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**A Lifelong Network: Perceptions and Experiences of First-Generation Alums After
Graduation**

by

Allison K. Toney
B.S., Clemson University, 2007
M.Ed., Clemson University, 2009

Chair: Jeffery L. Wilson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Educational Leadership
Associate Dean, Graduate School

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Justice at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Dedication

To my brother. You would have probably hated the touchy-feelyness of this but I miss you and I love you. Thanks for always bragging about me and believing in me.

Acknowledgements

I first want to thank the alums that participated in this study. They raised their hand, offered me their time, and trusted me to share their experiences and stories. I truly enjoyed getting to know them and I hope they know their degree-granting institution will always be there for them. They are who continues to inspire me to do this work everyday and to continue to serve and provide the best experiences to alums.

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think about him every day and how he helped me get here. To my “cohort” of School of Education peers (Dr. Shenita Williams, Dr. Portia Newman, Dr. Beth Paris, Sarah Haden, Kayla Diggs-Brody). We went through classes together, I often reached out to many of you for guidance, or you reminded me to complete something (😊). But also, the opportunity to meet you, I am inspired by all of your work. The friends that are always my biggest fans (Bethany, Lindsey, Coleman, Corrine, Beth, Jenna, the Tiger crew). There was no judgement or questions asked, just constant support. I got to this place with so much support from these individuals and probably many that I have failed to mention but I could not have done this without your sarcasm, laughter, and encouragement. Now, what to do next?

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ABSTRACT

A LIFELONG NETWORK: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION ALUMS AFTER GRADUATION

By Allison K. Toney, Ph.D.

As first-generation students transition to college graduates, the question lies in whether institutions of higher education are continuing to provide opportunities for them as alums. As a result of first-generation college students being the first in their family to attend college, students may enter college not knowing what to expect. But institutions have evolved to provide services, resources and opportunities that support their success while enrolled. Upon graduation, the process of transitioning out of college can be a challenging time for students as they seek post-graduation success. Some institutions offer support and resources tailored specifically to first-generation graduates or graduates based on their identity, shared interests, or affinities. However, first-generation students may face the unknown or a loss of resources as they transition into life as a graduate. First-generation graduates may feel relatively alone in navigating life after college simply by virtue of being “first in their family” (Olson, 2015), however, students-turned-alums do not have to feel alone as they navigate post-graduation life. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand the unique, lived experiences of first-generation alums, how they describe their alum network, and the relationship and experiences with their degree granting institution post-graduation.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Is there value in an alum network?¹ I am often faced with this question weekly, if not daily, in my personal career within college alumni relations. What has [insert school name] done for me is a common concern among students turned alums at institutions of higher education. When I began my career working in alumni relations, I saw the power and influence of the alum community. Within my own alum network, peers and friends connected me with job prospects and provided much needed advice and support that helped me navigate through personal and professional successes and challenges. Challenges that included making decisions about jobs, struggling to find new opportunities when you knew the current situation wasn't going well, how to approach supervisors, how to apply for jobs or even connections to people when I moved to new cities. Needless to say, I began to question whether all alums were afforded such support and felt that same way about their alum network. In a professional capacity within my work as the Senior Director of Student and Alumni Engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University we have started to gather engagement data of alums participating, attending, or volunteering with the institution. But we have had anecdotal conversations with alums who commented that they did not understand what was in it for them or how they could benefit from the alum network. I began to wonder if alums recognized the resources that were still provided through the institution after graduation or the vast networking pool that is readily available for alums to tap into.

Across the United States, colleges and universities have seen an increase in the diversity of the student population, especially those who are first-generation college students. On average,

¹ The term alum or alums is used throughout as the inclusive, gender-neutral term for a group of individuals that graduated from an institution. In some cases, alumni was still used when referenced from the literature, offices, department, and history.

45 percent of undergraduates at public and private four-year colleges and universities are first-generation college students (RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students are commonly defined as students whose parents or legal guardians did not complete a bachelor's degree from an institution of higher education (RTI International, 2019). First-generation college students represent a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, social classes, family backgrounds and experiences, however; they are more likely to be female, students of color, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Olson, 2014; RTI International, 2019; Engle & Tinto, 2008). For first-generation college students, there is a sense of determination to achieve more for themselves and their families. And this is just one of the many motivators to attend and succeed in college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Overall, the experiences of first-generation students within higher education can be vastly different than those of their non-first-generation peers, and the approach to research has often focused on the “lack of” or “otherness” of first-generation college students as opposed to their peers. However most recently, more specific research related to first-generation students has focused more on what institutions are doing to support students and the successes of first-generation college students (Davis, 2012).

Historically, institutions of higher education have not been set-up in a way to support the success of first-generation college students despite students having the educational assets to succeed (Schwartz et al., 2018; Gillen-O’Neel, 2019). As the number of first-generation students at colleges and universities has increased, institutions are responding to their needs by implementing programs, services, and resources to support students. For example, at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) there is a dedicated office for first-generation students within Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success (SEMSS) that provides academic and

student support through resources such as mentoring initiatives, student organization participation, financial guidance, and familial support services (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021). Programs and resources like these are common among college campuses across the country, some more robust than others. For example, some colleges have multiple individuals for staff support, have dedicated advisors, have a formalized mentor program, do consistent programming for students, have summer bridge programs, or have significant scholarship opportunities for students. First-generation college programs could include all of the examples mentioned above or have only been able to implement a few programs and resources with the hope of expanding.

As students graduate from college, first and continuing-generation-alums alike can face a transition that can sometimes be complicated and unexpected (Olson, 2016). But for first-generation college alums, as a result of them being the first in their family to attend college, navigating life after graduation can make alums feel as though they are on their own, similar to their experience and feelings while enrolled in college. In addition, there may be an increased sense of pressure from first-generation alums as they transition into the “real world,” (Olson, 2016). This pressure can stem from feeling that they have to represent success in their careers, not to mention meeting family expectations. However, students-turned-alums do not have to feel alone as they navigate post-graduation life (Olson, 2016). Their new-found college network of alums and post-graduation resources can be accessed for support.

In Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin’s, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, the authors explored how and whether higher education has been able to achieve what it set out to do (Bowen et al., 2005). They stated that colleges and universities are “engines of opportunity,” meaning that colleges are providing positive outcomes for students in the form of

future financial earnings, advanced degree attainment, career choices and life satisfaction. Thus, there should be benefits from attending college that should extend beyond the college experience itself and that ensure colleges are helping students advance throughout their various life stages (Bowen et al., 2005). The research strongly concurs that the pursuit and attainment of a postsecondary degree is considered a path leading to opportunity, social mobility, and economic progress in the United States (Carey, 2004; Olson, 2014).

Problem Statement

The 2018 Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey (Strada Education Network & Gallup, Inc., 2018) reported on what more than 5,100 college graduates said about their college experience and life after graduation: Only nine percent of graduates reported that alums or their alum network was helpful to them post-graduation. Gallup also noted the level of attachment alums had with their degree-granting institution, showing that only 24% of graduates agreed to the statement that their college was passionate about their long-term success (Gallup Inc., 2014). These surveys concluded that the most common form of value for college graduates was acquiring a sound and successful job. However, respondents did not see their alumni network offering support to them within the job market or as a means of support post-graduation (Strada Education Network & Gallup, Inc., 2018). To put this finding into perspective, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) with 204,891 living alumni reported in the 2020 fiscal year that 32,062 unique alumni engaged with the institution, which accounts for 15.6% of the entire alumni population (VCU Office of Alumni Relations, 2021). Alum engagement has been defined in buckets of awareness, experiential activities, volunteerism and giving, which followed the professional association standards of engagement. I go into a more in-depth description of these buckets in the literature review. The level of engagement and attachment of alums with their

undergraduate degree-granting institution could correlate with the self-reported helpfulness of their alum network, but the numbers reported from VCU and the Gallup surveys distinctly show that the number of alums connecting with their institutions after graduation is relatively small. These numbers are lower than the national alum engagement metrics. In the Alumni Engagement Metrics report, data from 365 institutions reported that among the primarily undergraduate schools, the median percentage of engaged alumni was about 28% (CASE, 2022).

Research on college and university alums has primarily focused on the financial support they provide. However, not enough attention has focused on the non-financial aspects of alum support such as access to professional networks, beneficial relationships, or support networks (Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Strada Education Network & Gallup, Inc., 2018; Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021). This lack of research suggests that higher education is not prioritizing alum engagement that could most fully benefit and support alums post-graduation. Though providing greater financial benefits to the institution is also important to the long-term success of the institution. Alumni engagement helps to build lifelong and mutually beneficial relationships not only to the individual, but to the institution (CASE, 2018). Among the alum community, individuals can share their lived experiences that have helped to shape their identity, success, and challenges over time building a community of resources and support for other alumni and students (Shaindlin, 2018). For example, alums that engage with their institution by connecting with other alums, attending events, volunteering their time, or mentoring a student are more likely to continue to stay engaged with the institution and more likely to transition into future alum donors (Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009).

What does engagement look like for first-generation alums? There has been little research into a first-generation alums' journey into the workforce or as alums move further away from

their college experience (Olson, 2016). The lived experiences of first-generation college students while enrolled in college suggest that their experience navigating post-graduation life could also be a new and exploratory, prompting the interest in this research study. Throughout college, the experiences and opportunities for many first-generation college students within the college setting may be unfamiliar or new to the student and the student's family. Their needs may also not be known to their support networks (Olson, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2015). As students transition to post college life and new careers, they may experience a similar feeling of uncertainty as they begin to navigate decisions related to their job, career, or post-graduation life (Olson, 2014). A study that discussed the challenges described by first-generation college graduates as they transitioned into the working world highlighted the difficulties around learning specific life skills related to their careers. These difficulties included work benefits, retirement plans, and work-related attire (Huber, 2010). In these instances, first-generation alums had difficulty sharing their challenges with friends and family. Furthermore, they described the need for a professional network or support system to help guide them through these challenges and provide mentorship or support (Huber, 2010; Olson, 2014). The emergence of a network of people and support groups outside of friends and family would be valuable.

Pascarella et al. (2004) completed a study that sought to broaden knowledge on how first-generation students experience and benefit from college. One of their central conclusions pointed to the level of engagement of first-generation students in the social and peer network of their institution. Those students found that extracurricular involvement had a positive effect on them and found that the social capital gained through extracurricular and peer involvement in college could be useful to first-generation students as a way to acquire additional capital to help them succeed in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). This finding suggests that the capital acquired

through those networks of peers, if continued post-graduation, could have a positive impact on first-generation alums.

Social capital that was described as useful can be a network of connections and relationships that are formed between individuals. It can help to build other connections, create opportunities, and access to others. As mentioned previously, these connections could be in the form of extracurricular involvement in college (Hennessy-Himmelheber, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004). Situated within the category of social capital is cultural capital, that includes forms of culture that can be leveraged in certain contexts and situations to promote social mobility (Lane & Taber, 2012). Studies have suggested that first-generation college students may not possess the same levels of either social or cultural capital as their non-first-generation peers and may face challenges in navigating the university and post-graduation life. But that is not to say that first-generation students and those who become alums do not have their own forms of social and cultural capital that could be leveraged within their post-graduation life (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). First-generation students and alums can leverage the social and cultural capital acquired and accessed through higher education within their own lived experiences, and benefit from this through the form of the network of alums. College students and alums gain social capital, both based on their network and the individuals within that network. In some ways, they are able to create the easiest network based solely on matriculation at their institution; a community of alums that have all graduated from the same institution (Huber, 2010).

Students and alums have continued access and potential support from their vast alum network. Could it be the lack of knowledge or awareness regarding the forms of capital or the unfamiliarity and newness of life after graduation that stands in the way of first-generation alums continuing to stay connected with the institution upon graduation? As first-generation students

navigate the changes and challenges within college, they experience similar forms of changes and challenges with life after graduation (Huber, 2010; Olson, 2014, 2016). There was a need in research to see how social capital played a role in college students experiences. Mishra (2018) unpacked how social capital influenced higher education for underrepresented students. Their research revealed that social support from a network can compensate for lack of information-related social capital, the information-related capital that they shared mainly pertained to students whose parents or guardian gained at least a bachelor's degree and contributed towards their individual success. Bowman and Gasman (2013) argued that it was important for advancement and alumni relations professionals to survey and gather information from alumni populations, especially concerning alumni of color in order to know what was important and how they might affiliate with the institution. A gathering of information from alums based on their identity, background, and interests encourages the long-term commitment towards alumni engagement.

Theoretical Framework

What is the significance of the relationships, connections and networks that can provide opportunities and support for first-generation alums post-graduation? This study explored the experiences and challenges of first-generation alums post-graduation and how they may have engaged with other alums and with their undergraduate degree-granting institution. As stated previously, three theories of capital are utilized throughout this study. This study utilized the frameworks of social and cultural capital as well as community cultural wealth. Developing and establishing new personal connections as well as maintaining long-standing relationships can be critical to students' success throughout college, implying that the same could occur for students after graduation (Wittner et al., 2020; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Parks-Yancy, 2012).

