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DEFYING THE ODDS: EXPLORING THE WAYS FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE
STUDENTS ENACT RESILIENCE

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky

By

Paris Lauren Nelson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Renee Kaufmann, Assistant Professor of Communication

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2020

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

DEFYING THE ODDS: EXPLORING THE WAYS FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS ENACT RESILIENCE

This thesis examined the experiences of first-generation college students in the context of higher education. This thesis was framed by the communication theory of resilience to discover how first-generation college students enact five processes of resilience: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, employing alternate logics, and foregrounding productive action. First-generation college students face academic preparation, financial, social capital, personal, and college completion adversities that may necessitate engagement in resilience processes. Participants ($N = 8$) participated in focus groups and interviews where they discussed messages from family, peers, and university faculty and staff involving reactive and proactive resilience processes. Results showed that first-generation college student engage in all five processes of resilience with peers and university faculty and staff and four processes of resilience with family. Implications for theory, limitations, and future directions for research directions for research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Communication Theory of Resilience, First-Generation College Students,
Focus Groups, Interviews, Resilience

_____ Paris Lauren Nelson

_____ April 15, 2020

DEFYING THE ODDS: EXPLORING THE WAYS FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE
STUDENTS ENACT RESILIENCE

By

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Date

For dad-

*To the calloused hands
that turned book pages for me.*

Thank you, draggle dad.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As demand increases in the job market for a highly trained workforce (Carnevale et al., 2010), the burden falls upon the shoulders of today's students to obtain continued education and training via higher education. Industries such as STEM, healthcare, and community services are rapidly growing and require higher levels of educational attainment from their potential employees. In 2016, 37% of occupations in the U.S. required some postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Additionally, out of the 30 fastest-growing occupations in the U.S. from 2018 and projected through 2028, 18 occupations require some postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). These statistics suggests that there is a growing industry need for individuals with training that exceeds a high school diploma, thus underscoring the need for education systems to effectively support students as they transition to higher education and attain degrees.

Further, for many students, the transition from high school to college can be an exciting experience as they leave home to pursue a degree that will prepare them for a career. However, the transition to and experience in education is often rife with adversity for first-generation college (FGC) students. The Higher Education Act Amendments (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) defines a FGC student as any student from a family where neither parent completed a Bachelor's degree. These students have reported experiencing difficulty integrating into higher education culture as well as feelings of survival guilt, imposter syndrome, and even lower graduation rates (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Graham, 2011; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998;

Orbe, 2004; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2014b).

In contrast, FGC student peer-counterparts, also known as continuing generation college (CGC) students, come into higher education equipped with the social capital. Social capital is defined as “the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network or more or less institutional relationships” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). CGC student equipped with social capital are better prepared to navigate the college experience and transition to college confident in their feelings of belonging in higher education and persist to graduation (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). For FGC students, the transition to college is often turbulent and fraught with obstacles that inhibit success.

Scholars have outlined a litany of adversities for FGC students, which broaden the gap in achievement such as the lack of academic preparation (Bragg et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2017; Choy, 2001; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Planty et al., 2006; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2012, 2014a, 2014b), financial hardships (Furquim et al., 2017; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Tate et al., 2013), lack of social capital (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2012, 2014b), personal adversities (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2004, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2014a, 2014b) and reduced likelihood of college completion (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez &

Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). All of these adversities greatly influence FGC student success in higher education.

Further, FGC students face many of these adversities as they transition from high school to college, which begins their negotiation of their home and college life identities (Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2004, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013). But, while there is ample research exploring the adversities FGC students face, instructional communication research, specifically, lacks studies that delve into the communicative processes that FGC students may enact to successfully matriculate to and complete college. More specifically, the research has yet to explore how resilience may be enacted in this group.

As FGC students are called to “pull up by their bootstraps,” FGC student family, peers, even university faculty and staff may not ensure that every student has “boots” (i.e., the means or resources necessary to do so). This metaphor highlights the inequity that pervades the FGC student experience. FGC students must strive to achieve a college diploma to meet the growing demands of the job market (Carnevale et al., 2010) but do not start with the same advantages or support as other students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Wang, 2012; 2014a). Taken together, in many ways, FGC students must engage in a process of resilience that empowers them to construct and reintegrate normalcy in order to defy the odds before them (Buzzanell, 2010; Richardson, 2002).

Extant literature applying the communication theory of resilience (CTR; Buzzanell, 2010; 2018) is slim and conceptually vague (Afifi, 2018). Applying CTR to better understand what messages FGC students receive and how those messages

contribute to resilience processes may provide a theoretical framework for understanding the FGC student experience with enacting resilience. This is a rich area of inquiry that has yet to be explored.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis was twofold. First, to explore the FGC student college experience through the lens of CTR, which may offer an expansion of the theory's application to a new population and insights for the individual and relational studies of resilience. Second, to uncover ways in which FGC students have engaged in the processes of resilience. Taken together, this thesis was led by one overarching question:

“What ways do first-generation college students engage in the resilience process?”

The following chapter provides an overview of the literature on FGC student adversity and the five processes of resilience, which presents an argument for the study of FGC student resilience.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The current literature on the study of resilience spans a variety of disciplines and paradigms. Therefore, in order to explore the study of resilience as a uniquely communicative phenomenon, which may have implications for first generation students, an understanding of previous work and background concepts is needed. Further, the development of a deeper understanding of specific FGC student experiences with adversity as well as identification of possible processes of FGC student resilience expands the literature to a unique group as well as provides an additional layer to the conceptualization and body of work regarding resilience.

First Generation College Students

In order to understand how FGC students may enact resilience, an understanding of FGC student experiences with adversity (i.e., trigger events) is necessary as it begins early in their academic careers. These experiences are filled with outcomes that may cascade and follow them into higher education (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2012; Wang, 2014b). Thus, identifying adversities FGC students face will provide a clearer understanding for how higher education and other FGC student stakeholders may assist with the transition and continuance of their academic journey.

Five common adversities have been identified in the literature on FGC students: *academic preparation* (Chen et al., 2017; Choy, 2001; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Planty et al., 2006; Tate et al., 2013), *financial barriers* (Furquim et al., 2017; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Tate et al., 2013), *lack of social capital* (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019, Wang, 2012), *personal adversities* (Blackwell &

Pinder, 2014; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008), and *college completion* (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

First, FGC students often lack adequate *academic preparation*. Often, FGC students do not take appropriate courses in high school to be prepared for college unlike their continuing generation college student (CGC student) peers (Chen et al., 2017; Choy, 2001; Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Planty et al., 2006; Tate et al., 2013). National data which examined course taking patterns, academic performance, and academic preparation of the 2003-2004 high school graduating cohort suggested that FGC students were less likely to take academically focused curriculum characterized by “a minimum of four credits of English; one credit of mathematics higher than algebra II and any two other credits in math; one science credit higher than general biology and any two other credits in science; one credit of social studies in U.S. or world history and any two other credits in social studies; and two credits in a single foreign language” (Planty et al., 2006, p. 8). Additionally, FGC students were also less likely to earn AP or IB credits, take high-level math courses (e.g., statistics, precalculus, or calculus; Planty et al., 2006), and graduate with a regular high school diploma or equivalency when compared to their CGC student peers (Chen et al., 2017). Analyses conducted on the data from this study exemplified the differences that exist in FGC student academic preparation and established the start for understanding the academic hardship and adversity for most FGC students. K-12 educational experiences impact college performance and psychological health (Tinto, 1993). FGC students are less likely to take rigorous high school courses if their parents did not take rigorous high school courses, are less likely to take college entrance exams,

report lower entrance exam scores, and report lower first-year college GPAs than their CGC student peers (Warburton et al., 2001). Therefore, logically, there is a connection between formative educational experiences, FGC student status, and college outcomes.

Pascarella et al., (2004) said it best, “Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (p. 250). Therefore, the lack of academic preparation documented among FGC students may present adversities in college that necessitate FGC students to enact resilience processes. As resilience is co-constructed through communication with others (Buzzanell, 2010; Buzzanell, 2018), FGC students may not be able to adequately engage in resilience construction due to a lack of parental knowledge and experience. Parental lack of higher education experience may then predispose FGC students to engage in less resilience processes with family, as parents may be unequipped to communicate resilience messages. This may have deleterious effects on students before gaining access to social capital yielding university peers, faculty, and staff.

Second, FGC students often faced significant *financial hardship*, which creates barriers to higher education access (Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Tate et al., 2013). Redford and Hoyer (2017) explained that FGC students were more likely to come from lower income households (e.g., incomes lower than \$50,000) and that many FGC students left college before graduating due to the financial burden and lack of financial access. Additionally, FGC students are burdened with more student loans in higher amounts than their CGC student peers (Furquim et al., 2017). Further, FGC students are less likely to have the necessary amount of funding to support their efforts to achieve a

four-year degree such as college entrance exam fees, entrance exam preparation courses, dual enrollment/AP courses, and college application fees (Graham, 2011). Aside from merely affording college, FGC students often lacked the resources to apply to college. Thus, historically, they are frequently taking on the primary burden of financially supporting their education, while working more hours in an off-campus job than their CGC student counterparts (Saenz et al., 2007). FGC students must enact resilience processes to negotiate the many demands on their mental and physical energy such as the stress and effort invested to obtain funding for college and balancing work and school.

Third, FGC students faced *a lack of social capital* (e.g., knowledge about and comfort accessing office hours, understanding course syllabi, navigating unwritten rules of courses and instructors). Many FGC students experienced a lack of social support specifically with their parents. Generally, FGC student parents were unable to provide support due to their lack of experience. Specifically, this lack of support problematized many FGC students ability to navigate processes needed to gain admittance to a university (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Wang, 2012; 2014a) and socially integrate into the college culture (Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Wang, 2014b). This lack of support caused FGC students to feel disconnected and misunderstood from family (Davis, 2010). Due to this lack of social capital, FGC students struggled locating a stable support system to guide them through their higher education journey (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Choy, 2001; Wang, 2014a, 2014b). Davis (2010) reported that FGC students likely limit themselves to “one or two sources of information on the culture of a college” (p. 30). A lack of parental involvement and guidance has had an impact of FGC students enduring through the

process of seeking higher education and contributed to the disparity between persistence and attainment of a four-year degree. Therefore, gaining access through maintaining and using additional communication networks with individuals outside of family may be a powerful strategy for FGC students to engage in resilience processes as they work to gain social capital from members outside of family.

Fourth, FGC students experience many *personal adversities* such as feelings of inadequacy, survivor's guilt, pressures to succeed, imposter syndrome, and intersecting marginalities (Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Orbe, 2008; Tate et al., 2013). These feelings often arise from FGC students believing that they are responsible for representing their respective groups of people, which can add high levels of stress (Orbe, 2008). In a study by Blackwell and Pinder (2014), FGC students' feelings of inadequacy often occurred due to lack of exposure to individuals like them who have obtained college degrees; this is particularly significant for minority FGC students. Intersecting marginalities complicate the already subjugated identity of being a FGC student with students negotiating intersections of FGC student, income, family role (e.g. caregiver), and race/ethnicity identities (Nuru et al., 2019). FGC students also reported feeling disloyal or guilty for their more advantageous position in life as they consider the difference between their families and peers (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Somers et al., 2004). In sum, FGC students experienced much more than the day-to-day stress of college and navigated intersecting marginalities (Nuru et al., 2019) of personal adversities. Therein, enacted resilience to bely these adversities was important to ensure persistence and graduation. Family, peers, and university faculty and staff may play important roles in offering social support through maintaining and using their communication networks

with FGC students, affirming FGC student identity anchors, and assisting in crafting normalcy in the foreign college environment (Buzzanell, 2010; Buzzanell, 2018).

