

An Inside Look at First-Generation Online Students: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction

Dan Rather, an American journalist for CBS Evening News, once said, “A college degree is the key to realizing the American dream, well worth the financial sacrifice because it is supposed to open the door to a world of opportunity.” For many, not attending college is a barrier to the “American Dream.” The emergence of online degree programs have created an additional avenue for individuals to pursue an education. However, this comes with additional implications on the types of people pursuing the programs and what that translates to in terms of career outcomes. In observing how first-generation college students navigate online degree programs, I described the backgrounds of four online students: Peter Kim, who graduated with a bachelor of arts in psychology from Capella University; Johnny Wang, junior business administration major at University of Phoenix; Khelsey Pllum, junior public relations major at California Baptist University (CBU); and Carlos Osuna, a first-year Master of Education student at University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education. I explored the research question: What are the challenges first-generation college students face when navigating online degree programs? Through qualitative research, there has been significant correlation between the preparedness level of those pursuing a college degree in relation to students who are of first-generation.

Jones (2008) cites that college students were exposed to the Internet at a young age and are well-acquainted to several types of technology. About 20 percent of college students started using computers when they were 5-8 years old. By the time they turned 16-18 years old, every college student has already begun using computers as it became part of their daily lives. About 85 percent of first-generation students have their own computer and about 66 percent have at least two email addresses. Overall, first-generation college students cite that the Internet has enhanced their education as it enabled them to use online tools for collaborating with classmates, to engage in research, and to communicate with their professors (Jones, 2008).

The Internet has widely shaped the average college students' social life, and particularly for first-

generation college students, it plays a pivotal role in the way they navigate online resources for their degree programs. While physical colleges provide a plethora of resources for its students, low-income first-generation students tend to be at the peak of those struggling to gain entry into a four-year institution. First-generation college students are the individuals who would have received the most benefit from a four-year institution such as career counseling, academic advising and student services, or university programming. Since first-generation students have the lowest representation in a four-year institutions, an additional avenue which has been slowly growing over the years is online education. For this reason, doing a research study on online education and its impacts on first-generation college students is very important. This paper will explore first-generation students pursuing an online degree program by first outlining a literature review, then identifying the methods used to capture the data, then presenting its data and an analysis of its findings, before finally reaching the conclusion of the research study.

Literature Review

The literature that currently exists includes topics on students with a disability, first-generation college students, as well as online education. However, there is very little existing research that combines all three. This paper fits into the conversation by focusing on a minority group pursuing an online education, particularly examining their challenges, motivations, and overall experiences.

Below is the literature found on students with a disability, first-generation students, and online education:

Students with a Disability

Gregg (1996) looked at the prevalence of first-generation minority students with disabilities as a sector of underserved and underprepared groups. Gregg cites that these students with disabilities are continually ill-prepared to face the challenges of a postsecondary education; stating that “there is a huge correlation between the spectrum of one's ability and their socioeconomic status, which represents their level of preparedness in the context of a college classroom” (Gregg, 2009, p. 105). This shows that students with disabilities may be viewed as less academically capable, which could be a driving reason

for pursuing an online education given the added flexibility to submit assignments online.

First-Generation Students

The prevalence of first-generation minority students to attend community college prior to attending a four-year institution is significantly higher than those who were not first generation college students. Zwerling incorporates ethnic implications in his study as he stated how underserved populations are more afraid towards challenging administration, despite being the most vulnerable population. These groups fear they may be powerless, unworthy, or unaware of how their thoughts may be perceived in relation to university administrators.

It is noteworthy that students rarely challenge the racism of the society at large or even the possible racism of white faculty and administrators. Black students are indeed critical, but the criticism is directed at targets within the black community - the black middle class, the black underclass, the black male. These criticisms are not unlike those voiced by white students (Zwerling, 1992, p. 26).

Hsiao (1992) cites the importance of first-generation college students seeking immediate employment upon graduation despite coming from a lower-middle class background. One of the greatest challenges is ensuring attendance in a four year college because first-generation students are often less prepared academically and do not have comparable management abilities when facing the economic realities of college life. Peer mentorship plays a huge role in allowing first-generation students to develop their social and analytical abilities because it challenges them to prioritize their work.