By attending and completing college, students have access to forms of social capital, in combination with cultural capital and community cultural wealth, that produces beneficial outcomes like a more positive college experience, acquired social support as well as new and expanded resources (Schwartz et. al, 2018; Wittner et al., 2020). This combination of frameworks helped to explain how individuals can understand the relationships in their lives and how such networks might assist them post-graduation (Bourdieu, 1983; Lin, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Yosso, 2005). These diverse, but connected theories serve as the lenses to help connect to the problem being studied. The application of these theories helped to bring meaning to the information that is being gathered, summarize what is known or discovered, and attempt to provide an explanation of the study (Merriam, 1998).

Bourdieu (1983) equates social capital with familial background and privileged resources. However, Lin (2001) and Coleman (1988) approach social capital from the notion that it's access to people. How an individual might use those people or resources is even more essential. Cultural capital also incorporates forms of culture into certain situations that might promote social mobility or the use of social capital (Lane & Taber, 2012). Finally, community cultural wealth promotes the networks and community resources that exist within communities of color that promote the use of capital in situations and environments (Yosso, 2005). Social capital and the related concepts will frame the people and resources that guided alums post-graduation in their personal and professional journeys. With an understanding of how capital might impact and is understood by participants, this study approached how institutions could better support alums and how alums can understand the influence of their network. If higher education is meeting the needs of alums post-graduation, they would hopefully describe those individuals or resources that assisted them after graduation.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the unique, lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they describe the value of their alum network, as a social network within the context of social and cultural capital. The study will also explore whether or not first-generation alums viewed their alum network as a means to support and acquired social and cultural capital. In addition, the study examined why alums did or did not continue to utilize or stay connected with their degree-granting institutions once they graduated.

Research Questions

The goal of this research study was to better understand the unique, lived experiences of first-generation alums; how they perceive the value of their alum network, the relationship with their degree-granting institution, and their experiences post-graduation. After hearing the experiences from alums, this study hoped to gain perspective in ways to support and serve the needs of alums. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation alums describe their engagement with their undergraduate degree granting institution?
2. In what ways do first-generation alums connect with their network?
3. How do institutional agents go about serving first-generation alums?

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the purpose of this literature review and study, in contexts where the research and literature referenced offices, departments, history, or literature related to alumni relations or the field of advancement, the term alumni may be used. However, for inclusive practices, the term alum or alums will be utilized, which is a gender-neutral term to refer to a group of graduates from an institution.

Historical Context of Higher Education

Higher education within the United States (U.S.) was founded under the impetus of European educational models, which created a lasting impact on the country socially, economically, and politically (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The first colonial colleges, like Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts were built on Protestant or Catholic ideals with the purpose of preparing White men to enter the ministry (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Bowen et al., 2005) and, as Wilder (2013) described, served as “instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and slavery” (p. 17). Colleges were not viewed as institutions for career preparation because, at that time, few fields required advanced education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). However, the division between church and state slowly started to unravel in the 19th century, and students began to upend the old curriculum with a new curriculum, changing from a religious to a nonreligious student population, and was moving the administration to a less authoritarian role (Schuh et al., 2010).

Between 1860 and 1900, higher education began to take on the notion that access for all individuals was paramount to the success of the student and the university (Cohen & Kisker,

2010). The passage of the 1862 Morrill Act provided colleges with funding for land to build new campuses and created greater emphasis on agricultural studies as a more practical application of knowledge (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Morrill Act expanded opportunities for individuals to pursue higher education by providing public funding to education and was based on the ideology that “public education would create engaged citizens, provide social mobility, and foster students’ commitment to democracy and service” (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 32). As a result of the second Morrill Act in 1890, there was growth in the number of Black colleges and universities throughout the United States. In many situations, funding was withheld from colleges and schools if they continued racist admissions policies, leading to the creation of separate institutions because institutions were still excluding individuals based on race, ethnicity, or gender from attending (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Stein, 2017). The Morrill Act continued to evoke segregationist practices, excluding historically Black normal schools and Black land-grant colleges and universities from receiving funding that supported their academic goals (Bowen et al., 2005).

Continuing into the 20th century, higher education assumed roles that perpetuated separation between socioeconomic classes and between racial or ethnic groups (Bowen et al., 2005). Colleges and universities throughout the United States maintained practices that intentionally excluded individuals and preserved the societal social order. These had been based in discrimination, placing limited value on students from different racial, religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bowen et al., 2005). Higher education dramatically changed once again when the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill, was introduced in the 1940s. The bill removed or lowered financial barriers for many veterans to pursue a degree within higher education but proved to exacerbate, again, inequalities that existed

between Black, White, and other underrepresented students (Bowen et al., 2005). Throughout the years, higher education has continued to transform based on federal and state agendas and regulations.

Fast forward to higher education as it stands today, which has faced a record number of challenges; increasing tuition costs, decreasing enrollment as traditional aged college goers decline, and increased criticism of the perceived value of higher education (Busteed, 2020). Despite these challenges, the landscape of higher education has evolved to provide access to more students; institutions across the country are enrolling a more diverse student population, and a high school graduate from a White, upper to middle-class background is no longer the “traditional” college student (American Association Colleges & Universities, 2019; Jesnek, 2012). As higher education has grown and diversified, it is still important to grasp how higher education was founded, and what its original limited purposes were, in order to know where we came from, where we are headed, and how it has impacted students and the academy.

Introduction of Alumni Relations

The transformation of higher education also brought nuances to programs, services and opportunities for students and future graduates (or alums). Alumni relations programs found a home within institutional advancement at colleges and universities. Professionals who work in the area of institutional advancement share the common goal of advancing the institution through the development of beneficial relationships with alumni, students, parents, and friends of the university and by garnering support from its constituencies to secure resources like students, faculty, and money (Calvert, 2000; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Rowland, 1986).

Alumni relations programs were organized as early as 1792 with the first class secretaries and the beginnings of classifying alumni by graduation year at Yale University (Pulley, 2019;

Forman, 1995). During the 18th century, colleges and universities began to provide opportunities to engage students in different ways, including activities outside of the classroom. But institutions realized that organized efforts did not exist to engage with matriculates after graduation (Williams et al., 2014). The first chartered alumni association was at Williams College in 1821, and by the late 1800s over 100 alumni associations had been established across the country (Rowland, 1986). The first alumni fund, or collection of alumni donations, was also started at Yale in the early 19th century which was followed by the creation of independent alumni organizations, alumni associations, dedicated buildings on campus for alumni, alumni magazines, and specific alumni relations administrative positions (CASE, 2019).

The formalized alumni relations offices have served institutions by building lifelong relationships with alumni, communicating between the institution and alumni, amplifying and utilizing the alumni voice, as well as cultivating and celebrating institutional traditions (Newman & Petrosko, 2011; CASE, 2009). “Friend-raiser,” a term coined for alumni relations professionals, was used to describe the efforts of institutional advancement in engaging alumni through diverse and quality programming as well as providing a lifelong connection to one’s alma mater (Arnold, 2003; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Webb, 2002). The impact of alumni relations efforts and programs influenced not only alumni but also institutional services like student affairs; alumni often attracted future students to the institution, mentored or supported current students, or promoted the lifelong relationship with the institution (Rissmeyer, 2010; Williams et al., 2014). The depth and breadth of alumni relations offices have expanded over the years in order to continue to stay relevant and provide value to alumni.

First-Generation College Students

As mentioned, higher education has diversified to increase access and opportunity for students to attend and excel in college, and although there are still areas of improvement in serving and supporting all students from a variety of backgrounds, the reach of higher education has expanded. One such area of growth is within the first-generation college student (FGCS) population. The number of first-generation college students has been steadily increasing over the years with FGCS representing between 22 to 77 percent of an undergraduate student population at two and four-year colleges and universities across the country (Ward, 2013; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Stebleton et. al, 2014). On average, 45 percent of undergraduates enrolled across all public and private four-year institutions within the United States are first-generation college students (RTI International, 2019). The term first-generation college student has evolved over time, originally defined in the Higher Education Act of 1965 as “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree.” In the case that an individual lived with one parent, if that parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The Center for First Generation Student Success, an initiative of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), used the same definition. But it also included parents with no postsecondary education, those who did not complete their bachelor’s degree, and students that may be the first sibling in the family to attend college (RTI International, 2019). A continuing-generation student is defined as a student who has at least one parent with some postsecondary education.

It is important to note that there is no common, uniform “picture” of a first-generation college student. First-generation college students represent a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, social classes, family backgrounds and experiences (Olson, 2014; Lohfink & Paulson, 2005). They are more likely to be female (60 percent), many of whom

have dependents or are single parents (RTI International, 2019; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wilsey, 2013). Also, first-generation college students are more likely to be students of color or belong to an ethnic minority group (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward, 2013). Among first-generation college students, 46% are White, 25% are Hispanic or Latine, 18% are Black or African American, 6% are Asian, 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native and .5% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (RTI International, 2019). FGCS are more likely to have intersecting racial, socioeconomic, and gender identities. And these have further contributed to unequal and disparate collegiate experiences and support compared to continuing-generation students (Ellis et al., 2018). There are disparities that still exist between first-generation college students and their continuing-generation peers, specifically related to retention and degree completion. These findings suggest that colleges and universities have to continue to increase the support and resources provided to FGCS (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Data has shown that first-generation college students are more likely to be students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008) and there has been significant growth across colleges, and universities in enrolling more students from historically underrepresented groups (Kinzie et al., 2008). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data from 2002, 2004/9, 2008/12, a lower percentage of first-generation college students versus continuing-generation students are White, meaning that 49 percent of White students were first-generation whereas 70 percent of White students were continuing-generation (Cataldi et al., 2018). However, Black/African American students represented 14 percent of first-generation college students, compared to 11 percent of continuing-generation college students, and Hispanic/Latine students represented 27 percent of first-generation college students, compared to 9 percent of their continuing-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). Nationally, Hispanic and Latine represent

the fastest growing minority population in the United States with a growth in the number of Latine students enrolling in college (Pyne & Means, 2013). The demographic information is important to note for first-generation college students.

Higher education has historically been situated in a privileged space to serve a majority White and elite population but continues to improve to promote the intersectional identities, cultures, and experiences of college students (Jackson & Tran, 2019). When colleges attempt to understand the intersectional identities of first-generation college students, this demonstrates that they are thinking about the lived experiences and individual needs of each of their students. Research indicated that if first-generation students are able to incorporate their lived experiences as part of the classroom experience, these students benefit from that opportunity (Jehangir, 2010). Instead of viewing the student (and eventually alum) population as a homogeneous group, it is important that colleges view the individual needs of first-generation college students as they transition to and from higher education, as well as to think about why students wanted to pursue postsecondary education.

Motivation to Attend College

The pursuit and attainment of a postsecondary degree are considered paths leading to opportunity, social mobility, and economic progress in the United States (Carey, 2004). Factors like opportunity, social mobility and economic progress motivate a student to attend and succeed in college. Pertaining to future financial security, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found that even having some postsecondary education increased the amount of lifetime earnings achieved by an individual and only increased when a bachelor's degree was obtained (Carnevale et al., 2013). However, there could be a variety of reasons that a student, and specifically, a first-generation student has to attend college.

In a study that explored the motivators of first-generation college students to attend college, students talked about their sense of determination to have a better life and a way to improve their circumstances; or to have the opportunity to do and achieve more for themselves and their families (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). First-generation college students saw themselves as “more motivated, appreciative of opportunities, self-reliant, and adaptable” compared to their continuing-generation peers when pursuing higher education (Tate et al., 2015, p. 305). It could be argued that first-generation college students were especially resourceful, resilient and independent because of their first-generation status, not in spite of it (Olson, 2014). Students saw their life experiences as something that gave them specific strengths that they leveraged to complete and obtain their degree; their lived experiences informed their knowledge within the school setting and supported their learning (Tate et al., 2015; Castillo-Montoya, 2017). The intrinsic motivation and personal strengths that students leveraged encouraged them to pursue higher education. For a student that identified as first-generation with high levels of academic motivation, being first-generation was a source of motivation (Jehangir, 2010; Gillen-O’Neel, 2019). However, it was also discovered that first-generation students could also have greater threats to their motivation during college (Petty, 2014). Colleges and universities have to ensure they are providing programs, interventions and opportunities to FGCS to keep them motivated and encouraged throughout their college experience (Petty, 2014).

Student Experiences

Between 30% and 50% of first-generation college students withdraw or leave their institution after the first year, often citing that they did not feel welcome or that they did not fit into the academic community (O’Keefe, 2013). In a study of the strengths and struggles of first-generation college students, participants discussed the importance of campus-affiliated

relationships like formal and informal mentors, peers and faculty or staff and found that those relational networks were beneficial to their success as a student (Havlik et al. 2020). For first-generation college students, their peer groups, residential colleges, academic departments, student organizations, and volunteer groups offered opportunities to connect with others and created a community that made students feel comfortable and confident. Therefore, the social support was a need for first-generation students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). However, first-generation college students were often burdened with the financial responsibilities of college, being financially independent from their families. They were also required to balance their academic work and family responsibilities. This impacted their ability to fully engage in university life (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students experienced college differently than their continuing-generation peers, they did not always have the resources in their family and they had to take on additional responsibilities like working or taking care of responsibilities at home. However, they were excited about the opportunities that college would provide but had their own concerns and worries.