Lastly, FGC students do not *complete college* at the rates of their CGC student peers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Only 27% of FGC students complete a bachelor's degree in four years, which is about half of the national average for CGC students (DeAngelo et al., 2011). In terms of enrollment, less than 75% of FGC students enroll in college while over 90% of CGC students enroll. Of the FGC students that do enroll, 33% leave college without earning a degree within three years of enrollment in comparison to the 14% of CGC students that drop out (Cataldi et al., 2018).

These five barriers that FGC students experience do contribute to a more challenging transition from high school to college, oftentimes leaving students straddling two distinct cultures: home and academia (Orbe, 2004, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2012, 2014a). The accumulation of these barriers cultivate an ongoing experience of adversity or a prolonged trigger event “or turning point that sets human sensemaking in motion” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 2) that may start the process of resilience in motion. Thus, as many of the aforementioned adversities compound to further widen the gap between FGC students and graduation, it is imperative to determine how FGC students enact resilience in order to persist to graduation. One way this can be investigated is through the identification of the various messages that FGC students receive that may help to bolster their resilience processes in the face of these adversities.

Communication Theory of Resilience

Research on resilience has been wrought with incongruous positions grappling with resilience as an outcome, predictor of stress reduction, process, or miscellany of psychological trait-like characteristics (Lee et al., 2013; Lucken & Gress, 2010). Generally, resilience has been conceptualized as a phenomenon “constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people’s abilities to create new normalcies” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 9). Theories like communication theory of resilience (CTR; Buzzanell, 2010; 2018) have presented resilience as a process that examines events with “multiple implications and multiple effects on the process, because of the need to account for temporal connections among events” (Poole, 2013, p. 380). Developing an understanding of the conceptualization of CTR and its applications is an important next step in applying CTR to this particular audience (i.e., FGC students) in the context of higher education. Therefore, resilience is deemed as a communication process that is ongoing, dynamic, and co-constructed, which is cultivated through the five distinct subprocesses (Buzzanell, 2010; 2018). In particular, a necessary element to consider in the resilience equation is how an individual enacts resilience.

Buzzanell (2010) pointed out that the occurrence of a “trigger event or turning point that sets human sensemaking in motion” (p. 2) should also be considered when examining resilience. A trigger event, outlined by Buzzanell, is a situation that causes an individual to seek additional understanding of a situation. For example, in the case of a FGC student, major and minor selection presented a trigger event that set sensemaking into motion (Wang, 2012). In interviews with FGC students, Wang (2012) reported how one student sought advice from their faculty advisor as they struggled to select a major and minor. While not explicitly studying resilience, this exchange between a faculty

advisor and student encapsulates how FGC students may be engaging in resilience processes. In this example, seeking advice and guidance through maintaining and using her communication network with a faculty advisor presented an opportunity to seek support for a stressful decision and enact resilience (Wang, 2012). Experiences such as this were commonplace within the higher education context and highlight the possible activation of resilience processes through communication with university faculty and staff.

Moreover, according to CTR, trigger events are considered the occurrences that activate resilience processes (Buzzanell, 2010; 2018). Notably, trigger events are not always episodic and are generally characterized by a “disruption to life” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 2), “relational turning points” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 100), or acknowledgement of the “accumulation of challenges and obstacles” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 100). Taken together, the activation of resilience may not always be reactive but may also be a proactive event (Buzzanell, 2018). Thus, in these cases where there may be no trigger event, communication processes may be embedded in everyday talk and stories (Buzzanell, 2018; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). For FGC students, these communicative interactions with family, peers, or other stakeholders (e.g., university faculty or staff) could cultivate resilience processes through learned behaviors and values (Buzzanell, 2018; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012).

As already noted, Buzzanell (2010; 2018) situated resilience as a uniquely communicative process. In the theory’s first introduction, resilience was seen primarily through the lens of social forces and interpretations that contributed to the five subprocesses of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018). While the five subprocesses (i.e., crafting

normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, employing alternative logics, and foregrounding productive action) are still maintained in updated work, one key change has occurred (i.e., use and incorporation of a distinctly critical approach to the study of resilience; Buzzanell, 2018). Therefore, rather than social forces and interpretations solely as the creators of resilience, CTR now considers the power imbalances of social structures that may minimize an individual's capacity to engage in resilience processes. Moreover, given that resilience is a dynamic process of meaning making that is constantly constructed and ever-evolving (Poole, 2008) and with considerations of the CTR literature, resilience is defined in this thesis as a *dynamic, co-constructive process that empowers individuals to adapt and/or transform, through five communicative subprocesses, to craft a new normalcy* (Buzzanell, 2010; Buzzanell, 2018; Poole, 2008; Richardson, 2002).

In sum, CTR is a relatively new theory and has been applied and clarified over time to offer a better operationalization of the five processes and to better acknowledge the inherent power disbalances that affect the resilience process. Therefore, given the review of literature and the overarching question for this thesis, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1a: What types of messages do FGC students identify receiving from their *family* about their trigger events?

RQ1b: What types of messages do FGC students identify receiving from their *peers* about their trigger events?

RQ1c: What types of messages do FGC students identify receiving from their *university faculty and staff* about their trigger events?

Notably, while previous literature has explored ways in which individuals enact resilience processes, little is known of how messages from different relationships like family, peers, and University stakeholders may impact FGC student resilience, which offers exciting opportunities for the study of FGC student resilience.

Five Processes of Resilience

CTR sought to provide an understanding of resilience as not a mere outcome or personality trait but as fundamentally constituted through communication (Buzzanell, 2010). The purported five communicative processes serve as a means for the development, maintenance, and growth of resilience. Further, there are multiple relationships and sources (e.g., family or peers), which resilience may be constructed, so too may the five processes overlap. Each of the five processes of resilience “are not mutually exclusive and are often entangled in complex ways” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 100). The five processes are outlined below: (a) *crafting normalcy*, (b) *affirming identity anchors*, (c) *maintaining and using communication networks*, (d) *putting alternative logics to work*, and (e) *downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions* (Buzzanell, 2010; 2018).

Crafting normalcy in the wake of a trigger event or adversity is produced through “a system of meanings” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 3) that empowers individuals, families, organizations, communities, and nations to enact resilience in order to “maintain the mundane, the regularities in life that previously would have gone unnoticed” (p. 3). This process involves everyday talk, routines, interactions, rituals, stories, and storytelling behaviors that both integrate an understanding of loss while also framing and retelling narratives with images of hope (Buzzanell, 2018). For example, the process of crafting

normalcy at work within the family illustrated the power of family rituals and activities for crafting normalcy in the wake of divorce “by creating a sense of stability, belonging, and normality” (Hutchinson et al., 2007, p. 41). Another example of the process of crafting normalcy may be seen in military spouses’ negotiation of their partner’s deployment, return, and redeployment (Villagran et al., 2013). These spouses often crafted normalcy through language that framed their relationships and routines as past and present to engage in resilience processes to deal with the inconsistencies of daily life that are integral to the experience of being a military spouse (Villagran et al., 2007). Lastly, this process may be seen in a study of resilience in families of divorce. For instance, a stepfather and stepson found playing soccer together as a way of engaging in a shared activity in a relationship that was once laden with conflict (Hutchinson et al., 2007). This study in particular highlighted how everyday conversations and activities help to produce or reproduce the “regularities of life” that craft a sense of normalcy (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 3). Given the literature on this particular process, for FGC students, this process might look like a collaborative exchange between family, peers, and university faculty and staff that helps to normalize everyday life in college. FGC students may struggle to craft normalcy in college due to experiences with social isolation and lack of social capital. For example, literature shows that FGC students report feelings of straddling home and college cultures (Orbe, 2004, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Tate et al., 2013; Wang, 2012, 2014). Perhaps developing new traditions with family, developing friendships with peers through engaging in everyday talk and activities, and learning more about the cultural norms and expectations of college from university faculty and staff help FGC students craft normalcy.

Next, *identity anchors* are defined as “a relatively enduring cluster of identity discourses upon which individuals and their familial, collegial, and/or community members rely when explaining who they are for themselves and in relation to each other” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4). This process illuminated what is considered most salient and important to individuals during hardship (Buzzanell, 2018). For example, in the wake of job loss, fathers and family members helped to forward messages of the father as masculine and a breadwinner to affirm important identity anchors for their father or husband (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Another example of identity anchors encompassed the process at work within disaster-relief workers (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015). For disaster-relief workers, three identity frames were found to sustain individual resilience processes: familial network ties between family, community, and colleagues; secular ideological values of humanitarianism and egalitarianism; and destruction-renewal network ties. (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015). For example, disaster-relief workers were more likely to remain involved when one of these identity anchors was affirmed, such as the affirmation of a connection to the organization’s values of egalitarianism through showing pride in their mutual organizational and personal values (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015). These identity frames illustrate the power of affirming specific identity anchors for resilience processes. Given the literature on this particular process, for FGC students, this process might look like a collaborative exchange between family, peers, and university faculty and staff that helps affirm identity anchors. As minority students are more likely to be FGC students than Caucasian students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), family, peers, and university faculty and staff may find ways to bolster student resilience processes by affirming identity anchors such as race. Perhaps by engaging in

cultural traditions or everyday talk that affirms FGC students and their many intersecting identities is a way for family, peers, and university faculty and staff to co-construct the resilience process with FGC students.

Maintaining and using communication networks is defined as a process that “enables people to draw upon their bonds with others through face-to-face communication and mediated communication” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 102). This process may also be conceived as a process of “building and utilizing social capital” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 6). Building on this conceptualization, Bourdieu’s (1986) definition of social capital may be used to understand maintaining and using communication networks as the connections between individuals, families, organizations, communities, and nations that contribute to “the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network or more or less institutional relationships” (p. 248). In the case of CTR, people generally draw upon their social capital first from strong ties, such as family or local community, in times of distress before seeking to develop new connections with others (Buzzanell, 2010; Doerfel et al., 2010; Harris & Doerfel, 2017). For example, in a network analysis of organizational resilience post-Katrina, scholars found that organizational relationship development prior to a disaster is a strong indicator of organizational resilience (Doerfel et al., 2013). Importantly, network development before disaster seemed to buffer the effects of hardship even in organizations that are “resource-vulnerable” or less insulated due to a reliance on financial resources through donations, grants, or a proximally close customer base (Doerfel et al., 2013). Another example of this process exemplified the exploration of women in rural, impoverished communities (Notter et al., 2008). Findings in this context, showed that mentors,

surrogate family members, faith, moves, and divorce served as opportunities to facilitate the resilience processes. The process of maintaining and using communication networks is deemed most salient in cases of building and using close ties with surrogate family members and mentors for the women in this study (Notter et al., 2008). Given the literature on this particular process, for FGC students, this process might look like a collaborative exchange between family, peers, and university faculty and staff that helps to maintain and use communication networks. For example, research shows that FGC students have fewer interactions with university faculty, are less likely to report positive interactions with university faculty (Kim & Sax, 2009), avoid participating in class discussion (Rendon, 1995), and feel isolated (Davis, 2010). Perhaps FGC students that co-construct resilience with peers and university faculty and staff may begin to reach out to develop new relationships, engage in more help seeking behaviors, and take part in recurring activities like extracurriculars or advising sessions.