Engle (2008) cites that most of the pressure for first generation college students is the global economy. Part of this global challenge is improving access to college by highlighting possible resources to prevent failure. Some of the outer-lying risks include lack of academic preparation, lack of financial aid options, and lack of multicultural centers which may cause the student to feel like an outcast. This study fits into the larger body of literature because it looks at low-income first-generation college students and how they are impacted by federal and state resources.

Online Education

Woosley (2007) analyzed first-generation minority sophomores' self-efficacy scores through an online assessment. These assessments started out as an experiment to demystify the belief that online students were less motivated. The study explored the relationship between one's self-efficacy score and their academic performance, while also looking at the demographic, gender, and age for those who took part in the assessment. The results of this assessment were varied; however, more online colleges are pushing to incorporate these assessments into their online platforms so students can assess their motivation level and learning styles.

Methods

The specific methods I used when collecting my data include observations and ethnographic interviews. “The why of interviewing methodology is to obtain first-person accounts that potentially provide more credible and trustworthy evidence of social meanings to support our assertions of the phenomena we're investigating” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The data collection techniques I used includes snowball sampling strategies, recording, and transcribing. I used a critical research paradigm when examining the backgrounds of the two students, since two of my subjects were first-generation online students with a disability (Saldana, 2014). Specifically for Kim who appeared more shy, I tried matching his body language; whenever he sat up straight, I would do the same. If he slouched a little, I slouched a little. I believe this established stronger rapport.

Data Collection

I used note-taking, audio-recording, and remembering to capture the data for both of my participants (Kvale, p. 93). At the interview phase of this research study, I was unable to capture the surrounding backgrounds of Kim as part of the interview during my note-taking process. I did capture his social cues, body language, and tone of voice. I used my memory of the background and atmosphere after the interview to make sure I got everything down. For any of my participants, I do not feel the atmosphere or surroundings impacted any of the responses throughout each interview. I used rapport as a method to make the participants feel comfortable, such as repeating explanation, re-stating, and asking for use

instead of meaning (Spradley, 1979). Transcribing, which was my final step for data analysis, was most helpful when I coded and analyzed some of the details to find overlapping themes (Kvale, 1991).

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the study, I triangulated findings by drawing on multiple sources of data (Saldana, 2014). Since each individual had diverse experiences, my study was enriched in so many ways. Despite not having the opportunity to sit in an online session for a given class, I was able to have a more personalized approach to this study by speaking one-on-one in regards to each individual's unique experiences with online education.

Limitations of Study

There were limitations to this study because my sample size was so small. I only had four individuals participate in this research study, of whom despite all offered valuable information for this research study, it was not enough to comprehensively analyze this study. There are several external variables not accounted for including unique family situations, transportation needs and technology issues, as well as diverse perspectives of working professionals who graduated from online colleges.

In addition, of the four I interviewed, one was on Skype which meant I was not able to as effectively take note of his surroundings, nor was I able to get as clear of an understanding of his emotions as I would in-person. All of my studies were done one-on-one, and because I did not get into an actual online synchronized videochat session with the entire class, my study was limited and can be potentially biased because they were all individual perspectives. Another area where there was limitation of study is that there could have been a case study or focus group being conducted in order to compare first-generation online students' competency level with those students pursuing their degrees on-campus. Although this would have been incredibly time-consuming, this would have enriched my study in numerous ways as it adds an extra layer of perspective to the study.

Sample

The reason I selected my participants: Khelsey Pllum, Carlos Osuna, Peter Kim, and Johnny Wang was because they all fit the study criteria. When I first figured out the topic for my research study, I

immediately had two friends in mind, Pellum and Osuna, who fit the research study perfectly. I knew that I would have easy access to these individuals if I needed to perform an interview, which made it easy for me to conduct observations and interviews. For Kim and Wang, it was a bit more rough since I had no previous established relationships with them. At the moment, I was searching for first-generation students pursuing online degrees who also had a disability. It was a very narrow search, which made it difficult to find someone who matched all three of the criteria. By using the snowball sampling strategy (Seidman, 1991), I was connected to Peter Kim and Johnny Wang through Dr. Keanon Alderson, Associate Professor of Business at California Baptist University, who was an alumni of Capella University.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality within these research groups was that I had no established rapport with either Kim nor Wang, both of whom I was connected to a third-party mutual friend. I already knew Pellum and Osuna, which may have influenced their comfort level around me, but I do not believe that it impacted their responses in any way. Especially because of the nature of this research study, I was directly involved in each of my observations and interviews. I had direct in-person interactions with each participants except Carlos Osuna, of whom I interviewed via Skype.