Institutional Programs

In order to assist first-generation students in the transition to college or with their individual concerns, programs and resources were developed on-campus specifically for FGCS. Green and Wright (2017) stated that the creation of communities of learning at colleges and universities could “increase formal and informal interactions with faculty and staff, create a safe space for students to make mistakes, and reduce the isolation of underrepresented groups” (p. 330). These communities of learning could be spaces where students “receive direct contact with faculty, peer support and direct interaction with campus support services” (Green & Wright, 2017, p. 330). Communities of learning have to also provide culturally responsive teaching and

practices that account for the specific needs of students. Many state and federal initiatives and programs were created to address the systemic barriers that existed for first-generation students within the higher education landscape (Azmitia et al., 2018). Federal TRIO programs were created to assist low-income, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through academic programs from secondary to postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). TRIO is not an acronym but represents the original three programs that existed within the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Federally funded programs have grown and provided opportunities for students to work collaboratively and to connect to the support systems that would assist them throughout their college journey (Azmitia et al., 2018).

The Center for First Generation Student Success has created programs, like the First Scholars Network, to bring together institutions across the nation to build a multi-faceted approach to student success for first-generation students (2021). These programs have manifested themselves differently at colleges and universities. Many of these provide organized student organizations for first-generation college students, college success programs where students explore opportunities and attend programs together, and living learning communities. Institutions have also created support services, programs, and scholarships that would specifically support first-generation college students throughout their time in college.

Transitioning Out of College

As first-generation college graduates transition out of college, there may be a sense of pride as well as ambivalence (Olson, 2016). Of course, this could also be common for many college graduates. But as first-generation college students transitioned to life after college and into specific work and professional environments, tensions or feelings of discomfort arose as

they managed expectations that may have differed from those of their own families (Olson, 2016). However, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2016 student survey found that first-generation students utilized personal networking with faculty and friends at a similar rate as their non-first-generation peers (Eismann, 2016). They also found that non-first-generation students were more likely to use a parent or relative in their job search process than first-generation students did. But overall, first-generation students utilized similar job search resources that aided in their career success (Eismann, 2016). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) argued that first-generation students had to balance their independence with the interdependence of being a part of a college community and as they focused on their career aspirations and goals. But a student who was the first in their family to attend and graduate from college may feel relatively alone as they navigate post-graduation life (Olson, 2016).

Social Capital Theory

Developing and establishing new connections and relationships as well as maintaining relationships is critical for college students' success. When thinking about those connections, one can approach connections and relationships from a social capital lens. Social capital is often approached throughout scholarly research from Bourdieu's (1986) framework of social capital, however; there are several theories that help to define social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition or in other words, to membership in a group" (p. 251). Simplified, this means that social capital is the accumulation of a network, privileged knowledge, resources, and information gained through social networks that can provide access to economic and cultural capital in the form of real and symbolic goods (Langhout et al., 2007; Huber, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Bourdieu (1986) often described social capital in conjunction with one's family group or, by default, the connection with a family group. But he also described the investment that people make in building relationships that could serve a purpose or lead to an exchange. He emphasized the importance of social capital as both benefiting and serving the individual (Bourdieu, 1986).

Coleman (1988) expanded the definition of social capital by stating that relationships were the cornerstone for the successful transference of capital resources that could be performed through trustworthiness, obligations, and expectations of structures, information channels, norms, and effective sanctions. Coleman described social capital as an aspect within social structures and the individuals within those structures (1988). Robert Putnam (2000) also defined social capital as the connections among individuals, the establishment of a social network, and how individuals might begin to trust and help individuals within that network. He emphasized that connections were often embodied in organizations like civic and professional associations, through extracurricular activities or just by gathering with friends (Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) believed that social capital included both an individual and collective aspect. Finally, according to Nan Lin's theory of social capital, social capital was gained by access to people and the mobilization of those individual resources (Lin, 1999; 2000). By building relationships and acquiring social capital outside of one's own network, she believed there could be greater access to resources and information (Lin, 1999). Lin also stated that social capital contributes to career trajectories and upward mobility for individuals (2001). Finally, it is important to consider the social capital framework from Stanton-Salazar (2011). They argued that there were individuals who acted as agents of social capital resources and they acted as gate-keepers or empowerment agents. Gate-keeping agents often perpetuated the privileged or dominant forms of social capital.

Whereas, empowerment agents were critically-conscious individuals who were committed to changing oppressive institutional structures and empowering students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Social capital has also been described as a means of social support or the mobilization of resources surrounding a person to achieve a certain goal (Wittner et al., 2020). For individuals, social capital can be considered an asset, contributing to financial, physical, political, cultural, and environmental capital (Green & Haines, 2002; Carr, 2019). The various and evolving definitions of social capital can be applied directly to a support network, access to it, and relationships built and maintained by students while attending and matriculating from institutions of higher education.

Social Capital and First-Generation College Students

Research has suggested that positive interactions with peers and others while in college also positively influenced one's overall college experience. In addition, interactions were built upon the accumulation of people and resources that could help one to succeed (Wittner et al., 2020). While students are enrolled in college, social capital had been connected to several possible positive outcomes for students. These included higher retention and persistence and higher-grade point averages, as well as overall feelings of satisfaction with their institution (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Schwartz et. al, 2018). The cornerstone of social capital theory suggested that students have to maintain relationships with their communities outside of school as well as establish new connections in college to be successful (Schwartz et al., 2018). Students, and especially first-generation students, may not recognize that networking with university contacts, agents, or that using the social capital benefits from academic and social engagement, could support their personal and professional growth and development (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Parks-Yancy, 2012). An example of ways that

institutions are increasing social capital for students is through formal meetings with their academic advisor. This is a strategy to connect students with staff and to foster those relationships with students to be a resource and source of support (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Several studies have identified how social capital was cultivated among first-generation college students in comparison to continuing-generation students. When social capital theory was applied to first-generation students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education at a university, it was utilized as a way to help faculty and staff “acknowledge the different advantages students whose parents are college educated can accrue, [and it] developed ways to leverage the strengths of students social networks and attempted to mitigate the differential advantages inherent in our current education system so that all students have access to resources” (Martin et al., 2020, p. 2). The study helped researchers to understand how the people in a first-generation student's social network encouraged their persistence in their major and what forms of social capital those networks provided to the students (Martin et al., 2020). The study found that previous middle and high school teachers, parents, other family members, peers, professors, employers or coworkers, and professional organization contacts all provided some type of benefit to the students during their time before and during college (Martin et al., 2020). This study illustrated that students could leverage existing and future social connections to help forge a successful path throughout college (Martin et al., 2020).

Soria and Stebleton (2012) stated that first-generation students may not possess the same levels of social or cultural capital as their non-first-generation peers and may face challenges in navigating the university and post-graduation life. They concluded that first-generation students reported less academic engagement while enrolled. These results were expressed through less integration with course material, asking fewer questions in class, and by fewer interactions with

faculty than their non-first-generation peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). In some ways, first-generation students had been perceived as having a “lack” of social capital, because they were not academically engaged. This is often not due to the fact that they do not want to be engaged, but more so that they may not be aware about the benefits of engaging in such behaviors (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Similarly, when first-generation students were asked about their career development in college, many reflected that a lack of a professional network would make pursuing career goals more difficult than their non-first-generation peers who, they believed, had it all neatly laid out for them (Tate et al., 2015). In a study of African American first-generation students regarding how students obtained social capital and achieved their career development goals, the students expressed that social capital played a large role in career development (Parks-Yancy, 2012). However, they did not feel like they knew how to access or utilize the resources or capital to their advantage (Parks-Yancy, 2012). For many students, their families were a pivotal part of their life and huge support system, but they were not always equipped to provide advice on how to navigate new career opportunities or new resources (Parks-Yancy, 2012). The study found that the number of students who talked about how professional connections helped to increase their knowledge of career opportunities was relatively small (Parks-Yancy, 2012). However, in a similar study, first-generation students described their experiences with cultural and social capital and connected social capital to career accessibility (Lane & Taber, 2012).

Parks-Yancy et al. (2009) also reported that social capital resources were exchanged much less for marginalized and minority communities versus White communities and recommended that institutions of higher education focus and prioritize the exchange of social capital resources so all students perceive they can access and benefit from those resources. Ultimately, to no fault of the students, the “insider” knowledge or beneficial resources go

untapped because students do not realize the potential benefits that could be acquired from interacting with individuals or by building relationships with others within and outside of their academic space (Parks-Yancy, 2012).

There were few studies that explored how social capital was specifically presented to first-generation students as a tool and resource. One provided a social capital intervention to first-generation college students that focused on the development of skills and attitudes to empower students to cultivate on-campus connections (Schwartz et al., 2018). It found that students who experienced this type of intervention began to see the importance of social capital and it increased their likelihood to seek support and improve their relationships with instructors (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Students of Color and Social Capital

Since the majority of first-generation college students are students of color, it is important to explore how social capital is understood from their point of view. In the study of a career collaborative project for racially minoritized students in which alumni of color were used as institutional agents, it was found that when students interacted with the alumni who were able to share their experiences on how connections proved beneficial to them, the students had greater confidence to build those relationships within the confines of their communities and within higher education (Carr, 2019). Another study utilized Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework of social capital and the definition of empowerment agents, which highlighted how four leaders at a Hispanic-serving institution used social capital to develop structures that supported and empowered racially minoritized students at the institution (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). These structures could be institutional programs, policies or environments that impacted or aided in a student's success. That study found that leaders who used their resources to enhance institutional

structures boosted the educational outcomes and experiences for not only Latino/a students but all minoritized students (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). This also disrupted institutional structures that limited marginalized students' access to social capital networks and recognized the importance of how institutional leaders could challenge systems that may not support and empower students of color (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). By creating spaces for Latino/a students and leaders advocating for the needs of their students, its empowered students to access and utilize social capital. Because of the diverse nature of a first-generation college student, research has suggested that their networks will also be diverse to meet their needs (Wittner et al., 2020).

Social Networks and Social Support

Social networks and social support provide access to, and is considered a form of, social capital through information, assistance, and resources (Schulz et al., 2017, as cited in Mishra, 2020; Wittner et al., 2020). Theorists have defined social support to include six functions within the scope of a personal relationship: attachment, social integration, the opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliance and the obtaining of guidance (Weiss, 1969; Weiss, 1974). These also fostered the functional content of relationships—like the perceived and actual support that an individual receives (House & Khan, 1985). In a study that investigated the process of social integration (or lack of it) on first year students' decision to stay or withdraw from a university, researchers found that new students needed support to deal with the academic shock of higher education, but also with the emotional shock of moving away from home (Wilcox et al, 2005).

Stanton-Salazar (2011) described support as both direct and indirect. Direct support transmits knowledge, teaches students how to network, and navigate the institution. Whereas indirect support advocates for students and uses power to provide resources to those at the

institution, becoming empowerment agents for the students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). These individuals can dismantle systemic barriers or create new opportunities that will benefit their specific needs.

Cultural Capital Theory

Cultural capital is defined as the specific forms of culture that are defined within the context of certain situations and environments that can promote social mobility and social capital (Lane & Taber, 2012). Bourdieu saw education and schools as an opportunity for cultural capital to be promoted, leading to social mobility and success (Bourdieu, 1986; Lane & Taber, 2012). Cultural capital includes aspects of culture, such as family background, education, attitudes, and behaviors that typically help one achieve success (Lane & Taber, 2012). These aspects are often framed in what is most important within a privileged society (Lane & Taber, 2012).

Bourdieu utilized cultural capital in his work, articulating the idea that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are not. He argued that traditional norms influenced Western society and manipulated definitions of what had and what had not been accepted in society (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005; Lane & Taber, 2012). However, Yosso (2005) argued that some forms of cultural capital are recognized while others are not. Thus, marginalized groups should not be viewed as culturally deficient because forms of cultural capital are not seen as beneficial or privileged, in accordance with the dominant notions of society (Lane & Taber, 2012). Certain cultures and privileges have been perpetuated as the norm within the educational system, and reinforced inequities (Bourdieu, 1984; Brann-Barrett, 2009). First-generation college students felt as though their cultural capital was of no use within their chosen institution of higher education (Jehangir, 2010).

A study that focused on the educational success of first-generation college students found that their educational life stories connected to forms of capital. For example, the capital that they had acquired prior to and during college was important so that the students could use their individual cultural capital within their social networks and future career endeavors (Lane & Taber, 2012). The students expressed that they thought their access to career opportunities was greater when “cultural capital was supported by social capital (Lane & Taber, p. 11, 2012).” This may be interpreted to mean that the capital that they had based on their enrollment in higher education, or within their personal communities, was influenced or supported by the additional networks of people. This research highlighted the importance of allowing students to bring their stories and lived experiences into the education system in order for them to utilize their own forms of capital.