The next process, *employing alternative logics*, is defined as systems that incorporate “seemingly contradictory ways of doing organizational work through development of alternative logics or through reframing the entire situation” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 6). This process is characterized by times when an individual’s patterns of responses to hardship no longer work (Weick, 1979, 1995) to sustain the resilience processes and must seek to identify a response to a trying and urgent need (Buzzanell, 2018). Buzzanell (2018) explicated this process later stating, “they skirt around rules and design new ways of handling problems, challenge the status quo, and live fully in the face of terminal illnesses- whatever they do, it is not ‘more of the same’” (pp. 102-103). Military spouses that reframed their hardship as an adventure or a lifestyle to celebrate

exemplify the alternate logics process (Villagran et al., 2013). In another example, individuals employ alternative logics in family conversations of economic adversity (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Lucas and Buzzanell (2012) found themes across multiple family discourses such as a focus on countable aspects of job loss rather than emotions, framing of economic hardship, problem solving through odd jobs, and the importance of being proactive in preparing for crisis. These themes showed evidence of the use of alternate logics, such as identifying odd jobs as a means of problem solving, and reframing through positioning job loss as “lean times” (p. 198). Given the literature on this particular process, for FGC students, this process might look like a collaborative exchange between family, peers, and university faculty and staff that helps employ alternate logics. For example, in a study on memorable messages FGC students received from university advisors, a FGC student was reminded to “remember their roots” (Wang, 2012, p. 249) which served as an alternate logic. This message encouraged him to consider putting his family before himself as a means to motivate him to persist to graduation. This example highlights one way that family, peers, and university faculty and staff may co-construct resilience processes about alternate logics.

Lastly, *foregrounding productive action* is defined as the “deliberate foregrounding of productive action while simultaneously acknowledging that the circumstances perceived as detrimental could legitimately provoke anger and other potentially negative feelings” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 7). This particular process is characterized as the “embodiment of resilience” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 101). Resilience may be embodied through deliberate efforts made during decision-making and messages of support to others that forwards positive communication (Buzzanell, 2018). An

example of this process is exemplified by a study on women's focus and balance of motherhood and career, which found that women often negotiated between the two conflicting goals in family and professional responsibilities. The process of foregrounding productive action may be seen at work here in the participant's open acceptance and embodiment of the hardships inherent to the competing priorities of parenthood and career (Gilbert & von Wallmenich, 2014). In another example, one of three themes of emotion work found in families experiencing job loss highlights the foregrounding productive action process of emotions (Buzzanell, 2010, 2018; Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). For instance, some participants who had experienced job loss backgrounded their initial feelings of anger and bitterness as a strategy to handle the intensity of those emotions and bolster their ability to find a new job. These individuals took "negative feelings off the table" (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003, p. 36) to focus on constructing a new normal for themselves and their families after job loss. Given the literature on this particular process, FGC students may receive messages from family, peers, and university faculty and staff that help them to engage in the process of foregrounding productive action. As outlined in this literature review, FGC students experience many adversities in their journey to and through higher education. These documented adversities offer opportunities for family, peers, and university faculty and staff to foreground productive action while simultaneously acknowledging the negative feelings associated with their experiences. For example, FGC students report receiving memorable messages from university mentors about increasing their future potential (Wang, 2012). This included highlighting greater financial stability and career options that come with obtaining a college degree.

Taken together, these five processes have highlighted the ways resilience processes may be constructed. Through deepening our understanding of how FGC students, in particular, may engage in these five processes of resilience, we may then begin to identify ways of instructing people to engage in or support others' resilience as well to develop context-specific message strategies. Currently, we are uncertain how these processes look for FGC students when a "trigger event" is more than a one-time, episodic event (e.g., such as divorce or devastating tornado). Further, we are uncertain how the culmination of adversity, such as that of the FGC student, may interact with resilience processes. Given that CTR has not been applied to the context of the FGC student experience in higher education and that there is little known about how FGC students engage in each of the five subprocesses of resilience, the following research questions are posed:

RQ2a: In what ways, if at all, do messages from *family* contribute to the processes of resilience?

RQ2b: In what ways, if at all, do messages from *peers* contribute to the processes of resilience?

RQ2c: In what ways, if at all, do messages from *university faculty and staff* contribute to the processes of resilience?

Summary

It is imperative to cultivate a higher education environment in which all students have equal access to the social capital needed to be successful. FGC students make up one third of today's college population (Campbell & Wescott, 2019) and yet do not achieve their degrees at the same rate as CGC student (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001;

Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Despite these daunting odds, some FGC students enact resilience and find ways to negotiate the foreign space and unique trigger events of higher education. Developing an understanding of the ways in which FGC students craft normalcy, affirm identity anchors, maintain and use communication networks, employ alternative logics, and foreground productive action is needed to create the informational fodder for change and support for these underserved students.

The following chapter provides an overview of the research methods to answer these research questions. Data collected through these methods was used to determine emerging themes in FGC student resilience.

Chapter Three: Methods

This thesis was situated in the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive scholars seek to understand what human action means to people (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). This paradigmatic focus allowed for robust understanding of the experiences of the participants' experiences. Further, I examined the messages and stories that affect FGC students' ability to engage in the processes of resilience. This approach allowed me to tap into in-depth contextual information, interpret, and contextualize the messages received by FGC students. Then I applied the five processes of Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience to make sense of FGC student resilience and to better understand whether the themes from FGC students' experiences would align theoretically.

Protocol Pilot Testing

Prior to conducting focus groups and interviews with participants, the question protocol was piloted with two undergraduate FGC students who served as model participants to help test the quality of the procedures and protocol (e.g., clear questions, effectiveness, and did not exceed allotted one hour). Undergraduate FGC students were selected due to the fact that they similar to the inclusion criteria of the targeted sample. Minor changes were made to the wording of the question protocol following pilot testing to enhance the clarity of the questions.

Participant Recruitment and Screening Procedures

Participants for this thesis were recruited through a research participation pool and via email listservs at a large Southeastern university. Individuals that were recruited from the research participation pool, met the sample requirements, and participated in the focus group or interview were awarded one research credit point to fulfill their course

requirement. A total of (N = 54) eligible participants signed-up to participate in the research. No individuals were recruited from the email listservs, which targeted FGC students. If individuals had been recruited, they would have received no incentive or reward for their participation.

In order to qualify for the focus group or interview, individuals that expressed interest in participating completed an online survey to identify and screen participants to ensure that they met inclusion criteria (See Appendix A). Participants who were enrolled in college courses, between the age of 18 and 99, met the definition of a FGC student as defined in the Higher Education Act Amendments of 1998 (i.e., neither parent completed a bachelor's degree; U.S Department of Education, 1998), and held junior or senior status qualified to participate. As juniors and seniors have experienced a minimum of two years of higher education, this population was selected for study in hopes of recruiting FGC students that had engaged in resilience processes with family, peers, and university faculty and staff.

The qualifying definition of a FGC student was used because this is the same language and parameters used by the federal government to determine if students qualify for FGC student-targeted federally funded programming (e.g., Talent Search, TRIO, Upward Bound, McNair Scholars). Next, individuals that qualified were invited via email to participate in focus groups or interviews. A total of fifty-four FGC students were determined as eligible to participate in this thesis. Of those invited participants, 8 consented and participated in either a focus group or interview.

Participant Demographics

The final participant sample ($N=8$) included seven females and one male. Participants were either juniors ($n = 5$) or seniors ($n = 3$). They included 62.5% Caucasian students, 25% Hispanic/Latinx students, and 12.5% Asian students. The participant ages ranged from 19 to 27 years of age ($M = 21.0$, $SD = 2.47$). No other demographic information was collected.

Focus Group and Interview Procedures

Data were collected through the use of focus groups ($n = 2$) and interviews ($n = 2$). Focus group one ($n = 4$); focus group two ($n = 2$); and the two interviews were used to examine this topic to answer the research questions proposed.

Focus groups possess the key strength of “group effect” (Carey, 1994) that affords unique access to insights created through group ideas, sensemaking, and ‘chaining’ links of topics (Morgan, 1988). As focus groups offer group effects of complementary interactions, or broad participant agreement, and argumentative interactions, or differing opinions, this data collection method offered FGC students the opportunity to talk about the messages they received from family, peers, and university faculty and staff in ways that both converged and diverged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Additionally, focus groups allow insight into the vernacular speech of a group and thus offer a small window into the norms and sense making trends of FGC students (Kitzinger, 1994). Participants were invited to participate in focus groups no larger than eight participants, exceeded no more than one hour in length, and took place in a neutral location on campus (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). While the optimal size for a focus group is 6 to 12 participants, recruitment limitations rendered the focus groups in this thesis to 2 to 4 participants per group. Through the use of an interview protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and interviewer

self-disclosures to develop rapport (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), interviews were also used as a data collection method. This method was selected in an effort to tap into the rich stories, communal insights, and nuance of the FGC student resilience experience. See Appendix B for the question guide.

Before the focus groups and interviews began, consent was secured. I then used my interview guide to facilitate the interview process but also integrate a sense of flexibility in order to probe unforeseen insights that contributed to depicting a fuller picture of the FGC student experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The organized and structured interview protocol is based off of Rubin and Rubin's (2005) guidelines and employed open-ended questions to best encapsulate FGC students' experiences and stories. Finally, participants were invited to select a pseudonym for identification during the focus groups and interviews, which were all transcribed in data to maintain participant anonymity.

To maintain the confidentiality of my participants, focus group and interview responses were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview and focus group discussions ranged in length from 44 to 54 minutes ($M = 50$, $SD = 3.74$), with a total of 201 minutes of recorded data. Transcriptions totaled 54 pages of single-spaced text.

Data Analysis

Resilience is constructed through stories, rituals, logics, identities, emotions, and reframing life experiences and lends itself to the interpretive paradigm. Through understanding what human behavior means to others (Baxter & Babbie, 2004), the data afforded through in-depth, rich, and contextual information from how FGC students

interpret and give context to their worlds is of utmost importance for understanding the construction of FGC student resilience.