Presentation of findings:

Below are the summary of findings including two observations, two interviews, as well as a reflection of the observation and interview process.

Observation while interviewing Khelsey Pellum

On a Sunday afternoon, I met with Pellum on a bench beside CBU's campus library. She was wearing black leggings and had a black cardigan on over a business casual shirt. I did not ask if she came off from work or came from a presentation as I did not find it relevant to my study. Because I have known Pellum since I was an undergraduate student, we spoke about some of the changes of CBU's policies and the diverse student populations the university draws each year. As I examined our surroundings, I saw new palm trees beside the library, there were more benches placed in the center of the campus, and there

was a giant box next to the library so students may donate books to local high schools. I was surprised of all the changes that have taken place in such little amount of time. After spending about five minutes talking about CBU, we jumped into the interview and the first question I asked Pellum was why being a first-generation college student equated to her pursuing an online program. Pellum responded saying that it was mainly finances and flexibility.

She said, “Being an only child, I do not want to burden my mother. I have a single mother who works two jobs, and she tries really hard to support the two of us. Attaining an online degree allows me to pick up a part-time job and is more cost-effective.” Despite the plethora of counseling and tutoring services offered on a physical campus, Pellum said that she could always utilize services from local counseling centers or could consult her mother if she needed anything. She did not feel that the cost of a physical campus would have led to a “better” social experience. Some of the social cues I noticed from Pellum was that she shrugged every time I referenced back to her background. She smiled softly whenever I questioned about the relationship she had with her mother, and she would open up about how her mom is always working overtime so that she could live a better life.

When I asked Pellum about her thoughts about her university's exams for her courses, she mentioned that most of her courses were writing intensive. For the few courses that required exams, some were open-book timed exams, some were purely essay prompts with several questions, while her math exams from her general education courses required her to go to a local testing center with a proctor. She cited that she was still learning the material and doing the required readings as did any other student, despite the less stringent policies being in an online program. Pellum said that she does not learn as well having physical multiple-choice exams, and therefore appreciates the nature of her online program's exams.

Navigating an online program presents several challenges, especially if one is new to an online college environment. I asked Pellum what were some of her challenges being the first in her family to pursue a college education. Pellum said:

The first few months I was still concerned about using Blackboard, whenever my professor would post videos or readings online, I had a hard time adjusting to the whole online atmosphere. I enjoyed every class session because everything was synchronized, I felt I got the individualized attention I would not have otherwise received if I attended a state school in a large lecture hall.

I sensed relief in Pellum when she took a deep breath and she pointed her eyes up as she reflected on the advantages of being in an online program. She paused after every sentence only to express excitement in her tone; she raised her voice after she mentioned the extended time she was able to spend with her mother and that she was able to maintain her own part-time job to assist in financing her own education.

Observation while interviewing Carlos Osuna

As I interviewed Osuna via Skype, I noticed he was wearing a red polo shirt and was wearing glasses. He was in his bedroom, and I saw on his wall some student leadership awards, pictures of his family, a giant USC poster, and a UC Berkeley pennant. Osuna, who is pursuing an online Master of Education in Learning Design and Technology from University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education, cited that his main motive for pursuing an online degree had nothing to do with cost – in fact it was the same cost as a physical degree on-campus. Osuna was drawn to the reputation of USC and saw a strong profile of faculty members teaching under his program. Osuna wishes to pursue a career in education consulting, with the vision of utilizing technology as a way to eliminate education inequity.

Osuna said:

The future of education is online, I want to be a pioneer in the field and experience first-hand the technologies, tools, and resources of an online degree program. Having graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, I have already been exposed to a physical campus environment. I only want to expand my knowledge of navigating an online program.