Critique of Social and Cultural Capital

It is important to mention that there are critiques of social and cultural capital and how it is accessed, acquired, and defined. An opposing view of Bourdieu and Coleman’s theories argued that they focused on building capital to fit into the dominant culture, using a White, middle-class culture as the standard (Yosso, 2005). Students or individuals are compared to the dominant culture, from a White-centric perspective. This view proposes that individuals may be lacking capital to fit into this dominant culture idea and expression (Gardner & Holley, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Also, Bourdieu’s theory operates under the guise that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are not (Bourdieu, 1985; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu’s (1988) framework of social capital theory postulates that knowledge gained by the upper and middle classes is deemed the most valuable, and if an individual is not born into a family with that value, then valuable knowledge could potentially be gained through education (Yosso, 2005), thus

precipitating, I believe, the White dominant cultural norms. These theories often posit that people of color lack the social or cultural capital required for social mobility (Yosso, 2005). Both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) believed that social capital was most often passed through families to children or dependents. This view introduced the notion that generational capital is the only form of social capital. Deficit perspectives are often threaded throughout Bourdieu and Coleman's theory of social capital and throughout the literature on first-generation college students.

However, it is not that first-generation college students lack and do not have access to social capital. But it is important to remember that students often have their own forms of capital that can be leveraged (Yosso, 2005; Frett, 2018). The shared interests and experiences of first-generation students have allowed them to capitalize on community assets and cultural knowledge that they can access and utilize in school and when they graduate (Frett, 2018). First-generation college students may feel a sense of classism or prejudice from privileged peers, creating a sense of failure, bias, or guilt related to their increasing or gaining capital (Garnder & Holley, 2012; Liu et al., 2004; Almeida et al., 2019).

Community Cultural Wealth

To combat the deficit-oriented approaches, the community cultural wealth theory used a Critical Race Theory lens in order to shift the focus from White, middle class culture to cultures within communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth includes the knowledge, skills, abilities, strengths and capital acquired and possessed by communities of Color and the accumulation of those assets to resist forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth model includes six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic,

familial and resistant capital. Each form builds upon the other and can interact with one another (Yosso, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Social capital was included as a necessary form of capital within the Community Cultural Wealth framework. The framework emphasizes the drawing on networks and community resources that exist within communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). Scholars have argued that the community cultural wealth model is a better definition for first-generation, students of color. Based on the model, they are able to draw upon their own strengths, their ability to navigate social institutions, their legacy of resistance, and their own social capital in order to succeed in education and beyond (Gardner & Holley, 2012, Yosso, 2005). From this view, rather than focusing on what first-generation students lack, higher education can approach their work from an asset and strengths-based approach, empowering first-generation students to leverage their own communities (Garriott, 2020).

Alums

The dictionary defines alums as individuals who have either attended or graduated from an institution of higher education (Merriam-Webster, 2021). This study focused on students who graduated from college. Institutions of higher education graduate students every year, and they join the growing community of alums that are forever connected to the institutions that they attended. New graduates are often poorly informed about how or why involvement and connections as alumni is critical, the ways they can remain involved with their alma maters (Johnson & Eckel, 1998; Fugate, 2019), and the benefits and services available to alumni (Allenby, 2014; Fugate, 2019). When students transition from “alumni-in-residence” to alumni, they may feel as though that is the end of their relationship with the institution (Johnson & Eckel, 1998, Fugate, 2019). Gallo (2013) stated, “instead of turning back to the university as a means of

support, many alumni forge ahead (p. 1150).” But it is critical for institutions to prepare students for lifelong relationships as alumni (Gardner et al., 1998; Fugate, 2019). Often, new graduates are not aware of the relationship that continues with their alma mater after graduation or view it as a lifelong association that could be mutually beneficial (Gallo, 2013).

Alumni represent various intersectional identities within the context of their university: a graduate, a community member, a first-generation college student just to name a few; and their identities interact with the university and the alumni community (Gallo, 2013). As stated previously, it has been important to understand the intersectional identities of students which are the same for alums. To better understand alumni of color experiences at a predominantly-White institution, Gasman and Bowman (2013) stated that among predominantly-White campuses, there was a lack of understanding of alumni of color, their representation within the overall alumni network, and within a university alumni community. Understanding the overall alumni population is paramount to engagement and future fundraising (Gasman & Bowman, 2013). As state support for higher education has declined, universities nurture relationships with alums for philanthropic assistance and for political advocacy. However, there are benefits to continued and encouraged relationships among the alumni community, beyond financial support for the institution (Weerts & Ronca, 2009; Dillon, 2017; Gallo, 2020).

Alum Capital

By attaining a postsecondary degree, graduates acquire a new sense of social and cultural capital through their alum network. As Gallo stated, “our alma mater is a hypernetwork at our disposal: a multitude of connections” (2020, p. 15). The alumni network is an inclusive and diverse array of individuals with a shared experience, attending the same institution, but also a vast collection of varied experiences (Gallo, 2020). Networks are often described in terms of

strong and weak ties. Strong ties are those that we regularly turn to, like family, friends or coworkers, and weak ties are those we are connected to but may never seek out (Burkus, 2018). Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) completed research arguing that those weak ties can often be someone's strongest connection, and the best source for new information and help (Burkus, 2018). In some instances, the vast alumni network could be considered a weak tie but could also be the most beneficial in the long-run. Brown and Davis (2001) described social ties acquired by attending a college or university and proposed that the interaction between alumni after graduation can often strengthen those ties.

Koenig-Lewis et al., (2016) explored students' recollection of their academic and social experiences that influenced their loyalty after graduation, concluding that the academic experiences alumni had while a student played a significant role in their level of loyalty and behavioral intentions as an alumnus. Behavioral intentions were defined as an alums likelihood to stay in contact with a faculty member, mentor a student, or come back to campus to give a lecture or presentation (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016). The study addressed the ties that alumni continued to possess post-graduation and found that alumni with strong ties had also built strong connections as a student with peers, faculty, and the university, and were more likely to connect with the institution and exhibit pride. Those with weak ties identified less with their alma mater. Interactions with their alma mater were limited or less regular unless there was a need for assistance or information from the greater alumni community (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016).

In research conducted by Gallo (2020), an alumnus of the University of Edinburgh stated that she felt that her alumni network made her feel a part of a group when she moved to a new city and did not know anyone. For a college graduate, interacting with other alumni created social opportunities that influenced choices, behaviors and opportunities which were often

recognized by those within and outside of the alumni community (Dillon, 2017). A few studies examined how social capital could be understood as beneficial to graduates and how students (and soon to be graduates) could come to understand their own social and cultural capital. In the book, *The Alumni Way*, alumni capital was used to describe the people, knowledge, and resources that an individual has just by graduating from an institution of higher education (Gallo, 2020). Saxenian (2006) explored how Indian, Chinese, and Israeli professional networks were organized around social activities and how the role of informal social networks and formal organizations like alumni associations helped sustain social capital. In another study that investigated Master of Business Administration alumni networks from leading business schools in the United States and the United Kingdom, researchers found that educational institutions, in addition to individual alumni, sought to extract value from their alumni networks (Hall, 2010). Both studies suggested that the social and cultural capital that one gains through alum networks have perceived and obtained value on the alums for personal and professional reasons.

In the Frett study, previously discussed, that focused on the college to career transition for racially minoritized students, the author emphasized the importance of institutional agents, like alumni of color, in supporting students of color in their transition post-graduation (Frett, 2018). Institutional agents were individuals who held a position of authority and play a role within a student's network (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). They defined alumni of color as form of social and cultural capital who provided support to underrepresented minority students, as well as to alumni through forms of coaching and mentorship (Frett, 2018). Alumni of color were utilized as coaches with students, and students found that connecting with alumni created a sense of familiarity, comfort, and trustworthiness (Frett, 2018). The alumni also played an important role in contributing to the acquisition of social capital and built the trust necessary to help transfer

capital to the students (Coleman, 1988; Frett, 2018). First-generation students benefited from interacting with and building relationships through institutional agents, like alumni while they were students. Just by graduating from an institution, they have the opportunity to connect with alumni of the institution, thus acquiring their own acquired social capital (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Havlik et al., 2020). If students were able to build supportive relationships with alumni while they are students, relationships between alumni could provide a sense of support and comfort as alums navigated life after graduation (Havlik et al., 2020).

Alum Engagement

An early study from Mael and Ashforth (1992) attempted to understand the relationship alumni have with their alma mater and how they maintained the connection to their alma mater. This study was one of the first to explore how organizational identification could influence behaviors and belongingness as well as ways to channel those connections for future benefit (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Their conclusions were that the more an alumnus identified with their alma mater, the more likely they are to offer their support and build upon the relationship for mutual benefit (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Within the field of alumni relations, there was no clear definition of alumni engagement found by this researcher to describe how alumni understood the relationship with their alma mater (Fleming, 2019). However, Gallo (2013) suggested that there were stages of relationship building with alumni. Those stages included affiliation, affinity, engagement, and support and were defined as the following:

- **Affiliation:** by virtue of graduating from the institution alone, students and recent graduates complete their degree.

- Affinity: communications received by graduates, like the alumni magazine or social media. Often this can seem like a dormant phase for alumni and the onus is on the alumni to recognize their affinity.
- Engagement: focuses on two-way interactions between the alumni and the institution, and the active participation from alumni.
- Support: alumni develop deep and altruistic relationships with alma mater and are at the time in their lives to give back (Gallo, 2013).

These definitions have allowed practitioners and institutions to view the relationship they have with alums throughout different stages. And these have begun to shape how alums identify with their undergraduate degree-granting institution.

The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) created a task force to define and create a common language around alumni engagement (2018). The task force defined alumni engagement as the “activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support, strengthen the institution’s reputation and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution’s mission.” Many institutions have adopted this universal definition of alumni engagement to create a common measurement of engagement (CASE, 2018). The task force also defined categories of engagement, this was not an all-inclusive list of the ways that alums could be engaged. But the delineated broad definitions included the variety of ways that alums could stay connected. Those categories were volunteer, experiential, philanthropic and communication; and are defined further in Table 1 (CASE, 2018).

Table 1
Definitions of alum engagement

	Category			
	Volunteer	Experiential	Philanthropic	Communication
<i>Definition</i>	Roles that are endorsed and valued by the institution.	Meaningful experiences.	Opportunities to make philanthropic investments.	Interactive and informative communication.
<i>Example</i>	Governing or advisory board members Student recruitment Career mentors Classroom speakers	Homecoming Reunions Networking events	Financial and in-kind support	Social media Class notes

(CASE, 2018)

Characteristics of an Engaged Alum

It has been important for college advancement professionals to understand the identity and characteristics of engaged alums. Weerts and Ronca (2007) described alumni involvement in conjunction with the social exchange theory. They suggested that the costs of alumni volunteering or spending their time with their alma mater is weighed against the potential benefits received by the alumni. Their study created a profile of alumni that were most likely to continue to support the university through volunteerism, professional expertise, and political advocacy (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). The researchers found that there were some variables outside of an institution's control, (like distance from campus), that impacted alumni involvement (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). But student engagement and an alums' innate interest in service and civic engagement strongly encouraged their levels of involvement (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

The term engaged has also been defined as the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contributed positively to the university, where alumni felt positively and passionate about their alma mater beyond graduation and were committed to support both students and other alumni (Fleming, 2019). One study investigated the predictors of membership within an alumni association. Newman and Petrosko found that one of the most significant variables for alumni to join the alumni association was the perception of the alumni association (2011). They postulated that alums have to see the potential benefits and value to them (Newman & Petrosko, 2011). Gallo (2020) described engaged (or dynamic) alumni as those who considered themselves alumni as soon as they stepped on campus, reflected on their university experience as a learning experience, identified with the term alumni, considered the university as a lifelong resource, and are were open to receiving university information that was helpful to them. A recent study was conducted to explore more deeply how alumni determined their personal level of engagement (Fleming, 2019). They found that alumni described their engagement as the convergence of their personal values, the integrity of the institution, their sense of connection, their commitment to the institution, and, finally, their sense of fulfillment (Fleming, 2019). Alumni continued to evaluate the relationship with their alma mater, at different times, and determined that different elements may be more important at certain times, and may influence their level of engagement (Fleming, 2019). Finally, in a study of graduate student alumni engagement, Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) reported that there were numerous non-monetary ways that alumni supported their alma mater, and that the sense of belonging a student had while on campus translated to their engagement level as an alumnus. Dezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) also found that race and international status played a role in alumni engagement. They suggested that Black and international alumni had a greater likelihood of being a donor and engaged with the

institution when sense of belonging was considered (Dezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021). The combination of these definitions described alum engagement and the alum network as continued opportunities of support and access to resources.

Affinity Groups. The diverse alumni population from colleges and universities built a need for alumni relations offices to create organizations in which alums could connect based on identity and shared-interests, similar to their needs and experience as students. The use of affinity groups within alumni engagement has specifically provided opportunities for alumni of color to join groups based on how they identify (Gasman & Bowman, 2013). These groups provide a more personal experience, one where alums can affiliate with organizations, chapters and councils based on an affinity. This has been a growing strategy for alumni relations offices. For example, the University of California Los Angeles has 104 affinity groups, many of which are race or ethnicity-based as well as professional, academic and interest based (Gasman & Bowman, 2013). When institutions hold many of the major and signature events for alumni, events like homecomings, reunions or alumni weekends, there are opportunities for affinity groups to provide specific programming and gatherings for alums that affiliate with their groups.