Data were analyzed through the use of a theory-driven codebook. The codebook served as a tool for developing and documenting the codes and how they were to be applied to the data. It included an exhaustive list of categories, code names, examples for each category, and number of instances in the data that fit the code (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In order to establish coding reliability, after the development of the codebook, a second coder was trained and invited to code 20% of the data. Inter-rater reliability was established in order to help reduce the potential for bias during data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The second coder was trained by (1) establishing an understanding of the criteria for each code, (2) establishing an understanding of the theoretical subprocesses that guide the structure and categories within the codebook, and (3) engaging in a hands-on pilot coding process. During this process, the first and second coder independently coded the same subset of data and then reconvened to discuss the coding process and resolve differences in interpretation. We achieved a 91.7% agreement rate. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Cohen's Kappa = .833. Additional checks to ensure the reliability of the data analysis include the use of member checking with research participants.

Verification

To meet interpretive paradigmatic conventions, I employed three common validation strategies. First, I recorded each interview and took detailed field notes. I then generated transcriptions for all recorded audio. Second, I assessed the quality and validity

of my results using member checking by blind carbon copying email summaries of my findings and themes to all participants to check whether my findings accurately depicted their individual experiences as a FGC student (Creswell, 2007; See Appendix C). Six participants reviewed and agreed with the findings. Third, I provided evidence of my findings through extensive and rich participant quotes.

Reflexivity

Exploration such as this relies on the researcher as the research instrument. Therefore, any knowledge obtained is confined by the partialities and ability of the researcher to analyze discourse and derive meaning (Hine, 2011). Meaning that is derived is impacted by my own background, identity, and feelings (Jorgenson, 2011). Jorgenson (2011) challenges researchers to reflect on the very communicative and performative nature of research itself and strive to heighten awareness of local context. As a FGC student, my experiences may have an impact on what I attended to in the data that emerged from this thesis. Measures such as the use of a CGC student second coder and member checking were put in place to help belay this unintended effect.

Chapter Four: Results

Data were transcribed and coded into five themes guided by CTR. Based on the findings from the focus groups and interviews, research questions one and two were combined and results will appear in order of frequency: (a) maintaining and using communication networks ($n = 24$), (b) affirming identity anchors ($n = 14$), (c) downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding productive action ($n = 9$), (d) putting alternate logics to work ($n = 8$), and (e) crafting normalcy ($n = 4$). Sources (i.e., family, peers, and university faculty and staff) were coded by relationship to the participant and appear in order of frequency within each theme. See Table 1 for a comprehensive report of theme and source in order of frequency.

Table 1

Theme and Sources in Order of Frequency

Theme	Source Order Based on Frequency
Communication Networks	Family, Peers, University Stakeholders
Affirming Identity Anchors	Peers, University Stakeholders, Family
Foregrounding Productive Action:	Family, Peers, University Stakeholders
Putting Alternate Logics to Work	Family, University Stakeholders, Peers
Crafting Normalcy	Peers, University Stakeholders

It is important to note that participant quotes have not been edited for clarity. The words appear verbatim as spoken by the participants. It is important to note that focus groups and interviews did not reach theoretical saturation, thus results must be interpreted with caution as the findings only apply to a small portion of the targeted population. Despite

this limitation, participants offered rich stories of their experiences as first-generation college students and their stories are valuable, worthy of study, and highlight the need to further study this population.

Research Question One and Two: Resilience Messages

Research question one inquired about the types of resilience messages FGC students received from their (a) family, (b) peers, and (c) university faculty and staff after a trigger event. Research question two inquired about the ways messages from (a) family, (b) peers, and (c) university faculty and staff enacted a process of resilience. Themes derived from these questions were not easily discernible from one another as participants shared messages from family, peers, and university faculty and staff that both addressed emergent needs after a trigger event (i.e., reactive resilience) and engaged in messages or everyday talk that enacted a process of resilience (i.e., proactive resilience).

In other words, Buzzanell (2010; 2018) explained that resilience may be both reactive in direct response to a trigger event and proactive when embedded in everyday talk. Therefore, the themes derived from this data set were collapsed from both research questions as instances of proactive and reactive resilience processes that occurred in tandem or overlapped to the extent that it was not feasible to separate the two when sharing the lived experiences of FGC students.

Communication Networks: Family, Peers, and University Stakeholders

In order of frequency within the communication networks theme, FGC students received messages from family ($n = 8$), peers ($n = 8$), and university faculty and staff ($n = 8$). The following results will be discussed in turn. Routine use of mediated communication with family members, face-to-face communication with peers and

university faculty and staff were commonly used to call upon existing networks and create new networks.

Communication Networks: Family. FGC students often maintain and use their communication networks with parents, grandparents, and siblings. Family members serve as important sources of emotional support and idea sounding boards for FGC students. Sara tearfully reflected on a conversation she had with her grandmother as she grappled with the transition to college and her major selection:

I remember, I came into the university as an architecture major and I hated it within the first week! And I want to, I was like, I have to get out of this before the end of the semester or I'm gonna drop because I can't do this. And, I remember my grandma texted me and she was like, this might make me cry, she was like, 'Just do whatever makes you happy and that's all that matters.' And I was like, that really helped me.

For Sara, the process of changing her major was a trigger event. Regularly drawing upon her bond with her grandmother was one way that Sara was able to enact resilience through garnering support. Sara's maintenance and use of her connection with her grandmother via mediated forms of communication (i.e., texts and phone calls) was one way that Sara proactively nurtured her network connections to bolster resilience processes and dealt with emergent problems such as major selection.

Other FGC students reflected on using their family communication networks as ways to cope with adversity or trigger events. Sarah recalled one of her coping strategies after performing poorly on a test:

If I have a bad grade on a test it'll bunk me down for like a day. It'll bung me down like I'll start sobbing for no reason. Like it'll, it'll like nearly make me depressed for a couple of days so. For that, like, my- like I would say like one of the things I have to do is like get on the phone my parents.

Like Sara, Sarah too turned first to her strong family ties in the face of hardship. FGC students do not only turn to their parents and grandparents but also maintain and use their sibling communication networks.

Specifically, Natalia reflected her conversations with siblings about finding their own unique path in college. She explained, "I talk a lot with my siblings about college and finding our niche, doing what we want. We emphasize that a lot on our conversations." For Natalia, drawing upon her sibling close ties provided a space in which she could discuss family and college. As all Natalia's siblings were also FGC students, she drew from these relationships often to discuss family influence on the college experience, school, and future career aspirations. FGC students also maintain and use communication networks with peers.

Communication Networks: Peers. FGC students also maintain and use their communication networks with their peers. Echo recalled a time when his undocumented parents' immigration application was denied and how he coped using his peer communication network:

My friends were there for me like it was super, that's how I got introduced to [an on campus resource] is from that, is because I like told my friends. I was like, 'Hey, so this happened to my parents like they just got like their case denied. Like they may have to go back to India. Like go home.'

For Echo, peer communication networks were valuable sources of emotional support as he worked to both accept that his parents may be deported and quickly find a solution to his parents' immigration status. While peers like Echo's are powerful sources of emotional support, FGC students who befriend other FGC students may share about their shared experiences as FGC students. For example, Sara reflected on her peer FGC student relationships:

So like, in my high school, a lot of people I was in classes with were like also going to, planning on being first-generation college students. So it was definitely nice to have people who were as scared as I was at the time. And so, we all kinda talked about like, what it was gonna be like ... just like not know what's coming up.

For Sara, drawing upon her bonds with other FGC student peers to commiserate about the uncertainty of the college experience was an important way of maintaining and using communication networks. Finally, FGC students also maintain and use their communication networks with university faculty and staff.

Communication Networks: University Stakeholders. FGC students also call upon and work to build networks with university faculty and staff during trigger events.

Melodie recalls a time when she reached out to her professor:

I'm really bad at public speaking but I get really shy and nervous. I went and asked for some advice and he was like, 'It's okay. We all get nervous at one point.' And he gave me a lot of tips on how to improve. That stuff that you take, it's coming like helping you to build a better you.

For Melodie, a FGC student returning to college after ten years, developing communication networks with university faculty was transformational for her ability to enact resilience. For many FGC students, university faculty served as valuable resources of career guidance and emotional support. Hanna reflected on using her communication network with her advisor:

He is so so nice and he would let me come to his office, like schedule an appointment, and just spend 30 minutes venting. Like, he was so nice and he had a lot of the same issues, whether it was in my relationship or something that was going on, like, he was there to be like, 'Okay, well I'm going through this and that.' And he really just related with me and made me feel a lot better about what's going on.

FGC students also saw the value in building new communication networks with university faculty and staff. For example, Melodie, reflected on her experience building new communication networks:

I go to their office hours and with this professor I just decided like one day because she talks with confidence like she knows stuff. Because all of them are CPAs like most of the professors are CPAs so they they've worked outside. And one time I just decided I would ask her like, 'Hey if you have any advice, um, I need some help.' And look, I feel like a lot of professors are willing to help if you just ask. She was very good about it, like she was like, 'Yeah, we'll meet one day and we'll just talk about that.' So we met and she started, we made a list.

For Melodie, university faculty are a valuable network to build, maintain, and use. Like Melodie, many FGC students used their communication network ties with faculty and

staff to garner emotional support, career advice, and guidance. Another key way that family, peers, and university stakeholders communicate resilience messages is by identity anchor affirmation.

Affirming Identity Anchors: Peers, University Stakeholders, and Family

In order of frequency within the affirming identity anchors theme, FGC students received messages from peers ($n = 5$), university faculty and staff ($n = 5$), and family ($n = 4$). The following results will be discussed in turn. FGC students engaged in conversations that both affirmed their identity anchors and used identity dioceses to explain or illuminate who they were during a trigger event. Discourses that highlighted the most salient and important identity anchors present in this thesis were FGC student and immigrant identities.

Affirming Identity Anchors: Peers. One example for how FGC students affirmed identity after a trigger event was based on Sarah's experience. Sarah reflected on conversations with peers who were CGC and FGC students:

And, I think a lot of a lot of what my friends would say like being a first-generation college student, they're like, 'You're not a first-gen college student. Why are you, why would you? Your parents went to some college, your step-dad went to college.' ... And then you have your other friends that are also first-gen. So, some of my other friends are first-gen college students and they, or were, and they talk about the same experiences that they have. Like the difficulties that they had or that they think they might face going into college.

For Sarah, her status as a FGC student was salient and she often endured disconfirming messages about her FGC student status. Later, Sarah described these messages as a "slap

in the face.” Sarah’s feelings toward these messages and her communication with other FGC students show the salience of the FGC student status. While some peers offered disconfirming messages that questioned her FGC student status, other peers offered shelter from the attacks and provided a space to affirm her FGC student identity through conversation about the FGC student experiences.

Another example of affirming identity anchors included Hanna’s experience. Hanna reflected on her peer relationships:

So like, I would say, probably 80% of my friends are first-generation college students. And I think it's just so cool because like you really don't hear about it that much. People don't like to talk about it and so it's just so interesting that there really are so many of us. And like, so my friends have always been super supportive. And, I don't know, I think that having people by your side, that are going through the same thing as you is like, really cool.