Osuna spoke with confidence that an online degree program was right for him and he was able to effectively navigate the online program's tools, especially because there were synchronized class sessions, videos, articles, and online submissions necessary for completing his daily school work. In addition, he felt that there was enough support from the faculty members to assist him when he would navigate his education. Because of that, he felt readily prepared to endure the challenges of his online program. He

spoke with energy every time I asked about his background, he stated that he overcame a lot of challenges involving his family financially, and because he immigrated to the United States at a young age, he felt that there was not anything stopping him from pursuing his dreams. Osuna immigrated from Mexico at age five, and grew up in a low-income neighborhood while attending charter schools his whole life. In the past six years, he has held part-time jobs to support his family and to finance his own education. He said, “I believe challenges are the reason I pursue my dreams. Why pursue something if there is no challenge?”

A huge asset for Osuna was the fact that he was a visual learner and he said that creating symbolic references, such as charts, graphs, pictures, and other forms of visual aid, would enable others to learn more effectively. Osuna has a vision of designing a dynamic learning environment through online mobile applications, and because symbols are contextual, it is important to challenge others through describing their meaning. Especially because in qualitative research, codes symbolize larger passages of data, it assists the brain to create meaning in symbols (Saldana, 2014). A research study that Osuna mentioned that he was working on was examining students with disabilities and how they would be able to navigate online programs more effectively.

Osuna said he wanted to create a consulting business centered on education technology. Because I interviewed him via Skype, I had to pay sharp attention towards his facial expression, his voice, and body language. Throughout the interview, he appeared confident in his voice, he mentioned a lot about streamlining online webinars to the public so that he would be able to target a larger demographic. The vision for the consulting business is to help first-generation minorities gain college admittance. Osuna is particularly passionate about increasing the community college transfer rate for underrepresented groups.

Interviewing Peter Kim

Peter Kim is an alumni of Capella University with a bachelor of arts in psychology. Prior to meeting up with one another, I had no established rapport with Kim and I was nervous moving into the interview stage because I have never seen him before in person. It was a Friday afternoon, I met with Kim inside of a Starbucks in Buena Park. He was dressed in business casual clothing, and he told me had just

gotten off work at his church. After spending about five minutes talking about his religious and family background, we jumped straight into the interview. One of the data collection techniques I particularly used was recording the interview, “which includes audiotape recording, videotape recording, note-taking and remembering” (Kvale, 2007, p. 93).

Establishing Rapport

I wanted to build immediate rapport with Kim so that the interview would run more smoothly and that he would be more open towards the different questions I may ask him. According to Spradley, three important principles facilitate the rapport-building process: First, make repeated explanations. Second, restate what informants say. Third, do not ask for meaning, ask for use. (Spradley, 1979) In demonstrating these three points, I started the conversation by saying, “As I said earlier, I am interested in learning about your perspective of pursuing an online education, and how your background influenced the way you navigated everything.” After his response, I said, “I understand your point of view” and would go off using different words, but still re-stating the message. Lastly, instead of asking how he chose his respective online college, I framed the question in a way so I could use the information for my research study. I asked him what resources he used to search for online colleges and which individuals may have directed him.

Responding to Being a First-Generation Online Student with a Disability

Whenever I spoke during the interview, I recognized the importance that my role primarily consisted of asking questions and following up on important details the participant was saying (Seidman, 1991). One question I asked Kim was why being a first-generation college student equated to him pursuing an online program. Kim responded saying that it was mainly finances, convenience, and flexibility. He said, “Since I was a child, I had cerebral palsy which means I grew up having stiff and weak muscles, particularly for my legs which would have made it difficult for me getting to class.” As I remained attentive to what he was saying, I asked him what the disability entailed, and he said his muscles, particularly in his legs, would suddenly tighten at random times of the day. He continued,

“Being an online student, I did not have to worry about getting to class.”

Kim's Nonverbal Cues

Throughout Kim's interview, I was not taking note of his surroundings. It was not until after the interview, I remembered that the surroundings is an important factor in an interview and it may have influenced the responses of the participant. “An interview may be recorded by a reflected use of the interviewer’s remembrance, relying on his or her empathy and memory, and then writing down the main aspects of the interview after the session, sometimes assisted by notes taken during the interview” (Kvale, 2007, p. 94). During the interview, I was primarily focused on gauging the content from Kim. It was not until after the interview, I reflected on all the nonverbal cues he presented. Some of the nonverbal cues I noticed from Kim was that he shrugged every time I referenced back to his background. He was more motivated whenever I questioned about his experiences working at his church, and he spoke in detail about how his disability affected his education.