Additional Programs and Resources. In addition to affinity groups, offices of alumni relations provide programs and services related to career services, lifelong learning, professional development, networking, mentoring, recognition, and awards. They can also provide benefits like insurance or credit card programs with discounts, exclusive travel opportunities, and promotions with specific corporate partners. Additionally, alums can get more involved and take on leadership or volunteer roles with the organization. For example, they could lead a council or chapter, serve on a board or council, and volunteer their time at events at programs. All combined, these services, programs and resources allow alums to connect back to the institution

in whatever way means the most to them or in whatever way they might need at that moment in time.

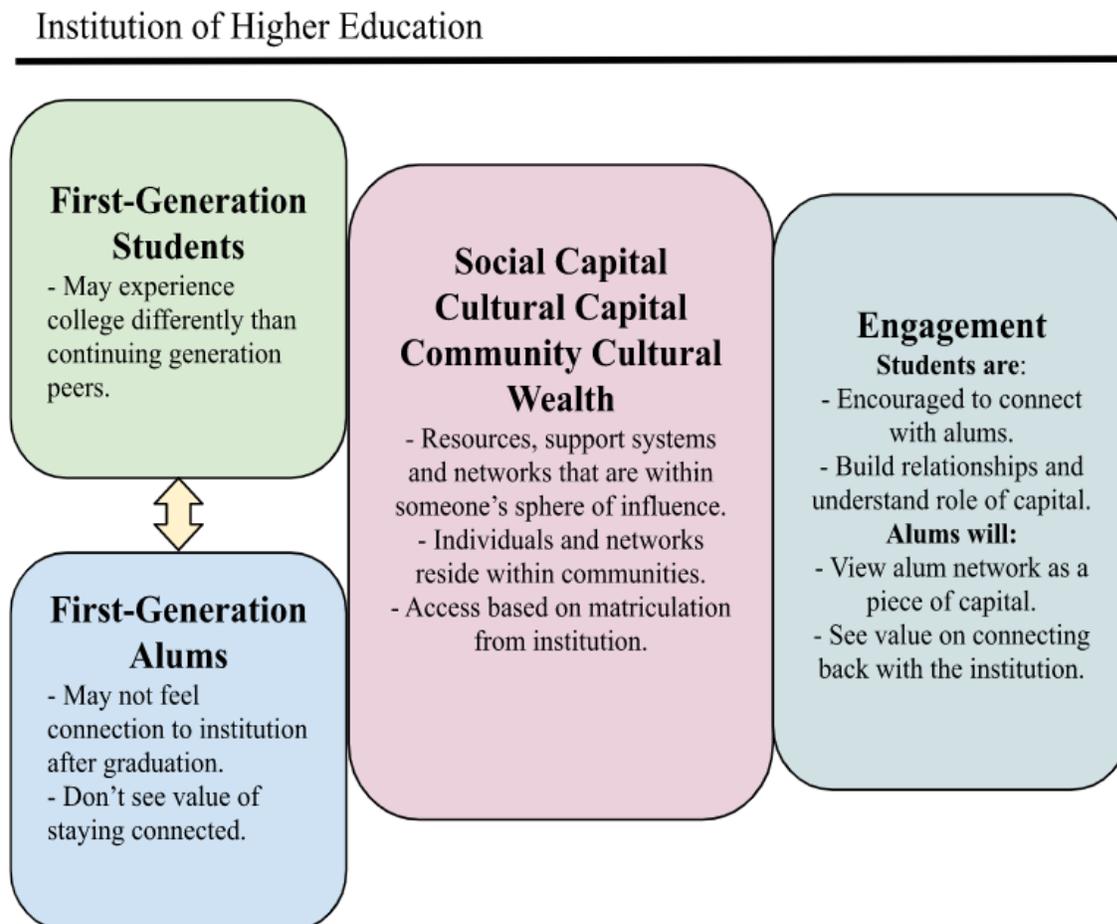
Philanthropy. Institutions of higher education continue to seek support from alumni in philanthropic ways to support the budget and growth of the university (Pumerantz, 2005). In a 2020 survey, on average alumni represented 22.3% of funding to higher education (CASE, 2020). Research found that alumni were more likely to give back to the institution based on their experience as a student, especially if those experiences were positive and when they built relationships with faculty and staff on campus (Pumerantz, 2005; Gaier, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; Newman & Petrosko, 2011). They also found that alumni who were involved as students, such as joining a student organization, or a fraternity and sorority, were more likely to give back philanthropically to their alma mater (Gaier, 2005). Other characteristics that often predict alumni giving behaviors include demographics such as age, ethnicity, income, gender, residence, and marital status (Newman & Petrosko, 2011). Overall, institutions strongly pursue alums to give back to the institution financially. In the next section, I discuss why it is important to consider utilizing a capital framework in conjunction with alum engagement as alums connection to their degree-granting institution.

Conceptual Framework

It was important to consider the many definitions and approaches to social and cultural capital. Both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) believed that social capital was most often passed through families to children or dependents. This idea assumed generational capital was the only form of social capital. However, social capital has also been described as a means of social support, access to people, and the mobilization of resources surrounding a person to achieve a certain goal (Wittner et al., 2020; Lin, 2000). These definitions of social capital could

be applied directly to the support, access to, and relationships built while attending and matriculating from college. In addition, social capital was included as a necessary form of capital within the community cultural wealth framework which emphasized the networks and community resources that existed within communities of color (Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth framework helped to provide the idea that first-generation students of color utilize and benefit from social capital within their own communities within and outside of college. Because of the diverse nature of first-generation college students, research suggested that their networks would also be diverse and meet their needs in a variety of ways (Wittner et al., 2020). Research also suggested that assistance from university personnel, which could be in the form of current and future alumni, could be an acquired form of community capital resources for students and future graduates (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

By combining the frameworks of social capital, cultural capital, and community cultural wealth, this study utilized an assets-based approach to investigate the experiences of first-generation alums within their alum community and degree-granting institution. The figure below illustrated the social capital frameworks and the relationship that one has with their degree-granting institution. By virtue of attending an institution of higher education, one can build and sustain a network (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1*Conceptual Framework*

In summary, the community of students and alums from institutions of higher education create a means of social support and act as a resource. The mobilization of these resources or people from the same institution creates a network that is available to alums for a lifetime.

Conclusion

College students and institutional alums gain social capital based on their network and the individuals in that network. In some ways, they are able to create the easiest network based solely on matriculation at their institution (Huber, 2010). The combination of social capital (access to networks and connections), cultural capital (individual knowledge and skills), and

community cultural wealth for college students, and especially first-generation college students, helped to identify how an institution creates a network that would ideally translate post-graduation (Bourdieu, 1986; Lane & Taber, 2012; Varghese & Fuentes, 2020). Martin et al. (2020) concluded that the educational system can be altered in ways to help first-generation students leverage their existing social networks as well as help pave the way for new connections, like through the vast alumni network. In addition, Wilcox et al. (2005) described the support that was needed for first-year students as they transitioned into higher education. We can assume this might be the same for alums as they transition into the working world. The research has supported the notion that first-generation college graduates could leverage their forms of capital. But the research does not indicate how alums can access and utilize their network within the alum community. In order to understand the power and influence of the alum network, social capital, cultural capital, and community cultural wealth models allow this research to explore how alums understand and take advantage of the alum network.

Chapter 3

METHODS

The goal of this research study was to better understand the unique, lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they perceived the value of their alum network. This study aimed to better understand alums relationship with their degree-granting institution and their post-graduation experiences with others. After hearing from 23 first-generation alums, the majority of whom were from historically marginalized or underrepresented communities, this study gained perspective in ways to support and serve the needs of alums. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation alums describe their engagement with their undergraduate degree granting institution?
2. In what ways do first-generation alums connect with their network?
3. How do institutional agents go about serving first-generation alums?

Research Design

Utilizing a constructivist paradigm, this study attempted to interpret and describe the realities experienced by participants through a qualitative design (Creswell, 2013). The constructivist model conveys that the views and knowledge of individuals are formed through interactions with others and through social contexts experienced by those being studied (Creswell, 2013). Constructivism proposes that knowledge depends, or is constructed, on the individual's understanding or perspective of reality rather than just the objective nature of reality and the situation. Maxwell best expresses this concept: “we recognize that what people perceive and believe is shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality that they interact with” (2013, p. 43). In a further elaboration, Maxwell posited that an individual can

perceive or believe something that is built from their previous experiences and their day-to-day interactions with the world. From this ontological belief, the study attempted to understand how first-generation alums fostered connections or engaged as alums. They described their experience and shared their stories, conjectured how the alum experience might have changed them as an individual or their perspectives.

Qualitative research utilizes a process-theory approach, in which researchers try to investigate and better understand the people, situations and events that may be connected, and how some situations may influence others (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative inquiry gathers a holistic view of an issue or problem, exploring the who, what, when, where, and how of the research questions (Creswell, 2013; Terrell, 2016). To gain a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of first-generation alums post-graduation, a qualitative approach to this inquiry was supported by Maxwell's (2013) unified theory of qualitative research. This theory incorporated dialogue between differing perspectives and divergent models to help expand and deepen the understanding of individuals or subjects. In order to understand how first-generation alums viewed their relationship with their degree-granting institution, what has been valuable to them, and how they have constructed relationships with others in the context of the institution, it was important to gather their individual perspectives.

This was an exploratory case study to gather an in-depth examination of the experiences and decisions of first-generation alums. There are several definitions of case study research, often depicted as a study that involves an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 12). Case study also investigates a phenomenon in depth and within a real-life context, "especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context might not be

clearly evident” (Yin, 2018). By incorporating a constructivist approach to the case, this study attempted to gather and understand the perspectives of different participants and to better understand their differing experiences and meanings related to the topic being studied (Yin, 2018). The case study focuses on a particular situation, program, or phenomenon. A case study “offers[ing] insights and illuminates[ing] meanings that expand its readers' experiences... [the] case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). They provide rich descriptions, a broader understanding of the phenomenon for the reader, and discover new relationships or concepts (Merriam, 1998).

In this particular research study, the gathering of perspectives, views, and experiences of first-generation alums from Future University involved a multiple-case study design to describe the engagement of first-generation alums post-graduation and ways in which the institution may better support and provide value to alums (Yin, 2018). The study concentrated on one setting, Future University, but incorporated multiple cases (or participants) to demonstrate or reflect on the same setting (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Each participant was considered a case within the one setting. By utilizing case study methodology, the research answered how and why questions to examine the process by which a phenomenon (i.e. engagement) took place within the group of first-generation alums from a specific institution (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018).

Research Setting

The setting for this study was a large, urban, research university in the southeastern United States. For the purpose of this study, the institution was known by the pseudonym Future University. Future University enrolled more than 29,000 students and nearly a third (30%) of those students were first in their family to attend college— which is one of the reasons this university was chosen for the study. The student population at Future University was 82% full-

time students, 87% in-state students, 63% female, and 37% male. The university was racially and socioeconomically diverse among its undergraduate student population: 42% White; 20% African American/Black; 14% Asian; 11% Hispanic/Latine; 8% two or more races; 01% American Indian or Alaskan Native; less than .01% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; and .02% race or ethnicity unknown. The university awarded over \$69 million in financial aid and scholarships and about a third of the student population were Pell eligible. This was the federal aid awarded to students with the greatest financial need. Among the first-generation students at Future University, 68% were racial or ethnic minorities, more than 50% were underrepresented racial or ethnic minorities, and 55% were Pell grant recipients. Future University had more than 205,000 living alums; nearly a third of the alum population graduated within the last ten years and over 60% continued to live within the state where the university was located. Future University had not kept historical records of first-generation status for alums until more recently but a similar or even higher percentage of the same statistics from the undergraduate population could carry over to the alum population.

Sample and Participants

Participants in the study were selected from the Future University alum population that either self-identified as first-generation or were acknowledged in the alum database as so. As mentioned previously, historical data had not been kept until recently on first-generation status in the alum database but was utilized, in a limited way, to identify graduates from Future University. 23 participants were recruited and saturation was met, meaning that additional participants or information would not generate any new understanding (Liamputtong, 2013). As shown in Table 2, the demographics and profiles are described for each participant. Their time from graduation or graduation year was included to then be able to classify them as recent

graduates or seasoned alums. These differentiated periods of personal and professional life that may influence their engagement or non-engagement with their degree-granting institution. Recent graduates were classified as those who had graduated within the last ten years, and those 10 or more years removed from graduation were classified as seasoned alums.

Participants also included institutional agents that were identified as faculty or staff from the university. These individuals were selected based on their work with first-generation students or alums. Institutional agents were defined by Stanton-Salazar (2011) as individuals who held a position of authority and played a role within a student's network, often acting as a resource or support. In the literature cited, institutional agents were alumni of color that were supporting or mentoring students and, in this case, the institutional agents were faculty or staff members.

There were a few sampling strategies utilized in this study which included purposeful and snowball sampling. As Durdella (2019) described, colleagues who use their contacts act as gatekeepers or informants to help build a purposeful sample. A purposeful sample is described as a way to select individuals for a study who can "purposefully inform" the research study and/or central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). A purposeful sample represents a way to form relationships with participants with little effort that will enable a study to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

For this study, I utilized contacts within the Office of Alumni Relations as well as other campus departments at Future University to recruit participants through databases, personal relationships or direct networks. In addition, I connected with the staff liaisons to affinity, identity, academic, and regional networks or organizations within the Office of Alumni Relations to send out email communications to potential participants. Sample emails and participant recruitment scripts have been provided (see Appendices A & B). Finally, a snowball effect

allows individuals to recommend others that may fit the criteria for the study, building off of established relationships. In some cases, participants said they were happy to reach out to other personal contacts and peers to see if they would be interested in participating in the study. There were also instances where institutional agents recommended someone else that might be beneficial to the study.