For Hanna, having a friend group dominantly populated by other FGC students offer many opportunities to affirm her FGC student identity. Having a network of like others allowed Hanna to explain better “who they are for themselves and in relation to each other” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4). Peer communication was not the only location where FGC students engaged in this resilience process. University faculty and staff communication also served as powerful spaces for identity affirmation.

Affirming Identity Anchors: University Stakeholders. Melodie reflected on a trigger experience navigating college major selection as a FGC student and the conversations she had with an academic advisor:

Being a first-generation student, you lack all this knowledge or you don't know what to expect. Sometimes you don't know where you wanna go, you just know you wanna do college, but there's a lot you can do in college. ... I was just like, I want to be an accountant. ... I talked to my professor and she was like 'Well, what part of accounting do you wanna get into?' I'm like part? What do you mean?

For Melodie, talking about "being a first-generation student" was a common way of expressing her identity, the trigger events inherent to that identity, and a way to describe herself to others. Many other FGC students used the FGC student title as way to describe themselves or in conjunction with an adversity they had experienced.

FGC students' conversations with university faculty and staff also contributed to the process of affirming identity.

Another example of affirming identity anchors with a university stakeholder, includes Peyton's experience. Peyton recalled a conversation with a university staff person:

I honestly, I guess there's like a really big scholarship for first-generation students here that I had no idea about till about two weeks ago. Yeah so, I'm going abroad this summer and she [university staff] was like, 'You really need to fill out all of these first-generation scholarships.' And I was like, "What are you talking about?" [University staff person], she was like, 'You're pell grant eligible so you could be getting like a lot more.' And I was like, 'Yeah I really did not know that was a thing.' And I guess they have like a whole center for it [university FGC

student service] so I was just kinda like wingin it on my own. But, um, yeah she let me know about it.

For Peyton, talking with a university staff person offered opportunities for identity affirmation through being informed of specialized FGC student scholarships and campus services. Therefore, not only is the FGC student title an important identity anchor for FGC students to describe themselves and experiences but also is a powerful anchor for faculty and staff to support and validate. Finally, FGC students also engage in resilience processes with family members.

Affirming Identity Anchors: Family. Echo reflected on his experience with a trigger event as a FGC student and child of immigrant parents. Echo reflects on the pressure from his mother to succeed as the first in the family to go college:

“She’ll be like, ‘I can go to your class and pass your classes for you if you need.’ ... That’s her way of like telling me to like, just like, there’s no reason for you to complain. Like you can do it. You’ve done it for three years now, you can’t not pass a class. It’s not that hard, you just got to put in the time.’ ... Because like if I’m doing bad, her like expectation is like, I’m not putting in the work to do well.”

Echo further added on his experience:

I feel like it adds an importance to like, that I need to succeed. Because, like I mean, my parents come from nothing and have put all this effort into getting me here so I can’t like be ungrateful for it or anything. Like, I can’t complain about being sent to college. I can’t do what other people do where they like go out every weekend, party, and then fail and drop out of classes. I can’t. I can’t do that.

For Echo, being a FGC student and child of immigrant parents provided salient identity anchors by which to explain his experiences and sources of motivation in college (e.g., Interview #1). Further, FGC students that were also children of immigrant parents attributed their feelings of guilt to these identity discourses. For example, Natalia reflected on her experience, “I think it brings some guilt if I’m not working hard, like I feel so guilty. Because then I just like get in this deep dive, like thinking about my parents.” Identity anchors were powerful tools of discourse for FGC students to explain who they are to others and make sense of their own intersecting identities. During college, FGC students who grappled with the hardship of coursework and rigor found their FGC student and immigrant identities as both fodder for motivation but also sources of adversity in expressions of guilt.

Natalia’s conversation with her highlights how family affirmation of identity can also be motivating. Natalia reflected on a conversation with her mother about the lack of diversity in her intended career, which highlighted the affirming identity anchor process of resilience:

I, this is kinda random in a way, but like for the culture. For culture, like meaning like, Mexicans can be super educated and high career performing. ... I was like telling her [mom] and she was like, ‘Well, Natalia... do it, represent.’ You know what I mean? Like that should motivate you more because underrepresented fields, especially like upper level finance fields, its brokers are super whitewashed.

For Natalia, talking with her mother was a way to engage in identity affirmation. Family members are important actors in affirmation of identity for their FGC student children though affirmation may have effects that both bolster and damage resilience processes.

Foregrounding Productive Action: Family, Peers, and University Stakeholders

In order of frequency within the foregrounding productive action theme, FGC students received messages from family ($n = 6$), peers ($n = 2$), and university faculty and staff ($n = 1$). The following results will be discussed in turn. FGC students received messages that foregrounded productive action and positive thought. Often messages of perseverance, thinking of future rewards, and creating a better life were shared.

Foregrounding Productive Action: Family. Melodie recalled a conversation she had with her mother while going through a hard time:

Just when I've talked with my mother and she's been like well, 'This is the rough patch but just think about the reward that you're gonna get later. Just imagine, like, you're gonna have a better life, a better job, something that you actually like.'

For Melodie, conversations with her mother about adversities in college helped her foreground productive action and rewards such as a better job in the face of hardship. Melodie's mother helped to foreground productive action by encouraging her to focus on the bright future she would earn by persevering through college. Another example is through reminders of family sacrifices. Echo reflected on a conversation with his parents:

My parents pretty much said like, 'We want you to go to college because like that's the reason we did everything we did is because you can go and have like a

better life than we did. So you don't have to do like the crazy hours we work, the crazy work we work.

For Echo, messages from family contribute to the process of foregrounding productive action. As immigrants, Echo's parents used their own life experiences as a means of highlighting the importance of college while also acknowledging the sacrifices that were made for that opportunity to be accessible. Family communication was not the only location where FGC students engaged in this resilience process. Peer communication also served as powerful spaces for foregrounding productive action.

Foregrounding Productive Action: Peers. FGC students also received messages that foregrounded positive action from peers. Brooke recalls a conversation with her roommate during a rough time the previous semester:

I know that I'll still graduate even if I ended up being a little behind transferring my majors or adding another major. And they were like, 'You know what? What's one more semester? Like you're gonna get a whole other degree just staying that extra semester.'

For Brooke, conversations with peers helped to make sense of and foreground rewards of adding a second major while acknowledging that it may cause her to graduate behind schedule (trigger event). Another example of foregrounding productive action included Sara's experience. Sara recalled a conversation she had with her peers:

So I was thinking about applying to [a university summer program] but I was afraid because I was like, I don't know if I want to spend 5 weeks away because I'd never been away from my family that long before and I was like, 'I just don't know if this is right for me.' My friends like pushed me to apply. They were like,

‘It's gonna be really fun, like you're gonna get this awesome opportunity, to like hang out with other people and like try.’ You had like a focus area where you could like take almost like a college course in high school. So, like they applied along with me and they encouraged me to do it too and so I think that like helped me.

For Sara, having peers help foreground productive action helped Sara background her fears about being away from family to apply for a summer university program. Sara’s peers exemplify how peers contribute to the resilience process specifically with foregrounding productive action. Finally, FGC students also engaged in university faculty and staff communication that foregrounded productive action.

Foregrounding Productive Action: University Stakeholders. FGC students also received messages that foregrounding positive action from university faculty and staff. Melodie recalls her professor’s announcement to the class after she and many of her peers failed a test:

She was like, ‘Don’t give up. There is more, like, you still have a chance to bring it up. You just have to work a little bit harder and put more effort into it. ... Don’t think this is the end. ... Don't give up. You may not get an A but B is not bad. B is still good. So, just keep working harder.’

For Melodie, conversations with university faculty helped her foreground positive action after failing a test. Additionally, Melodie recalled opening up to a faculty member stating, “I talked to her about like my background a little bit. They’re like, ‘Oh, that’s very good that you’re tryin to better yourself.’” Whether faculty members were encouraging students to press on after a bad grade or affirming their place in higher education,

university faculty and staff played an important role in foregrounding productive action. Based on the findings, for FGC students, messages from family, peers, and university faculty and staff were all instrumental in the process of enacting resilience.

Putting Alternate Logics to Work: Family, University Stakeholders, and Peers

In order of frequency within the putting alternate logics to work theme, FGC students received messages from family ($n = 3$), university faculty and staff ($n = 3$), and peers ($n = 2$). The following results will be discussed in turn. FGC students are nimble problem solvers, often rising to the occasion to find novel solutions to trying and urgent needs. FGC students shared about times in which they put alternate logics to work.

Putting Alternate Logics to Work: Family. Sarah reflected on her conversations with family that illuminates the employment of alternate logics:

I know that I remember, with my dad side of the family, some of them like I said, they aren't about it [going to college] but when I did get into college my aunt was the FIRST one to quickly jump on and be like, 'We are so proud of you. We're so, this is my niece, she's going to college, first in our family. We are so proud of you.' They are the first ones, that's part of the reason I don't interact with them on Facebook much anymore. Just they're the first ones to jump on my achievements and be like, 'Oh we're so proud of you.' When in reality, they really haven't done anything for me but put negative thoughts.

For Sarah, distancing her interactions and exposure to some close ties, like her father's side of the family, was a strategy employed for self-preservation. More specifically, Sarah reflected on conversations with family members as a process for putting alternative logics to work:

There's a lot of negative stigmas about it, I guess. Family just being like, 'You don't need it. You don't need it.' I do come, my original hometown is very small, most people do not go to college after they graduate and in our family it is proven. ... Because it's just been a mindset that it doesn't, 'We don't go to college, we stay in a small town, and we do things here, and we wanna live close to each other.' And that's just not a mindset that I live by.'

For Sarah, selecting to value higher education and go to college out of state was a significant challenge to the status quo of everyday life in her family. Later on she reflects that, "When I make people happy, I'm very happy. Like it's kind of my drive." For Sarah, the challenge of entering and succeeding in college also includes hard decisions to distance oneself from family values and personal values of making people happy to enact resilience processes. Family communication was not the only location where FGC students engaged in alternate logics. University faculty and staff communication also served as sources of alternate logics.

Putting Alternate Logics to Work: University Stakeholders. Finally, FGC students employed alternative logics with university faculty and staff. University faculty/staff played an important role in putting alternate logics to work. Sometimes, previous cultural lessons learned in one's home community inhibit FGC students' help-seeking behaviors. Finding alternative solutions for communicating with university faculty/staff is important. Sarah reflected:

I'm from the south, so we have our southern hospitality. We're told when not and when to ask questions/when not to ask questions. I think it has something to do with that like how I was raised and like how I'm supposed to talk to adults. Where

it's like now I'm shifting toward this mentality that adults should respect me just as much as I respect them.

For Sarah, employing an alternate logic to overcome her discomfort with interactions with faculty members helped to sustain resilience processes. Another example of putting alternate logics to work, included Melodie's experience, which included university stakeholders. Melodie reflected on the university faculty and staff relationships stating:

I came initially and then I took a break but I think that was my main struggle, speaking up. I was kind of scared to ask questions, find resources, ask for help, and I think that really got me. I, it's like finding ways to become successful, to plan, to get into routine, because it's something new it's not like high school it's like a whole new environment so yeah, it can be scary. It was scary for me.