Connecting Kim's Interview Responses with Research Study

When asking descriptive questions, longer questions tend to equate to extended responses (Spradley, 1979). I was strategic in the way I framed my questions by using mini-tour questions, which are identical to grand-tour questions, except they deal with a much smaller unit of experience. When I asked Kim on his thoughts about standardized exams to gain admittance into a 4-year university, he responded:

I am not a fan of standardized exams. I do not think these exams are the best methods for evaluating a person's potential success inside the classroom. There are other ways that could be used to assess a students' future academic performance such as high school grades, extra-curricular activities, and recommendation letters. I do not think one exam can necessarily predict the holistic abilities of a student.

Although this was a short response, I believe this was excellent data because he was focused on one subject, as opposed to jumping around comparing every little detail.

Navigating an online program presents several challenges, especially if one is new to an online

college environment. I asked Kim what were some of his challenges being the first in his family to pursue a college education. Kim said, “It was difficult in that I did not have family to help me. I was unfamiliar throughout the process, whether that meant applying to colleges or having to navigate the entire university system.”

Interviewing Johnny Wang

The second person I interviewed was Johnny Wang, junior business administration major at University of Phoenix. Using the snowball sample strategy, I met Wang through a mutual friend who connected me with him the night before via a Facebook message. It was a Sunday afternoon, I interviewed Wang at a Taco Bell across the street from USC. I noticed he was wearing a button-up shirt, dark jeans, and tennis shoes. I knew that if I wanted to get the best information, I would have to tailor the interview and get the information I needed. I spoke on a variety of topics and showed him some of the research I had. He responded to some immediately, but I had him save the information for the interview which I captured below.

Recording and Transcribing

The atmosphere was very calm. Since I was most concerned with collecting data to assess overlapping themes in this topic, I asked Wang for permission to record everything. After recording the interview, I would transcribe the interview so I would be able to code the data. “A good way to gauge listening skills is to transcribe an interview tape. Separate the interviewer's question from the participant's responses by new paragraphs” (Seidman, 1991, p. 57). Wang offered me consent to record, so I clicked the record button and immediately started the interview with the anticipation of eventually transcribing everything.

A Day in the Life of Wang

Wang said, “Due to my disability, attending an online university makes it easy since I do not have to deal with all the traveling. However, when it comes to group projects, it makes it difficult to meet up and I find myself only being able to communicate online.” He concluded saying if he were to start over,

he would still do his education online. He further elaborated saying he had diabetic neuropathies, which is a family nerve disorder caused by diabetes. For him, this developed into nerve damages in his legs, making it difficult for him to walk. For the past four years, he has been on a wheelchair. Since his program is online, it makes traveling less of a hassle.

A typical day, according to Wang, is that he wakes up, goes on his wheelchair, brushes his teeth, gets ready, and then has breakfast. After eating, he goes onto his computer to check what needs to be done for his online classes. Wang then works on some assignments, which the one he has been focusing the most on lately is his group assignment. He is currently coordinating a time to get together online with his group to do the project. Wang said, "I check my assignments to find out when they are due, and I typically start brainstorming a week ahead of time. In my group project, my classmates are juniors as well and some have part-time jobs; two are Asian females and the other is an African American male." Wang said that his latest assignment is a business proposal for a start-up that the group pitched to the professor.

Implications of being an online, first-generation student

Wang has a lot going on, as he is working on different assignments throughout the day, pacing himself. He does his readings during the afternoons since he has more energy then, and tries to make smaller work loads throughout the day. An issue Wang has mentioned in regards to being a first-generation college student is that there is not enough guidance on preparing for college. When he was in high school, he questioned what scores to get on his SAT, what he should be doing his senior year of high school, and what he should be doing after being admitted to a college.

Wang reached out to his counselors at school and asked them for guidance as opposed to his family.