Data Collection

Case study research encourages many forms of data collection in order to reveal multiple aspects and perspectives to a study (Liamputtong, 2013). For this study, data was collected through interviews, focus groups and the gathering of artifacts. The interview and focus group process allowed the research to gain a better understanding of individual and shared experiences of first-generation alums. By utilizing multiple sources of evidence, it allowed for the research to go more in-depth of the case, offering details about the phenomenon and the context, as well as assisted with data triangulation or a way in which to corroborate findings (Yin, 2018).

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 first-generation alums. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for the study to focus directly on the phenomena tied to the research questions which varied among the participants (Maxwell, 2013). By utilizing a semi-structured interview approach, I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix E) and, in some cases, asked follow-up or clarifying questions throughout the interview. Yin (2018) suggested that interviews follow a line of inquiry through the protocol but also include conversational questions in an unbiased manner. I adapted this recommendation. The interviews were conducted once the participants were identified, after I discussed the goals and emailed them the timeline of the

study and found a time that worked for them based on both of our schedules. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes, were completed virtually via Zoom, and audio recorded.

Weiss (1994) encouraged interviews to include questions about specific events and actions, thus encouraging the participants to tap into a memory and details of an experience. In an effort to ask about specific experiences and memories, many of the questions in the present study addressed the participants' journey to and after college, their perceptions of alum engagement and the ways in which they had taken advantage of capital after graduation. I thought it was important to include the steps, emotions, and feelings leading up to enrolling in college, as well as the college experience itself, in order to gain individual perspectives on what may or may not have impacted their feelings post-graduation. The interview protocol discussed participants' life after graduation, if they felt they had strong bonds or attachments post-graduation, their first post-college job, personal life satisfaction, what they did or did not expect from their degree-granting institution, as well as how they have or have not continued to stay connected to their degree granting institution.

In some cases, not all questions from the protocol were asked during the interview if participants addressed a question in a previous comment or did not have additional information to share. As I collected data, I utilized the practice of *epoché*, meaning bracketing or setting aside my own experiences and perspectives in order to approach the interview with an open mind—free from personal opinions or preconceived notions (Terrell, 2016; Creswell, 2013). In order to practice *epoché*, I had to spend time self-reflecting and becoming more self-aware. Asking myself what preconceived notions or experiences did I have, how could I set them aside, or be aware of those notions as I interviewed the participants. Additionally, Creswell (2013) suggested that the researcher minimize the number of personal stories and anecdotes that were shared and

utilize the bracketing method mentioned earlier, this technique allowed research participants to express their thoughts and opinions freely.

I also conducted interviews with five members of the faculty, staff or leadership from Future University who worked in development and alumni relations, student success, student affairs, or within an academic department. These individuals were recruited based on their specific work, working directly with alums, donors or first-generation students. When I identified one of these individuals, I reached out to them via email to see if they would be willing to participate. If they agreed, we determined a time that fit with both of our schedules (See Appendix C). Again, I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix G) to guide the discussion and conversation, trying to understand their perspective on how they might have interacted with first-generation alums and what the institution did or did not provide to first-generation alums. Each interview was about 45 minutes conducted via Zoom. Following the individual interviews, a focus group was held with the first-generation alums that participated in the individual interviews. The focus groups were held second because I wanted to gather the individual perspectives first without undue influence from others.

Focus Groups

After the initial interviews with the first-generation alums, one focus group was conducted with those that agreed to participate. I emailed everyone that completed the interviews and provided a Doodle poll with times and options; however, only six participants completed the poll. I scheduled the focus group based on who was interested and willing to participate. Typically, focus groups involve 6-10 individuals to discuss a specific topic with the help of a moderator (Liamputtong, 2013). In multimethod studies, focus groups can be used in conjunction with in-depth interviews in order to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon and

encourage participants to engage in dialogue that is free from the perceived constraints of a one-on-one interview (Liamputtong, 2013). Conducting the focus group after the initial interview stimulated further conversation and reflection from the participants that they might not have thought about during the one-on-one interview. The focus group was 60 minutes, conducted via Zoom, followed an interview protocol, and was audio recorded (see Appendix F).

Artifacts

I also drew on artifacts to assist with the focus group interviews. First-generation alum participants were asked to bring in an artifact that represented their relationship with their degree-granting institution. These artifacts were optional, but I provided examples that could include a photo, object, or something that they created that represented their relationship with Future University. Artifacts help to develop a broader perspective of the participants' connection with the institution and how that might have influenced their relationship with the institution, which was an important component to understand the connections between the cases (Yin, 2003).

Human Subjects Protection and Ethical Considerations

In alignment with Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, I completed the required Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training, specifically the human subject's protection course. In addition, all identifying information of the participants and of the associated institution was removed to maintain confidentiality and privacy. The participants were told that none of their identifying information would be shared or included in the study. In order to ensure that the study was carried out ethically, I protected the anonymity of participants by storing the data in a password protected, approved storage location and de-identified the research data with pseudonyms, which

maximized benefits and minimized harm to participants (Creswell, 2013; Durdella, 2019).

Participants were asked to sign an informed consent that addressed the study's purpose, their rights and responsibilities as well as their ability to withdraw from participation at any time (See Appendix D).

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) described data analysis as “the process of making sense out of the data and making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (p. 178). The process of “making sense” of the data began the data analysis process. This case study used an inductive analysis which “examines raw data sources, chunks information from those raw data sources, groups information that is similar in meaning and then looks for commonalities” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 112). This approach allowed for the experiences of the participants first to be portrayed, in their raw form. Then, within a case study, there were two stages of analysis which included within-cases analysis and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). Within-case analysis included the analysis of each case in this study and was then proceeded by cross-case analysis to help see the connections and build explanations across the cases (Merriam, 1998).

In addition, Creswell (2013) identified six steps to assist with the data analysis process which included organizing and preparing the data, reading the data, coding the data, determining description for the categories and themes, connecting or matrixing the themes or categories among participants, and finally interpreting the meaning of the results. Based on the six steps, the first thing I did prior to the interviews was to develop initial codes that I anticipated might come up based on the study's conceptual framework. I used the initial themes and categories as a tool to initiate my reflective activities and to help with the eventual data analysis. After that initial

process, the interviews were transcribed and I completed memos and reflections on the interview itself, the time spent together with the participant, parts that stood out, or observations and feelings I had during the interview. This was done immediately after the interview itself. These reflective thoughts helped to generate ideas regarding the participants' experiences and how they related to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021).

Transcribing helped me to begin the coding process. This is also described as working with the data from the ground up, pouring through the data and noticing patterns or useful concepts (Yin, 2018). The coding process has been described as the “critical link between gathering data and making meaning of it” (Yin, 2014, p. 3). Coding helps to categorize similarities and differences within the individual interviews, as a collective by identifying areas that seem important or meaningful (Maxwell, 2013). The categorization of data helped to identify those areas of importance, broadly based on categories or more narrowly within subcategories, then each statement received a label or “code” (Maxwell, 2013).

First, I printed off all the transcripts and read through the interviews, familiarizing myself in-depth with each participant's interview. The first-read of the transcripts was just to familiarize myself with the content before I developed any other meanings. Merriam (1998) suggested that either coding or categorization is developed from the researcher themselves, could be suggested by the participants, or could be utilized from the literature referenced. During the second read through, I started to develop codes while I read the dialogue. I utilized descriptive coding to generate a list of subtopics, which did not necessarily get at the heart of what participants said but brought together the topics from all the participants (Saldaña, 2021).

I also began to identify patterns in the codes and themes. Stake (1995) described the identification of patterns, even though there may be meaning in a single instance. He emphasized

the importance of recognizing meanings that occur when topics are brought up repeatedly (Stake, 1995). I took those codes to formulate a matrix on how the categories or codes connected across and between participants. The matrix was organized around each research question and I copied quotes or inserted summarized statements from the participants to create a visual of the themes among participants. By identifying and drafting the connections across participants, referred to as contiguity-based relations, these helped to see connections between things (Maxwell, 2013). I did the same thing with the focus group transcriptions. Themes and codes were gleaned from the focus group, based on the initial codes that were developed from the one-on-one interviews as well as any new themes that popped out from the focus group itself. The focus group codes were incorporated into the matrix to bridge any additional connections which complemented what was said in the initial interviews. Finally, I reviewed the matrix, codes, categories, and themes to draft my results and findings.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Although in qualitative research, the concept of validity is often debated, I used Maxwell's (2013) definition of validity in this research study as the "credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 122). The most serious validity threats in this study were participant recruitment and reactivity. Participant recruitment was a threat because some of the participants were accessed based on pre-established relationships. Participants had some idea of the work that I had done in a professional and intellectual capacity. Based on these relationships, researcher bias or self-report bias was an issue. Bias included preconceived ideas about the participant's perspectives or potential responses within the individual interviews. The knowledge that the participants had of my research interests and prior work experience might have unduly influenced the data collected.

Second, reactivity is often a threat to validity, which is the influence that the researcher could have on the individuals or within the setting being studied (Maxwell, 2013). This could have been experienced through the simple fact of being in an interview together over Zoom or the facial expressions that I might not have realized I made. Both of which could have potentially influenced the participant during the interview.

I addressed these validity threats through a number of measures. To address bias and reactivity, my interview protocol refrained from leading questions and included unbiased language. Qualitative researchers find that within an interview setting, the dialogue can be one-way, guided strictly by the researcher. This could lead to a power dynamic between the researcher and interviewee (Creswell, 2013). To combat this issue, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that an interview be collaborative, where the “researcher and the participant approach equality in questioning, interpreting, and reporting” (p. 34). This acknowledges the importance of building rapport and creating an environment where interviewees feel comfortable being truthful and authentic when sharing their experiences, perspectives, and opinions (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 173). One way I ensured that the information gathered was truthful to the individual was through member checks. This meant that participants reviewed transcriptions, themes, and conclusions for accuracy. I conducted respondent validation or member checks with the participants to gather feedback and make sure that they approved of the information and conclusions drawn from the interviews (See Appendix H). This also ensured that, as a researcher, I did not exaggerate or undervalue their experiences or interpretations, and that I did not draw conclusions that might not have actually existed. In some instances, I used direct quotes from the participants as much as I could, to ensure that I gathered their experiences utilizing their own words and not summarizations.

Validity also addresses the authenticity, honesty, and integrity of the research. I wanted to ensure that the data and conclusions reported included rich data that was detailed, descriptive and specific. Saldaña et al. (2011) suggests a few techniques to ensure trustworthiness. First, being detailed of the research process by sharing the amount of time spent on each interview, coding the transcripts– or how much data was gathered and over what period of time. I read through the transcripts several times and completed multiple rounds of coding and categorizing. This allowed me to become extremely familiar with the data and each participant. Second, being open and honest regarding the difficulties, challenges, or ethical dilemmas that were encountered. Saldaña et al. (2011) suggests that the researchers' work and writing be “transparent[ly] to achieve credibility and trustworthiness with [your] readers” (p. 137). I have shared where I thought there were limitations made throughout the study as well as ways in which I tried to achieve transparency of thought from the participants and from myself as the researcher.

Researcher Relationship and Positionality

I approached this study as a researcher and not in an official capacity of my professional job. Although my professional role helped me identify participants and encouraged my research interest, I wanted it to inform alumni relations practice, but I did not want it to be confused with my specific job duties and requirements. I have worked for the past six years within an Office of Alumni Relations at VCU, and I have met students and alums that are passionate about their university who were looking for experiences that would help them personally and professionally. As I narrowed down my research topic for this dissertation, I thought specifically about my work within higher education to support first-generation college students and alums. As someone with frequent contact and specific knowledge of the population, I felt that I could contribute to the growing body of work in this area.

Also, I want to make it clear that I do not identify as a first-generation college student. I think it is important to note that I do not personally relate to the lived experiences of alums that identify as first-generation, but it is an area of research growth within the field of advancement and higher education. However, by incorporating practices of critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and other ways of knowing, I made it a part of my professional responsibility to decolonize learning into my research (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). I acknowledged that I am a discoverer of knowledge and lifelong learner. I did not want to impose my personal assumptions and experiences in the study and requested feedback and listened to others throughout this process in order to make changes and adjustments (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Finally, I included others alums that did not participate in this study, but who identified as first-generation alums, to provide thoughts and guidance related to the research questions and data collection process.

Limitations and Assumptions

It was important to consider the limitations and assumptions that impacted the conclusions and discussions developed from this study. First, there was a lack of research particularly on the topic of first-generation college alums and alumni engagement, in general. Research did not specifically focus or hone-in on first-generation students' post-graduation and their experiences with their degree-granting institution. The same could be said for all alums. Although there is significant research here on the ways involved, students may stay connected as alums or turn into potential fundraising prospects for an institution; There is not as much discussion on the relationship that alums have with an institution or with other alums after graduation.