For Melodie, after a ten-year gap before returning to college, finding a solution for barriers that held her back initially was key to enacting resilience in college. Identifying ways to reach out to faculty members, although scary, became an alternate logic.

Putting Alternate Logics to Work: Peers. Echo, reflected on his conversations with peers that illuminates the use of alternate logics:

One of my friends was like, 'Hey, I know a person like she can help you out like she probably knows. Like she deals with this kind of stuff with other people.' And so she went out and found her and like got her in contact with me and then like me and [university staff person] went ham and called like 15 lawyers to figure out like different options.

For Echo, leaning on peers was a way to address the urgent need to overturn his parents' immigration application rejection. He and his friends quickly came together, pulled upon

their collective knowledge to solve a problem and thus, provided him with messages of resilience. Similarly, Sara recalls:

We talked about scholarships a lot and also like trying to coordinate and plan out extracurriculars we could do together so that we could like strengthen our application. So like a lot of what we were doing was trying to like prepare our application materials because I think a lot of us were worried about not getting where we wanted to be.

Sara and her peers would come together to address the problem of a lack of scholarship funding by working together to identify ways to bolster their application materials. In this example, FGC student peers served as invaluable sources for the generation of alternative logics.

Based on the findings, for FGC students, messages from family, university faculty and staff, and peers were all instrumental in the process of employing alternate logics.

Crafting Normalcy: Peers and University- Stakeholders

In order of frequency within the crafting normalcy theme, FGC students received messages from peers ($n = 2$) and university faculty and staff ($n = 2$). The following results will be discussed in turn. FGC students crafted normalcy through creating and engaging in new routines and seeking affirmation of their college trajectory to help create social integration, stability, and a sense of control.

Crafting Normalcy: Peers. Sarah reflected on how her roommate helped her not leave the university when she felt separated from her family:

She definitely made an impact on what, like why I'm still here. Like she definitely is the reason I'm still here. If I hadn't had such a supportive roommate like her,

like being there to make sure like I'm okay all the time, I probably would've left.

Taking you to stuff like when we would, one thing we do is we go to football games together. If it wasn't that, we would go to a party together, like just to make sure I would get out and do something.

For Sarah, an out-of-state student, spending time and engaging in routine activities with her roommate helped to socially integrate herself in the college culture and develop new traditions and routines in her new environment in lieu of her separation from family and peers. Other FGC students also found conversation and activities with peers to establish a sense of normalcy through everyday talk and routines.

Much like how advisors offer support and guidance in navigating the college experience, CGC student peers can also be valuable sources and conduits of social capital for FGC students. For example, Hanna recalled a conversation she had with her CGC student roommate during move in week her freshman year of college:

I moved in, like my parents were like super confused. They had no idea what was going on, it was so stressful. It was such a mess. Her parents were like, 'Oh yeah, well you just do this and it makes it easier.'

For Hanna, peers served as rich sources for normalcy as they helped her makes sense of and navigate college. Additionally, Hanna reflected on a specific peer conversation that helped make college feel more normal:

Every once and a while when she's having a hard time, she'll text me and be like, 'Hey, you wanna go grab lunch or something? Like this just sucks right now and I need to get my mind off of it.' And it always ends up being when I'm super stressed and I just need something. So, like, it's really nice to have someone here,

that I don't have to, cause I don't have time to hang out with her every day or every weekend. Just, I work full time. I've got a full time job and then a part time job and then this [school] full time. Like, I just don't have time and uh, so it's nice to have someone that understands that like, even if it's only once every couple of months it's still matters and it's nice.

For Hanna, periodically connecting with a friend to do mundane activities such as getting lunch is one way peers help to craft normalcy. Despite working and attending college full time, Hanna's peer relationship helps her to momentarily silence the noise of life and come together for a meal. For Hanna, these periodic check-ins help to "maintain the mundane" aspects of college life (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 3).

Crafting Normalcy: University Stakeholders. Another example for how FGC students crafted normalcy after a trigger event centered around Brooke's experience.

Brooke reflected on a time when her advisor helped her through a hard time:

I had to get my GPA up. I was waiting to schedule classes January 8th, when classes started next week, and registration ended the 9th so I was freaking out like emailing [her advisor] like, 'I don't know what to do! What if these classes are filled?' and the advisors in [her college] were literally like, 'Any classes that are full, we're gonna get you in 'em. Like we will do anything we can to get you to graduate on time.'

For Brooke, her faculty advisor helped to establish a sense of normalcy and control during a stressful time. By reassuring Brooke that the actions would be taken to ensure she got the courses she needed in order to graduate on time and that this was a part of the

college process, she was empowered to enact resilience and maintain the everyday regularities of college life.

Peyton reflected on how her advisor helped her enact resilience through messages of crafting normalcy:

I plan my classes or what I need to talk about and he just like confirms what I'm thinking and makes me feel like I know that's what I need to do. It just gives me a satisfaction of knowing that I'm doing this right, this is what I need to do, it's all good, just a second opinion.

For Peyton, routine appointments and interactions with her faculty advisor helped to establish a sense of normalcy through guidance and confirmation of degree progress.

Other FGC students also found routine appointments and interactions with advisors to be helpful ways of exhibiting control over the college process and garnering support to help them cope with the stresses of college. Based on these findings, for FGC students, messages from peers and university faculty and staff were instrumental in crafting normalcy.

Results Summary

These exploratory results are encouraging and successfully mapped on to five processes of resilience (Buzzanell 2010; 2018). Regardless of their community, FGC students reported sharing similar experiences with trigger events and general college experiences in which they report resilience through (a) maintaining and using communication networks, (b) affirming identity anchors, (c) downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding productive action, (d) putting alternate logics to work, and

(e) crafting normalcy with their conversations with family, peers, and university faculty and staff. Overarching findings by source will be discussed below.

The Importance of Family

FGC student family members played an important role in communicating and engaging in resilience processes. In terms of maintaining and using communication networks, FGC students draw upon their close family ties during trigger events. Whether it was to communicate concern about their grades, financial aid, major selection or to simply check in, FGC students often reach out and are contacted by parents, grandparents, and siblings.

In terms of affirming identity anchors, family-affirming identity anchors involved FGC student and immigrant identities. Recurring messages that involved FGC students' family members reminding their students of their immigrant heritage, the importance of representation in whitewashed fields, and going on to do what other family had not done were frequently mentioned. Though FGC student family members do affirm FGC student and minority identities, the effects are not always ubiquitously positive. FGC students in this thesis report feelings of guilt and stress over major selection when immigrant identities are affirmed. Further, FGC students report experiences of survival guilt which add preliminary support that parental affirmation of identity may lead to deepening feelings of survival guilt. Identity affirmation from family can be both motivating in ways that affirm identity images of being a pioneer and hard worker but may also remind FGC students of underlying adversities and cultural expectations that work to erode FGC student motivation and cause stress.

In terms of foregrounding productive action, FGC student family members often background the hardships experienced in college while foregrounding positive actions or ideas that bolster FGC students' ability to complete their degree. Recurring messages that involved bettering oneself, a better career, a better life, making good of family sacrifices for opportunities, and end rewards were frequently mentioned.

In terms of employing alternate logics, FGC students that engage in employing alternate logics with family did so to add distance from one's family. Ultimately, FGC students embrace the alternate logic of distancing from family to sustain resilience processes. As FGC students work to successfully complete their degree, they too needed to employ alternate logics such as resisting their reliance on family in order to sustain their own resilience processes. In particular, Sarah's quote highlights this logic best as she realizes that some of her family stigmatize higher education and wish for her to uphold family values of togetherness. For Sarah to be resilient, she embraces distance from family.

Finally, when considering FGC student family members' role in crafting normalcy it is interesting that family did not contribute to this process. It is unsurprising that family members could not support FGC students in this way as they do not have the experience in college to reference when communicating messages that help to normalize the college experience. This is a surprising new finding as it illuminates the barriers family members face in contributing to their students' resilience processes. Therein, FGC students' family members cannot fully assist their students in engaging in resilience processes due to a lack of experience in the higher education system.

The Importance of Peers

FGC student peers also played an important role in the resilience process. When considering the peer role in maintaining and using communication networks, FGC students in this thesis often spoke to and were contacted by peers during hardship. Whether the peer was a fellow FGC students or peer CGC students, peer relationships provided opportunities for connection, support, and commiseration over college adversities.

In terms of affirming identity anchors, FGC students whose peers challenge their FGC student identity further strengthened the identity anchor. Like in the case of Sarah, whose friends question her FGC student status, defending and asserting the definition of a FGC student was one way her identity was affirmed. Further, FGC students with peer FGC student friends found that the identity anchor of being a FGC student was bolstered through everyday talk and commiseration. Similar to the varying nature of identity affirmation from family, FGC students in this sample seemed become more motivated both when their identity was attacked and affirmed.

FGC students engaged in the process of foregrounding productive action with peers. FGC student peers were able to highlight productive action and positive rewards while downplaying negative emotions. Particularly when FGC students need encouragement, peers are quick to put a hardship into perspective. Like in the case of Sara, whose peers chose to foreground aspects of a summer program that were positive and productive in hopes of backgrounding Sara's fears of being away from home.

FGC students also engaged in putting alternate logics to work with peers. FGC students and their peers work together to find solutions to urgent needs. Whether it was helping a friend connect with campus resources to prevent his parent's deportation,

banding together to plan activities to bolster their scholarship application materials, or sharing valuable knowledge passed down from CGC student family members, FGC students and their peers proved to be nimble problem solvers.

Finally, FGC students engaged in the process of crafting normalcy with peers. Most commonly, FGC students and peers craft normalcy through participating in routine shared activities like going to parties, eating dinner together, or studying. Like Hanna's quote exemplifies, peer relationships are powerful in crafting normalcy and in Hanna's case, encourage FGC students to stay in school. Considering that FGC students often experience social isolation, the peer's role in crafting normalcy cannot be understated for the FGC students in this thesis.

The Importance of University Stakeholders

Lastly, FGC students' university faculty and staff were important in enacting the resilience process. Most commonly, FGC students sought to build, maintain, or use relationships with faculty and staff to garner emotional support, advice, and guidance.

In terms of identity affirmation, FGC students not only make sense of their own adversities with university faculty and staff such as advisors in terms of their experience as FGC students but also receive targeted support and recommendations from university faculty and staff that affirm their FGC student identity. Peyton's exemplar quote serves as an example of university faculty and staff that connect students with FGC student-specific support such as scholarships.

Faculty and staff also help FGC students to focus on productive action. Melodie's exemplar quote about a professor that stressed that there would be more opportunities to bring up one's grade after failing an exam is one example of a faculty member

foregrounding productive action. In the midst of many well-documented adversities, it is important that university faculty and staff send messages that foreground positive and productive action.

In terms of employing alternate logics, FGC students recognize their need to reach out to faculty and staff for support as an alternate logic to adopt. While this was noted to be an uncomfortable task, FGC students in this thesis allowed themselves to momentarily set aside their pride and discomfort to interact with faculty and staff. It is clear that the FGC students in this thesis employ an alternate logic in order to engage in more help-seeking behaviors with university faculty and staff.