Wang said:

My family just didn't know as much. In terms of classes and registration, I had to meet with advisor, and they'd be helping me out. My parents never went through financial aid, so I was independent filling out FAFSA and getting that done. I had to find information about student loans and the entire process since my family didn't know what to do.

When there was a technical issue, Wang would call Blackboard technical support, and they would help

him out. When it came to homework, if he needed help, he would talk to his professor on the phone through office hours. Some of his professors and academic advisors have office hours only on a satellite campus, so he would have to go out of his way to get on-site to see them. It has been manageable for him, the only challenge for him has been transportation.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data mainly by using observations and interviews for all four of my participants. For all four of them, prior to asking them questions, I explained to them my research topic and had them review some of the key facts as stated in my peer reviewed sources. I gave each participant at least five minutes to review those sources, and to be mindful of how their experiences would interplay with what was stated in those sources. This was very helpful for the research study since it allowed each of my questions to be very tailored, and I was able to gauge on only the information I needed. After recording and interviewing each participant on their experiences, I transcribed everything on four separate documents of each participant's responses. By reviewing on paper what each participant said, I coded the data by extracting the key themes that was mentioned in each participant's responses.

Below I discuss five themes that emerged from the data:

Preparation for Online Coursework

The first theme that I found for every single one of my participants was their variations in preparing for their online coursework. Pllum and Osuna did not prepare for their online courses, while Kim and Wang occasionally had to test their software or hardware for upgrades. All four of the participants explored the course websites and tested the various features offered on the site. The primary theme here is that those who had experience with online courses in the past had an easier time navigating the following online course they were expected to take.

Online tools can be both a blessing and a burden. For Kim, he said that there were a lot of challenges using the online tools. On the other hand, Wang said that it simplified his online education.

Although it was not required to use these online tools, universities often embed these online tools to make it easier for the student to collaborate with classmates, access course content more efficiently, and find external resources that could be of additional assistance.

General Interaction with Faculty and Classmates

The second theme was the general interactions students had either with their professors or classmates. All four of the participants cited the importance of having clear, continual communication from the faculty to ensure that all questions would be addressed and that students would receive timely feedback. An especially notable theme was how important it was for the instructor to provide very thorough, complete instructions and expectations in order to avoid any possible confusion when the student submits his or her work. The more the professor is available via their email, Skype, or discussion boards, the easier it is for students to cultivate a positive relationship with their professor while performing well academically.

Student Support Services

The third theme revolves around student support services. Kim and Wang cited having poor registration experiences, and Pellum and Osuna cited smooth registration experiences. The key explanation for this was because Pellum and Osuna were given clear, immediate instructions on the process. Kim and Wang both had to ask their academic advisor on the process as well as the deadlines to register. Some of the advising experiences were good, while others were not so great. Particularly for Wang, he cited that at times he had to go out of his way to be at one of the satellite campuses so he can speak with an academic advisor in-person. Osuna and Kim rarely sought their academic advisor because they felt they were well-informed of their process. Pellum constantly cited how she stays on track of her academic plan by staying in close communication with the director of her program, Dr. MaryAnne Pearson, of whom Pellum mentions is very sweet and responsive with emails. The overall theme was that it would have been helpful for each student's respective institution to have posted a website detailing all

of their registration procedures and deadlines.

Implications of a Disability

A key theme I captured from Wang's interview was that his disability was the only driving reason which prevented him from attaining an education on a physical campus. Despite his appreciation for the online program and his thorough advocacy for it, it appeared as though he would have really appreciated the interactions that would take place on a physical campus; which ultimately would have made communicating in groups much easier. He maintained a positive attitude given his circumstance, and he was also very appreciative of the fact he was able to pursue a college education at all. Due to the disability affecting Kim's and Wang's legs, they had limited traveling ability which prevented them from pursuing an education on a physical campus. The word "convenient" came up several times from both Kim and Wang, as did their thoughts on communication with classmates. The primary drawback that both Kim and Wang mentioned was the limited interaction offered via an online education; despite the identical course content offered both on-campus and online.

Gregg's (1996) article resonated with Johnny Wang the most since he was constantly citing how his disability was a huge influence for pursuing an online education. Not only was it more cost-effective, but he needed the flexibility to make sure that he can sustain himself while balancing his studies.

