies, which are more likely to capture the attention and imagination of administrators and policymakers. At the very least, future research should explore the barriers that exist to quantitative approaches around this topic.

### **Conclusions**

This review explored the challenges of female FGCSs during their college enrollment and identified common experiences that may impact their college persistence. We acknowledge that all FGCSs, regardless of gender, face challenges, and we do not intend to undermine or diminish the needs of male FGCSs. However, this review highlighted three common elements that female FGCSs mentioned as challenges: identity negotiation and development, support systems, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This review's findings demonstrate that female FGCSs need more targeted resources to promote their retention and college success. Meeting these needs more effectively will likely support the retention goals of higher education institutions and promote the educational goals of female FGCSs as they pursue their degree credentials and future careers.

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