Second, I assumed that participants would see their support network of people and resources from their degree-granting institution as a form of social capital. The use of social

capital has been used within research in the undergraduate setting for first-generation college students. However, it had not often been described in an alum setting; but I assumed people would automatically make the connection to their alum network. This could have also stemmed from my interview questions. I could have asked more pointed questions regarding how alums have connected with other alums. I asked who had contributed to their success post-graduation, but I wanted to gather more specific information that the participants did not address.

Finally, my particular positionality within the research was a limitation. I do not identify as a first-generation and did not personally relate to the experiences that were shared by participants. I had preconceived notions and ideas on alum experiences and perceptions that first-generation alums might have and made some assumptions based on those beliefs. However, as I stated earlier, my professional role inspired my research, and after working at a variety of institutions of higher education, I recognized the need to support and continue to celebrate alums in their journey after college, specifically with first-generation college alums.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This qualitative, exploratory case study sought to understand the unique, lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they perceived the value of their alum network, the relationship with their degree-granting institution, and their experiences post-graduation. Alums and institutional agents were interviewed in order to gather information on perceptions, experiences and feelings regarding engagement and support of first-generation alums post-graduation. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation alums describe their engagement with their undergraduate degree granting institution?
2. In what ways do first-generation alums connect with their network?
3. How do institutional agents go about serving first-generation alums?

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews, focus group, and gathering of artifacts that were conducted. First, I include some additional context regarding the site and the participants, sharing a brief biographical sketch of each of the participants. The following sections include themes broken down among the research questions. I begin by sharing the descriptions from the participants regarding their identity as a first-generation alum, followed by the perceived engagement from alums with Future University, how alums connected with their network, and then the ways in which institutional agents supported first-generation alums.

Site and Participant Context

Institution Context

The site for this study was an urban, public, mid-sized research institution located in the southeast region of the United States. The pseudonym Future University was used to protect the anonymity of the participants. The student and alum facts, figures, and demographics are shared in the methods section in order to create a picture of the population and the institution itself.

Participant Context

A total of 23 first-generation alums and five institutional agents were interviewed for this study (see Table 2). Out of the 23 participants, three participated in a focus group, and all three of those individuals provided an artifact during the focus group interview. Table 2 includes a summary of information for each first-generation alum participant. Demographic information, such as race or ethnicity, was not collected during the interview itself; however, participants either self-identified or demographic related information was gathered from the alum database provided by the institutional Office of Alumni Relations.

In a breakdown of the total participants, 74% identified as women, while 26% identified as men. Roughly 43% identified as Black or African American, 17% identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 17% identified as White, 4% identified as Hispanic or Latine, and 17% did not identify their race or ethnicity. Some of the alum demographics were provided by the institution but the office made a note that it did not feel confident in the accuracy of their data. The demographics of the student population at Future University in the Fall 2022 was .02% American Indian/Alaskan, 13% Asian, 18% Black/African American, .1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 10% Hispanic/Latine, 4% international, 7% two or more races, 43% White and 5% unknown. The alum participants represented a similar breakdown of the student population;

however, the study had a majority of participants from underrepresented or historically marginalized groups. The diversity of participants represented a variety of backgrounds and experiences. These figures supported the literature because the majority were of alums of color and women (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward, 2013). Finally, 65% of the participants were classified as recent graduates, meaning they graduated less than 10 years ago, and 35% were seasoned graduates, meaning they graduated more than 10 years ago.

Table 2*Participants demographics and profile*

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Graduation Year	Recent or Seasoned Alum
Amanda	Female	22	Black/African American	2022	Recent
Anthony	Male	44	Black/African American	2000	Seasoned
Beth	Female	24	Black/African American	2019	Recent
Corrine	Female	26	Asian or Pacific Islander	2019	Recent
Darrell	Male	35	Black/African American	2009	Seasoned
David	Male	30	White	2015	Recent
Emily	Female	34	Asian American or Pacific Islander	2016	Recent
Joseph	Male	47	White	1996	Seasoned
Joslyn	Female	27	Hispanic or Latine	2018	Recent
Kennedy	Female	31	Asian or Pacific Islander	2013	Recent
Lisa	Female	40	Black/Caribbean	2018	Recent
London	Female	73	White	1975	Seasoned
Mia	Female	26	Unknown	2018	Recent
Richard	Male	31	Black/African American	2014	Recent
Sage	Female	34	Unknown	2014	Recent
Serena	Female	51	Black/African American	1993	Seasoned
Serenity	Female	33	Black/African American	2011	Seasoned
Shay	Female	28	Unknown	2016	Recent
Sienna	Female	23	Unknown	2022	Recent
Stephanie	Female	37	Black/African American	2008	Seasoned
Steven	Male	25	Asian American or Pacific Islander	2019	Recent
Tammy	Female	51	Black/African American	2018	Recent
Trinity	Female	57	White	1986	Seasoned

I learned a lot about each of the individuals interviewed about their path to, during, and after college. It was special to learn more about them as individuals and that they felt comfortable enough with me to share their personal backgrounds. In the following sections, I will outline who the participants were and the biographical information they provided during their interviews.

Amanda

Amanda pursued college because, for her, it was a “done deal” in her family. Her mom had always told her that because she did not have the chance to go it was important that her daughter have that opportunity. When she chose Future University, she was excited about being far but not too far from home and the diversity of the students, faculty, and staff. She approached college with an organization and enthusiasm for her program of study, and she was looking forward to her academic journey. Amanda specifically mentioned the challenges that came when she had to continue classes virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, her family and friends provided even more support and motivation.

As she thought about graduation, she connected with a professor who was also first-generation, and this experience gave her a lot of great, practical advice. She worried a lot if she was making the “right” choices, how and if she would utilize the alum network, and if the experiences she was choosing would help as she thought about and prepared to pursue medical school. She mentioned that she landed her first job through a referral from her network, community of people, and their relationships after graduation. The people that surrounded her had made her feel like she was not alone as she has navigated through life as a graduate. As a first-generation alum, she felt like TRIO and the first-generation student office provided additional support and resources. They also provided her with options for after college and

celebrated her accomplishments. Overall, she felt lucky that she was able to connect with a lot of alums to ask questions or to be a resource. But she also wondered if others knew that they had that opportunity to ask alums anything.

Anthony

Anthony had two family members that worked on a college campus. So, he was always around a college environment and knew that was something that he wanted to pursue. He participated in the Upward Bound program in high school– which took him to college campuses. He knew that was something he wanted to do but didn't know where to apply. Anthony chose Future University because it was just far enough away from home, and he could pursue communications. The day after he graduated, he moved on to campus and participated in a summer bridge program. While he was in college, he always stayed on campus and in the city because he did not want to go home and get caught up in things that he perceived he should not be doing with old friends. While he was a student, he had the opportunity to meet a lot of other first-generation students. They were able to enjoy the experience together, but he also felt he was on his own in a lot of ways. He did not want to mess up his college experience for his mom, and he wanted to complete his education and get a job.

Anthony was proud that he graduated within four years. He felt like he did not know how to build a professional network in college. Instead, he focused on finding a job and once that happened he would figure out everything else. He reported that his college experience was something he would never forget but he also felt like there were some missed opportunities because he was first-generation. Because he was able to come into college the day after he graduated, he learned a lot and he was able to meet a lot of people. These factors allowed him to discover his purpose.

Beth

When Beth discussed starting college, she said it was something that she always wanted to do and because there were specific advisors at her high school they helped her through the process. The chance to go to college provided her with more opportunities that her family did not have the chance to do, and seeing others pursue a degree motivated her. She was excited about the opportunity that college would provide and how it might change the legacy of her family and show family members that they have the potential to pursue college. She ultimately chose Future University because of a friend that she knew who had attended, it was different from home, and in a city. Prior to her first year, she participated in a summer bridge program and an extended orientation program that helped with the transition. She also got additional support from TRIO programs that provided resources and advice as she navigated starting and getting through college.

As she was gearing up for graduation, she spent a lot of time networking and building relationships in order to secure a job before she graduated. She realized how much networking and talking to people was important to the process of landing a job. She was able to secure employment before she graduated. It was a great feeling to have something planned, but there were also concerns if it was the right thing and how the job might fit into her long-term goals. But she hit the ground running immediately after graduation. She tried to connect with people at work and build those relationships to help her be successful. She was intentional in forming and maintaining those relationships. She expressed that, at that time, she didn't know how Future University would continue to play a role in her life. But she would like to see more ways to connect with alums related to her industry.

Corrine

Corrine is the youngest of four children. Her parents had immigrated to the United States, and they always had the expectation that she would go to college. However, she recognized that she did not have the parental guidance regarding what to do or where to go for college. She just knew that she wanted a financially stable and successful future. She applied to numerous schools but ultimately chose Future University because she was not ready to be that far from home, liked the diverse environment of the school, and had received some financial aid. However, she mentioned that financial aid did not cover everything, so she described a time where she had to apply for a private loan to help fund her education because she did not have any other options. It had such a high interest rate and she was worried that it might impact her in the long run. So, she paid it off while she was in college. During college, she felt like she was surrounded by people who were doing great things and that motivated and pushed her to do well.

She went into her final year with a job offer. She felt lucky that she was able to get a full-time job from her internship. Throughout college she didn't really connect in ways as a first-generation student. It was not until she graduated that she felt recognized for her achievement. As a first-generation alum, she felt drawn to want to give back to current students at Future University who might be going through similar experiences as hers. She wished to provide them with a sense of support that she might not have had during her time at college.

Darrell

As a high school student, Darrell wanted to be a doctor. He applied mostly to out-of-state schools because he wanted to get the farthest away from home. He got accepted to Future University, loved the campus and program, felt like it was more diverse than his high school, and decided that it was for him. He explained that he was not nervous about starting college but was excited about pursuing his dreams and being successful in his academic program. He realized

there were things that he and his parents didn't know about the college experience. So, he tried to network with people in college so he could ask more questions.

As he reflected on being a first-generation college student, he said he wanted to do well in college and be a role model for younger family members. He mentioned that as a student he did not really hear about others being first-generation and felt like it was his responsibility to meet his goals in order to be successful. He specifically mentioned that he took advantage of everything in college; if he was paying for it in his tuition, he was going to take advantage of it.

He did not even think about employment or what he was doing after graduation, he just wanted to pass and graduate. Then he realized that if he wanted to be successful in science, he had to get another degree. As he pursued his master's degree, he felt like he started to take advantage of his network so he could get the experience and get his foot in the door for the jobs that he wanted to pursue. Even during his graduate school career, he didn't feel that his parents knew what he was going through. He felt like there was more support for him now than there was when he graduated (he had graduated a little over ten years ago). Currently, he served as President of an identity-based alumni organization. Over time he realized that being involved with the alum community was more than just giving money, but that it also helped him grow professionally.

David

David detailed how he had grown up in foster care and he felt that his K-12 education included a variety of feelings and emotions. He had two main role models that had encouraged him, but he also assumed he would go to college. It was not something that he debated when it came around to apply. He expressed how he was ignorant to the process of choosing a college. He had not really thought about where or why he wanted to go to college but decided to go to

Future University. When starting college, he thought about all of the unknowns and did not believe that he was smart or capable but was looking forward to the freedom. David did not realize what being a first-generation college student meant as he transitioned to college. He also did not know what it meant for those who were also foster children. As he reflected back, he realized it was a big accomplishment, mentioning that research showed that only 10% of foster children complete college. He stated that college was a time for him to confront his beliefs and to think critically. He found community and also appreciated the fact that he could be hidden among such a large campus. He discovered that he had a hard time trusting other people but found support from peers, professors, and role models that helped him navigate college life. He developed that sense of belonging at Future University and it was what kept him involved in the program.

David shared the difficulties of finding a job after graduation. He applied to as many jobs as he could and even completed two free internships in order to gain the experience. He discussed some of his first jobs as ways to get experience. But these were not what he wanted to do or not related to his future career goals. He utilized the career center a few times after graduation. He thought he had not taken the time to develop a social network in college so when he graduated he did not have people to go to for support or advice. He felt that he had more of a community once he became an employee at Future University. He saw Future University as a way of helping him develop a larger world view and to see what was possible, however; he didn't feel like he had the support that he needed to be successful.

Emily

For Emily, going to college was an expectation. Her parents had immigrated to the United States and wanted their kids to go to college. She initially started at a two-year institution

so she could work and go to school part-time before transferring to Future University. She started at the two-year institution studying nursing and then decided to pursue accounting at Future University. She mentioned that she wished her high school had more specific resources for first-generation students as they were thinking about college. She felt that she was on her own and clueless as she navigated the process. However, she was good at researching and investigating on her own.

During college, she worked full-time while getting her degree. And, for that it was difficult to form friendships because she worked during the day and went to classes in the evening. She thought it was hard to organically grow relationships because her relationship with the institution was different. She did not see her experience as being “typical” for college students. Even though she was working in her industry while she was in college, she was nervous about her career path. She had feelings of intimidation and uncertainty, and there were still a lot of unknowns. However, she reflected on the connections she had made with professors and peers and thought they helped her navigate through the uncertainty. Her work supervisor advocated for her, so she was able to have a job lined up prior to graduating, thus easing some of the transition into life after graduation. Emily had become deeply involved in the alum community and noted that if she had not done that it would have been harder to see the possibilities it offered.