Implications of Being First-Generation

Peter Kim said that if he could start over, he would have done college in-person so it would be easier accessing resources such as counseling, advising, student groups, internship opportunities, among other things. Since each student was the first in their family to pursue a bachelor's degree, they had a limited understanding of the admissions process. Osuna had family and work obligations which forced him to attain an online education to be more flexible. The overall implications of being first-generation meant that they started college with limited understanding of their expectations and requirements, while also being presumably low-income which affects their academic performance as well as their ability to

balance work, school, and general finances.

Zwerling's (1992) study was relevant to every single one of my participants, but was especially noteworthy for Khelsey Pllum, of whom grew up feeling marginalized for being Black and growing up in a low-income community. There was an overwhelming overlap of themes in regards to each of my participants' view on how their social status played a role in their education. Pllum's story particularly made me grapple with how online education can in some ways perpetuate some of the existing inequities for low-income first-generation college students. These first-generation students thrive the most when offered the plethora of counseling and student services in a college setting, but when opting to join an online program instead due to feeling marginalized; they miss out on the university resources which build them up as individuals.

Conclusion

Some of the overall key findings include how there were both technical and intellectual challenges within the students' coursework, the students found that keeping track of coursework while being disciplined was a challenge due to over-flexibility; the students needed to be more keen towards managing their time efficiently. Pllum, Wang, and Kim cited that math courses were more difficult to be taken online, and every participant cited that communication may be easier online for those who would have otherwise been soft-spoken inside the classroom. Osuna stated that because everything is online, more sensitive topics involving one's social background can cause for misunderstanding or flaming discussions online; mainly because an online discussion does not allow individuals to experience the emotional face-to-face interactions on-campus programs deliver.

This study made me think more critically about the factors which make first-generation students question whether to pursue a degree on-campus or online. Are the students accurately being evaluated on their academic performance, or do standardized exams only benefit those who are good test-takers? How can one determine if they are more suitable towards an on-campus program or an online program? Why

are the expenses of a college education as high as it is, and how different would the education landscape be if the costs were lower? These are the questions I believe there needs to be more research being conducted in order to decipher whether pursuing an online education is most suitable for an individual. In my future research design, I would be interested in only looking at first-generation college students who already graduated from an online degree program and seeing how their career differs from those who attained their degree on a physical campus.

I do believe this needs to be studied because the emergence of online programs is still relatively recent, and plenty of research is still needed in regards to what population makes up the majority of online programs, what are the key reasons drawing these groups into online degree programs as opposed to a physical program, and how does an online degree affect one's career outcomes.

Despite none of my participants having attended a community college, all mentioned that community college would have been a wonderful avenue to pursue an education if one wants to transfer into a four-year institution. Cost and convenience seemed to be the key reasons all of my participants opted to remain in an online program. The data ultimately relates to my overarching research question in that first-generation online students choose to pursue an online degree for very specific reasons tailored towards their personal needs. The only thing I observed that I did not previously consider was identifying how one's surroundings can signify some of their values. For example, when I was observing the background of Osuna's wall during the Skype interview, I took note that he had a UC Berkeley pennant, student leadership awards, and photos of his family on his wall. This made me realize that he valued his education, service, and family; all of these themes came across in his interview when I asked what motivated him the most.

Convenience, cost, and level of interaction may be the key deciding factors for an individual selecting a degree program. The implications this study has for subsequent research would include identifying those who may have influenced the first-generation students to pursue an online education, how do alumni of online colleges compete in the job market after graduating, and in what ways online

education can be improved in order to holistically measure up to on-campus programs.

While this research study mainly looked at first-generation college students pursuing an online education, it did not look too closely at first-generation college students who had intersectional identities which may have served as a barrier within their education. These implications all build on one another because I drew on one alumni of an online college, but did not probe so deep to get information about his family. I asked questions about the students' experiences with online student services, but did not go as deep to ask in what ways it can be improved to mirror an on-campus' offerings. I asked each participant about their family and backgrounds, but I did not ask about their intersectional identities which may have influenced their overall educational pursuits. Upon reflecting on this research study, I have gained deeper insight on the challenges first-generation college students face when navigating online degree programs.

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