Finally, FGC students and university faculty and staff are able to craft normalcy through careful guidance and affirmation from advisors. For participants in this thesis, advisors are valuable sounding boards and sources of affirmation about the college process. Through actions as simple as confirming that a schedule will ensure a timely graduation or listening to personal disclosures, advisors are able to help normalize the college experience and empower FGC students to feel in control of their experiences.

Frequencies of Processes: Themes and Sources

The data support that FGC students enacted Buzzanell's five processes of resilience with the help from family, peers, and university faculty and staff both during trigger events and everyday situations while in college. From a composite perspective, the number of FGC students who engaged in each resilience process is as follows from greatest to least: maintaining and using communication networks, affirming identity anchors, foregrounding productive action, putting alternate logics to use, and crafting normalcy. Interestingly, all themes but crafting normalcy included the source - family,

peers, and university faculty and staff. See Table 2 for a comprehensive (includes both trigger events and everyday situations) report of theme and source frequencies (i.e., with family, peers, and university faculty and staff).

Table 2

Theme and Source Frequencies: Family, Peers, and University Faculty and Staff

Theme: Source	Frequency	Total Per Theme
Communication Networks: Family	8	24
Communication Networks: Peers	8	
Communication Networks: University Stakeholders	8	
Affirming Identity Anchors: Family	4	14
Affirming Identity Anchors: Peers	5	
Affirming Identity Anchors: University Stakeholders	5	
Foregrounding Productive Action: Family	6	9
Foregrounding Productive Action: Peers	2	
Foregrounding Productive Action: University Stakeholders	1	
Putting Alternate Logics to Work: Family	3	8
Putting Alternate Logics to Work: Peers	2	
Putting Alternate Logics to Work: University Stakeholders	3	
Crafting Normalcy: Family	0	4
Crafting Normalcy: Peers	2	
Crafting Normalcy: University Stakeholders	2	

Taken together, the results of this research allude there is there is a need within the field of instructional communication research to continue to explore the ways in which student populations enact resilience. Specifically, these exploratory results indicate that university faculty and staff were essential for helping FGC students after trigger events and when enacting resilience. Instructional communication scholars should continue to study the instructor’s role in student resilience processes and the peer’s role in student resilience processes. These results are discussed in more detail, including theoretical and practical implications in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

In this chapter, the themes from the data, theoretical implications, practical implications, and limitations are discussed. The purpose of this thesis was to determine in what ways, if at all, FGC students engaged in Buzzanell's (2010; 2018) five processes of resilience. Themes within this thesis were in alignment with Buzzanell's (2010; 2018) five processes of resilience (i.e., crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, employing alternate logics, and foregrounding productive action). Sources were determined and labelled by their relationship type (i.e., family, peers, and university faculty and staff). Based on the data, three overarching take-aways can be established. First, CTR was an appropriate theory to apply in the study of FGC students and second, CTR processes were not ubiquitously positive. Third, FGC student family members may be limited in their ability to contribute to the process of crafting normalcy. Additionally, practical implications are provided based on the suggestions made by the participants.

The research questions that guided this thesis sought to understand both the types of messages FGC students received from family, peers, and university faculty and staff and how those messages may or may not contribute to FGC students' processes of resilience. First, as CTR has not been applied to FGC students, peer-to-peer, student to faculty, or student to staff relationships, it was unclear if this theory would map on to the FGC student experience. Except for family messages within the process of crafting normalcy, FGC students received messages from family, peers, and university faculty and staff in all five CTR processes. Results where themes had low frequency counts were retained in this thesis to be faithful to the FGC student stories shared in lieu of not

achieving thematic saturation. As it is unknown whether certain themes with low frequency counts would have gained more with more interviews and focus groups, all data from this thesis are presented in hopes that future application of CTR to FGC students may best design a study to further the application of CTR to FGC students.

Second, when considering how family, peers, and university faculty and staff contribute to FGC students' processes of resilience, results from this thesis are decidedly mixed. Instances within the affirming identity anchors and putting alternate logics to work processes illuminated messages that would ordinarily qualify as an affirming identity message did not lead to solely positive outcomes. Interesting, much like Scharp et al. (2020) pointed out with the "double-edged sword" of resilience processes, FGC students whose immigrant identities were affirmed also experienced constraints to their resilience process (p. 15). Namely, FGC students report feelings of guilt and stress over major selection when immigrant identities are affirmed. Although receiving affirmation for identity has been connected positively to resilience, CTR does not yet make sense of competing outcomes from resilience processes, suggesting that there may be a positivity bias in CTR.

Recently, Scharp et al. (2020) concurred that not all resilience processes were helpful. The "double-edged sword" of resilience processes may help us make sense of the FGC student experience of survival guilt (Scharp et al., 2020, p. 15). Survival guilt relates to when an individual worries about being in a more advantageous position in life than others (Tate et al., 2013). Therefore, while affirming identity may have led to individuals engaging in resilience processes in other studies, in this thesis when immigrant and FGC student identities that were affirmed by family did not always lead to

transformative resilience outcomes. Interesting, the double-edged nature of these processes was also seen when FGC students received messages that refuted identity anchors. In some cases, messages that belittled and denied FGC students of their identity anchors resulted in bolstered resilience processes and motivation. Therefore, mixed reactions of motivation, guilt, pride, and stress were reported by FGC students in this thesis within the affirming identity anchors theme. Additionally, some processes work to undermine others, again pointing to the double-edged nature of CTR processes. As evidenced by the maintaining and using communication networks theme, many FGC students rely on family for support during adverse times. However, FGC students that engage in employing alternate logics with family did so to add distance from one's family. Ultimately, FGC students embrace the alternate logic of distancing from family to sustain resilience processes much like how alienated parents embraced distance from children from whom they were alienated from (Scharp et al., 2020). While FGC students do rely on family, not all FGC students' family members value education. This finding aligns with Scharp et al.'s (2020) finding of embracing distance as an alternate logic, yet directly undermines the maintaining and using communication networks process.

Third, when further considering how family, peers, and university faculty and staff contribute to resilience processes, it is important to note that not all individuals have the social capital, knowledge, or ability to contribute to resilience processes. In this thesis, FGC students' family members did not contribute to the process of crafting normalcy. As this process encapsulates communication that helped empower individuals to "maintain the mundane, the regularities in life" (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 3), it is unsurprising that family members could not support FGC students in this way as they do

not have the experience in college to reference when communicating messages that help to normalize the college experience. One key adversity that FGC students face is a lack of social capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Wang, 2012; 2014a). The absence of family in this theme aligns with research on FGC students and yet is still surprising. This particular finding illuminates the barriers family members face in contributing to their students' resilience processes. Therein, FGC students' family members cannot fully assist their students in engaging in resilience processes due to a lack of experience in the higher education system. With this result in mind, results show that peers and university faculty and staff are entrusted with the important role of contributing to conversations about trigger events and engaging in conversations that contribute to FGC students' ability to enact the process of crafting normalcy.

Communication Theory of Resilience

The communication theory of resilience (CTR) has yet to be applied to examine FGC students. Therefore, the findings in this thesis support the use of CTR by focusing on the ways in which family, peers, and university faculty and staff help FGC students engage in Buzzanell's (2010; 2018) five communicative processes of resilience. FGC students do engage in all five communicative processes. Importantly, this thesis supports Buzzanell's (2010; 2018) assertion that resilience is a uniquely communicative process and not merely a personal trait or outcome. For FGC students, family, peers, and university faculty and staff play an important role in communicatively constructing normalcy, identity affirmation, maintenance and use of communication networks, alternate logics, and foregrounding productive action.

CTR successfully mapped onto the FGC student college experience and allow a glance into the complex ways in which FGC students and their ties communicatively enact resilience in this thesis. CTR is a valuable lens through which to view the adversity-riddled experiences of FGC students and would be a worthwhile theory for instructional scholars to continue to apply to student populations. As documented in Scharp et al. (2020), not all resilience processes are ubiquitously positive. Engaging in some processes may “cut both ways” (p. 16). In this thesis, while the theory did map onto the FGC student experience, it did not offer a way to make sense of negative messages that promote resilience. Therefore, future studies seeking to apply CTR to the FGC student population should take note of the often messy duality of each of the processes, recognizing that some individuals are more privileged in their ability to engage in resilience processes than others.

Practical Implications

Research shows that one third of today’s college population are made up of FGC students (Campbell & Wescott, 2019). However, FGC students do not achieve their degrees at the same rate as CGC students (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). I contend that the results of this thesis begin to point out important ways in which FGC students engage in resilience processes with their family, peers, and university faculty and staff. As only junior and senior FGC students were sampled, it is heartening to find that FGC students that are closest to graduation are also engaging in these resilience processes. One of the most robust findings is one discussed by all participants - the use of communication networks with family, peers, and university faculty and staff. All eight participants

engaged in conversations that either sought to build, maintain, or use communication networks with these three groups.

As stated, FGC students often lack social capital and support. Further, FGC students often are unable to receive support from parents due to a lack of experience with university processes (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Graham, 2011; Nuru et al., 2019; Wang, 2012; 2014a), and therefore, may have trouble socially integrating into the college culture (Graham, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Wang, 2014b), as well as lack a stable support system to guide them through their higher education journey (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Choy, 2001; Wang, 2014a, 2014b). Aligning with what we know of the FGC student experiences, it is not surprising that FGC students that have made it to their junior and senior years of undergraduate education are also participating in conversations that help them to enact resilience such as maintaining and using communication networks. While FGC students most often used family networks for emotional support, results show that peers (both FGC and CGC students) served multiple purposes of emotional support, social integration, and valuable conduits of social capital. It was not uncommon for CGC student peers to share the “college hacks” that were passed on to them from their parents with FGC students. The application of CTR to FGC students does offer promising preliminary evidence to inform intervention. Findings suggests that a campaign to educate family members, peers, and university faculty and staff about Buzzanell’s (2010, 2018) five processes of resilience may be a worthwhile intervention.

Family Intervention

Based on the results, a family CTR intervention program should address two key points: general education on CTR’s five processes of resilience and their active role in the

process of resilience and education on the process of higher education (i.e., applications, scholarships, federal student aid, university move-in, university services, cultural norms, and college expectations). Such a campaign for family members may be disseminated while FGC students are still in grade school, ensuring that family members are equipped with the knowledge and resources to engage in conversations that bolster these five processes as FGC students begin the process of applying to college.

First, a general education program on CTR's five processes should focus to empower FGC students' family members to identify ways to send messages that bolster their student's resilience process. Guided by the double-edged nature of some of the findings in this thesis, the program would need to both translate CTR processes for a lay audience but also caution family members of the competing nature of affirming identity anchors of FGC student status and immigrant identities.

Second, a program that would give a college crash course (aka: college hacks) of what to expect as their student gains admittance and pursues college may empower parents to engage in the crafting normalcy process. Perhaps by better educating family members on the everyday life of a college student, family members will be more empowered to engage in conversations that craft normalcy. Several *college hacks* were identified by the FGC students in this thesis that involved knowledge of university processes (i.e., petitioning for courses to be transferred, move-in dorm policies, students services, FGC student specific scholarships, and applying for federal student aid). Across all the focus groups and interviews, participants reported sentiments like that of Echo who stated, "Like parents [that] have been to college before know like these little like hack 'college hacks' that they use to kind of like get an upper hand and be able to do

stuff.” An intervention that helped to educate family members of these college hacks may be a useful intervention based on the results of this thesis.

Peer Intervention

Based on the results, a peer CTR intervention program should address two key points: general education on CTR’s five processes of resilience and their active role in the process of resilience and useful, everyday strategies for being a resilience boosting peer. Most universities have an incoming student orientation structure. University peers may participate in workshops during orientation sessions that educate them on these processes to ensure peers have the information and resources to support their fellow peers.

Across the data in this thesis, peers often sent and engaged in resilience processes through routines, shared time, and supportive messages. As it is clear that FGC students have trouble integrating into college culture and report having fewer friends, an intervention that helped to introduce FGC students to their peers, encouraged shared time and routines, and empowered peers to identify and engage in messages that bolstered CTR processes would be a useful intervention based on the findings of this thesis. In particular, shared and routine activities of a group text message, study groups, parties, and lunch dates provide rich opportunities for FGC students and their peers to bolster resilience processes.

University Stakeholders Intervention

Based on the results, a university faculty and staff CTR intervention program should address two key points: general education on CTR’s five processes of resilience and their active role in the process of resilience and useful, everyday strategies for being a resilience boosting faculty or staff member. Producing an online resource in

conjunction with workshops may be a beneficial application of the findings for university faculty and staff. In this thesis, FGC students reported faculty and staff members that served as mentors, checked in often, offered career and major selection guidance, and connected FGC students with appropriated tailored resources as common resilience boosting communication. Rather than generating standard messages that family, peers, and university faculty and staff may communicate to FGC students, these findings highlight the nuance of FGC student experiences. With that in mind, an intervention that provides CTR a means for these individuals to be reflective of the ways that they engage with FGC students may be more impactful. Such an intervention would empower individuals to tailor messages for each FGC student.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all studies, there are limitations that must be taken into consideration when interpreting results. First, due to a small sample size, theoretical saturation was not achieved. Therefore, the results of this thesis do not fully capture FGC student experiences with trigger events and enacting the process of resilience. Results offer an exploratory view of how FGC students enact resilience. Future work should replicate this thesis in order to capture and achieve theoretical saturation (Kaufmann & Tatum, 2017).

Second, all the participants in this thesis participated in order to receive course credit and may not have prioritized engaging in thoughtful responses to focus group and interview questions. While the data is markedly rich, therefore, course credit may not be enough to entice FGC students to engage in the research process. As FGC students are more likely to live off campus (Davis, 2010), work off campus (Saenz et al., 2007), and have children (Terenzini et al., 1996), researchers should consider offering more

incentives for participation that would help to mitigate the sacrifices FGC students may need to make in order to participate in research.

Third, the results rely entirely on retrospective accounts of personal experiences. Longitudinal studies of FGC students may help researchers assess how resilience processes develop over time. The current findings offers merely a snapshot of FGC student experiences in enacting resilience. A longitudinal design would help eliminate the threats retrospective views provide such as the quality of participants' memories.

Fourth, this thesis is limited to a predominantly Caucasian, female, and traditionally aged sample. Because historic power disparities afford some individuals more or less resources than others, this thesis is limited in understanding how more diverse populations of FGC students enact resilience in the face of systemic power disparities. Future research on FGC student resilience would benefit from broadening the networks and spaces used to sample.

Fifth, participants were markedly independent. As there was a very low turnout rate for individuals that signed up to participate, those who did show-up may bias the results due to their initiative nature. More specifically, the participants who showed-up may be different from the participants that did not choose to or have the initiative to do so. Therefore, the strategies for enacting resilience among the population in this thesis may be very different from a larger FGC student population.

Conclusion

FGC student literature offers a storied and well-documented picture of the adversities that FGC students face both after trigger events and everyday situations. While it is tempting to focus on the injustice of the differences in outcomes between FGC

and CGC students, this thesis sought to understand those that were in the final lap of college. CTR serves as a useful framework for understanding the ways in which FGC students enact resilience with the help of family, peers, and university faculty and staff. By focusing on FGC student juniors and seniors, those with some experience in college, the findings illuminate how FGC students particularly defy the odds in the face of adversity. For example, Sarah captures the FGC student experience of defying the odds well by stating,

“If you’re a first-generation college student you just have to suffer like the rest of everybody else that HAS an idea of what’s going on but you’re just a little behind. Like, you’re a step behind because you really don’t know what to expect.”

As scholars continue to better understand the impact of messages in teaching and learning, I hope we all may remember those enter academia a few steps behind. By harnessing the power of communication, we may be able to bolster FGC students’ resilience processes as they continue to navigate, transcend, and defy the odds before them.

Appendix A:

Qualtrics Recruitment and Demographic Survey

Did either of your parents earn a bachelor's degree?

Yes

No

What year are you in college?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

First Name: _____

Last Name: _____

Email: _____

How old are you? _____

How do you identify?

Female

Male

Non-binary/ third gender

Prefer not to say

Prefer to self-describe _____

What is your ethnicity? (Select all that apply)

Asian

Black/African

Caucasian

Hispanic/Latinx

Native American

Pacific Islander

Prefer not to answer

Prefer to self-describe _____

Please follow this link to a poll to indicate your availability for a focus group if you qualify.

[insert link here]

Appendix B:

Focus Group and Interview Protocol Questions

The following script will begin after all participant(s) have consented to the study.

Opening statement:

Hello! Thank you all for coming today. My name is Paris Nelson. I am a second year master's student from Alabama and the project you are participating in today is for my graduate thesis. You were all invited here today because you are setting a new tradition for your families by being the first in your family to go to college. Like you all, I too am a first-generation college student, and know that there are unique challenges and experiences inherent to that mere title. I invited you all here today because it is important for your voices to be heard. I am interested in hearing your conversations today because through better understanding each of your unique experiences as a FGC student at XXXX we may begin to better understand the adversities you all experience and how you enact resilience to overcome those adversities. If we understand how each of you is resilient we may understand how to design support and policies that better support FGC student. All the information gathered from this project will remain confidential and nothing you say today will be able to be traced back to you. Our conversations today will be used to develop themes of your experiences for my thesis.

Participants will write their selected pseudonym on a card.

Opening Question:

Tell us who you are, where you're from, and your favorite thing about attending XXXX.

Introductory Question:

To be here today you had to qualify as a first-generation college student, or the first in your family to go to college.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about being the first in your family to go to college?

Key Questions:

What have your family members said to you about being the first in your family to go to college?

What have your friends said to you about being the first in your family to go to college?

What have your university faculty and staff said to you about being the first in your family to go to college?

What conversations have you had with family members that have helped you overcome your adversities as the first in your family to go to college?

What conversations have you had with friends that have helped you overcome your adversities as the first in your family to go to college?

What conversations have you had with university faculty and staff that have helped you overcome your adversities as the first in your family to go to college?

Ending Question:

Have we missed anything? What other information do you all think would help us better understand your experience as an FGC student?

Wrap up

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. I would not be able to do my work without you all. Your voices are incredibly important to me and I thank you for your candid discussion. Please keep an eye out in the coming weeks for an email with a link to

a survey. On that survey you will be able to see a list of emerging themes from this focus group. I would love if you take a look at those themes and let me know if they reflect your own experience accurately. Finally, if you have any questions please feel free to contact me at parisnelson@uky.edu. Thank you all again.

Appendix C:

Member Check Email

Email copy:

Hello!

Thank you for your candid conversation and participation in my study. Please follow the link below to a survey that will outline the emerging themes that I derived from our focus group conversations. All of the names used in the data are pseudonyms so no comment may be traced back to the person who said it. Please take a moment to review the themes and indicate if the data reflects your experience as a first-generation college student at XXXX. Your feedback and voice are important to me and this project and I hope to ensure that your experience is accurately depicted. Please feel free to email me if you have any further questions.

[insert link]

Thank you!

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Paris Nelson

EDUCATION

University of Kentucky August 2018 – May 2020 (expected)
Master of Arts in Communication | Specialization in Instructional Communication | 4.0 GPA

University of Montevallo August 2014 – December 2017
Bachelor of Science in Communication | 3.94 GPA

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant August 2019 – May 2020
Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, University of Kentucky

Teaching Assistant August 2018 – May 2019
College of Communication and Information, University of Kentucky

PUBLICATIONS

Nuru, A. K., Wang, T. R., Abetz, J., & **Nelson, P.** (2018). "I felt the invisible hand of inequity fall firmly on my shoulders, holding me back": Exploring the intersectional identities of first-generation college student women. In T. Heinz Housel (Ed.), *First-generation college student experiences of intersecting marginalities*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing

Nelson, P. (2016). Understanding the adversities that affect first-generation students and their transition to higher education. *Unconventional Wisdom: McNair Scholars Research Journal* 2016, 3(1), 146-178.

COMPETITIVE CONFERENCE PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Phillips, K., Wang, T. R., **Nelson, P.**, & Worwood, J. (2018, November).

Identity at play: (Re)negotiating educational identity in first-generation sibling dyads. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Salt Lake City, UT.

Nuru, A. K., Wang, T. R., Abetz, J., & **Nelson, P.** (2018, April). "I felt the invisible hand of inequity fall firmly on my shoulders, holding me back": Exploring the intersectional identities of first-generation college student women. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Milwaukee, WI. Top Four Paper, Communication Education Interest Group.

Nelson, P., Wang, T. R., & Nuru, A. K. (2017, November). "I always knew that college was going to be my only way out": Negotiating multiple intersectional identities and adversities while creating a new educational legacy as first-generation college students. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Dallas, TX.

Nelson, P. (2017, November). Understanding the adversities that affect first-generation students and their transition to higher education. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Dallas, TX.

RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

Nelson, P. (2017, March). Understanding the adversities that affect first-generation students and their transition to higher education. Paper presented at University of Montevallo Undergraduate Research Day, Montevallo, AL. 1st Place Oral Presentation.

Nelson, P. (2016, September). Understanding the adversities that affect first-generation students and their transition to higher education. Paper presented at the 24th Annual McNair Scholars Research Conference at UMBC, Baltimore, MD.

Nelson, P. (2015, June). Understanding the adversities that affect first-generation students and their transition to higher education. Paper presented at the 13th Annual University of Montevallo TRIO McNair Scholars Program Research Presentation, Montevallo, AL. 1st Place Overall Research, 2nd Place Overall Presentation.

CAMPUS & COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

Undergraduate Research Panel University of Montevallo	October 2017
Student Success Panel University of Montevallo	August 2017
Young Women's Empowerment Conference Young Women's Empowerment Conference, Birmingham, AL	March 2015
Guest Speaker: Overcoming Adversity 4th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Oratorical Contest, University of Montevallo	January 2015