Joseph

Joseph knew that he wanted to go to college but did not know much beyond that. He saw his peers doing campus visits in high school and did not understand why. He felt like college was a fresh start where he could do and be anything that he wanted. He knew he wanted to pursue broadcast journalism. Growing up, he described his family as working poor. He felt that getting a degree and moving into a professional career would set him up for success in life later. He chose

Future University because it was located in a similar city to where he had grown up and he appreciated the diversity. In college, he pushed through and did everything quickly, he did not realize you were not supposed to do that and ended up graduating in three and a half years. He took the responsibility of being first-generation very seriously and felt that attending college was something that his parents never had the opportunity to do.

As he was about to graduate, he approached his current employer and said that he needed a full-time job, and they offered him one. When he thought about his future career goals or aspirations he had assumed it was on him to find those opportunities. He could talk to people at his job, faculty, or previous classmates but felt it was really on him solely. He had a successful and incredible career journey, which he attributed to having received his college degree. His career journey and success has also led him to want to provide more of those opportunities to current students at Future University.

Joslyn

Joslyn described growing up in the surrounding area of Future University. Her parents had immigrated to the United States and placed a huge emphasis on education. So, there was always the expectation from her parents that she would go to college. She felt like lots of her peers from high school had parents that had not gone to college, but they were all interested in going even if their parents had not. The biggest pressure she shared in starting college was that her parents wanted to make sure she graduated debt-free— which guided her decision on where to attend.

During her college years, she commuted to and from campus, but this did not hold her back from having the college experience. Joslyn revealed a time where she actually saw the impact of alum involvement on her college experience. She went with a group on an experiential

learning course, and everyone ended up being able to go for free because an alum covered all the expenses. It was an amazing experience for her, and she was able to get to know an alum who had an incredible journalism career.

As a first-generation college student, she could not ask her parents questions. But she went to her peers and network to ask questions without fear of being judged. Joslyn shared that there were also a few professors who made a huge difference in her college experience and provided her with opportunities and support. For example, she mentioned one professor who connected her with an alum of color to share the experience with her. She was grateful for the introduction to that alum and the ability to form a relationship. She had a job lined up before graduation and she recognized what a relief it was to walk across the stage knowing she had a paycheck. She talked about how proud she was of the people and connections she made at Future University because she saw that it had extended a support system for her. As an alum, she thought if you do not seek ways to connect back or get that help, it might be difficult to find community. But she had found a lot of jobs in connecting with alums and being involved.

Kennedy

Kennedy's family had immigrated to the United States and her had not gone to school in this country. But for them, it was really important for her to go to college. As a 17-year-old, she had to do most of the research on her own about colleges. She was really worried about the financial component of college. She supported her family in a lot of ways throughout high school, but her guidance counselor offered her advice about institutions that she could research and encouraged her to look at Future University. She decided to stay in-state in order to save money and was accepted into a pipeline program that was designed for first-generation students

or students from rural areas. The program allowed her to start school early and was an organized way to familiarize herself with college life.

As she reflected on what it meant to be a first-generation college student, she said prior to starting college she recognized the stress but also some of the benefits of being first-generation. Once she was in college, she started to accept that there were some subtle differences between her friends who had parents that went to college and with herself. As an undergraduate she felt like it was hard to build her network because she did not have professional currency. She did not know what to ask of people or what to say. But as she started to connect with more people as she pursued her professional degree. She thought Future University shaped her experiences, her identity, values, and personality, and she felt like she had gained something or had a different perspective from those that had attended other universities. She also felt like she was pursued for financial contributions immediately, and too soon after graduation. She wished that the university had provided more emphasis on offering goals and priorities for alums than it had.

Lisa

Lisa always knew that she wanted to go to college and originally wanted to go the pre-med or humanitarian route for her career. Growing up, she had been in foster care throughout secondary education but had been academically motivated and was valedictorian of her high school. When Lisa graduated high school, she started at a local community college working full-time while also being a full-time mom. She left community college after three years and then worked another 10 years before deciding to enroll at Future University. When she started college, she did not feel like the typical college student and was nervous because she was older and was also a mom. In addition, Lisa felt like she had different lived experiences at that point. But her kids were her biggest champions and supported her all throughout her journey and

celebrated all of her accomplishments. She got involved on campus and tried to utilize as many resources as she could. But she also recognized that it was limited because she was working and raising a family. She shared that she was assigned a mentor from the university alumni organization who provided advice and guidance. But that relationship didn't necessarily continue throughout college or into her life after graduation.

Once she graduated she felt as though she was primarily on her own. She had received some great job offers but also wanted to be realistic with what she could do. Additionally, she wanted to align her work with what she was passionate about. As a first-generation college graduate, she often felt that other people had more opportunities, and she felt excluded in some way. She saw the impact of her family not having the resources needed to support her. She felt that she had to figure out everything on her own; there was not additional support from the university to help her throughout her journey.

London

London was the first person in her family to get a formal education beyond the 4th grade. Her family felt like college was a way out of poverty and encouraged her to pursue a degree. She started college, withdrew to get married, started a family, and then went back to college. When she decided to attend Future University, she said she was motivated by the fact that it was significantly less expensive than her previous institution. She was very goal oriented and wanted to complete her degree as quickly as possible, while building relationships with professors and peers. She took a tax accounting class and quickly realized that she wanted to pursue accounting. Overall, her college experience consisted of going to class and going home; there was not a strong connection in other ways.

When she was looking for a job, she reached out to a neighbor to see if they had any jobs, and they were able to direct her to a job where she ultimately broke the glass ceiling for women. She was the first female to be promoted to a director and then to a senior administrative position at her company. And she was successful within her field that was (is) very male dominated. She felt that she was able to because of her education. London credited Future University with her career success; she got the job but the education she received helped her to continue to be successful. She started a scholarship program at Future University and had continued to stay connected in order to help current students.

Mia

Mia described her path to college as something she knew she always wanted to do. It was a product of where she grew up, in a middle-to-upper class, suburban area where attending college tended to be the norm. Originally, she had big ideas of where she wanted to go but then realized that out-of-state tuition was pretty significant. She saw friends of hers thriving at Future University– which made her excited as she stepped on campus. She was nervous about going somewhere where none of her high school friends were attending. About a month before she was set to move-in, she told her parents that she didn't want to go. She did not feel a sense of independence at the time and was worried about leaving family and friends.

While in college, she built confidence and leadership skills. She took advantage of everything that was available to students outside of the classroom and they were some of her most memorable moments on campus. Being a first-generation student, she kept thinking about how this was a huge moment for her family since no one else had attended college and she described it as breaking a generational curse.

As she prepared for graduation, she felt it was up to her to figure out her next steps. No one was giving her advice or direction as to what she should do; so, she did the research. She was able to forge relationships with alums, but she felt unprepared for the professional world. Mia had pursued mass communications and advertising as her major, but she did not know how to navigate the industry after graduation. She felt like she needed a better understanding of the field she had chosen. She went to graduate school because she did not feel ready to jump straight into a job. As a first-generation alum, she had the confidence that she had shattered a wall when she graduated and opened doors not only for herself but for her family. However, she felt there were still feelings of the unknown as she took the next steps after graduation.

Richard

Richard shared an experience in high school of a university coming to do an onsite admissions process at his school. Had it not been for that experience he might not have looked into attending college. He transferred to Future University and was excited about charting his own path. But he realized there were some big differences between the two schools he attended, so the transition was difficult at first. He brought up that as a first-generation college student he wished he had taken more time to figure out what he wanted to do and explore more major options. But he didn't have a model to follow. He also felt he was carrying the weight of his family and that he was setting expectations for siblings and future family members. He joined a fraternity in college— which was a big part of his collegiate experience and his support system.

For Richard, he was most worried about finding a job post-graduation. He felt like there were some opportunities that weren't within his grasp because he was first-generation. However, he talked a lot about how relationships and the people helped him with job opportunities. He shared that he talked to alums and role models that set him up for success in some of his first

jobs and endeavors. Richard mentioned that outside of finding a job, he appreciated college for exposing him to new people and experiences, opening his eyes and for challenging his previous ways of knowing.

Sage

The path to Future University started in California for Sage. She transferred to Future University when her Dad lost his job during the recession. While tuition increased, her family moved to Virginia from California. She received her second associate's degree before she enrolled full-time at Future University. She had to navigate the challenges of transferring credits and previous coursework. Although her Mom and Dad had attended international universities, there was still so much of the unknown as she navigated an American university. She felt like she had to figure it out all on her own. She recognized it as a traumatic experience transferring colleges, feeling like she was starting all over again, and being a bit older than her peers in her classes. But this all allowed her to learn more about herself.

Sage worked a full-time job during her time in college. When she graduated she described being overwhelmed and somewhat complacent because she had a job that she could continue to stay in even if it was not what she ultimately wanted to do in her career. It took her one and half years from the time she graduated to find out what she wanted to do and to take the leap of faith to start a new job role. As a self-described extrovert, she felt confident to meet new people and build connections that allowed her to seek advice and help from peers, friends, and mentors. Over time, she recognized that she wanted to help students, especially those that might have similar experiences and feelings as she did.

Serena

Serena's parents always instilled in her the value of education and since neither of them had attended college they talked about college and the future. Since she lived near an historically Black college and university, there was some assumption that she would go there. But she wanted to pursue other options. She attended Future University because a friend had told her about it, and it was the only school she applied to. And she liked the idea of being a little farther away from home but still close. She said the day her parents dropped her off at college was also the first time her parents had seen the campus. As a student, she immediately got a job because she wanted to have money and help her parents with the expense of college. She reflected that once she saw that she could do something, it inspired her to try different things and opened her eyes to new opportunities. She did not think that the term first-generation college student was used at all while she was a student. And she didn't have anyone that she could talk to about what that might mean to her experience. As a student, she joined a sorority— which she felt really defined her network. Her peers there were her biggest resource and helped grow her career interests and passions.

It wasn't until she started graduate school that she felt like someone was truly invested in her success. She had a work-study job in the university career services office and the director supported and encouraged her in many ways. She said she was initially waitlisted for her graduate program, but the secretary of the program was influential in getting her accepted as a student. The university helped connect her with potential job placements. She continued through graduate school and earned her doctoral degree at Future University. She said that achieving her first degree set her up with the confidence to get those second and third degrees. As a first-generation alum, the narrative shifted for her family; college was then a possibility for those after

her. Her relationships with others and within her program of study has helped her build connections and have a successful career post-graduation.

Serenity

When Serenity explained her goals for going to college, she said that she wanted to get out of her environment and her homelife. It was not IF she was going to go to college but WHEN. She described how she went on a college tour and the tour took her everywhere except Future University. However, she saw herself there versus the other schools. As she was applying she received two tickets to attend a basketball game with other prospective students and families. That experience was a special moment for her and her family as she was choosing a college. For her, Future University was the most affordable, she had in-state tuition and received a Pell grant, and those factors really sealed the deal for her. She recounted so much was unknown to her. She was the third of five children in her family, and she had no idea what she was getting into by pursuing college. But she was excited for the freedom and about learning. A week before she was supposed to start school she got an email that her financial account was not up-to-date. She stood in line at financial aid for three hours, figured it out. She then decided to take her Mom's name off of information so it would go directly to her, so she would know if something was not right. None of her family had been to college. But they rallied around her throughout her time in college, driving her to school, helping her find a job, and providing money if she needed it.

For Serenity, she felt like the easiest part of college was actually graduating. But then finding a job and finding a place to live after college was a huge stress. She didn't want to go back home because she felt like her family might put too much pressure and reliance on her. Immediately after college, she did not feel like she had anyone to go to. She had plans to be a teacher and go to graduate school, but felt the university did no provide that type of support.

Eventually she had the support from her spouse's family to motivate, empower, and encourage her to pursue her passions. She felt her life at that moment was so different from how she grew up, as she interacted with people that grew up with vastly different lives from her own. She had feelings of imposter syndrome but challenged or pushed back on that status. She wished she had known more about the importance of professional life and what that might have meant for her post-graduation; She mentioned that networking was fun once she found out about it. She thought that she had only been contacted post-graduation for financial reasons. But as she had gotten more involved in councils and with activities she saw the value of alums sharing more about what they are doing and how they might connect to one another.

Shay

Shay said her family had instilled in her that if she wanted the life that she desired; college was the path that she should take, so she knew she always wanted to go to college. As she was applying to colleges, she was torn between a few schools. But ultimately, she loved how Future University was spread across the city and didn't feel like a "normal" campus. She talked about the anxieties leading up to attending Future University, how she was going to pay for it, and if expenses would increase over time. But she learned how to navigate on her own but also asked a lot of questions. Her family supported her by motivating and encouraging her throughout her journey.

As a first-generation college student, she was proud of herself, since she did not have that individual role model who had done the same thing before her; she had to chart her own path. As she was getting ready to graduate, graduation felt like the easy part. But there was anxiety related to leaving Future University related to finding a job. And she hoped she would feel secure after graduation. She described having more of a personal network than a professional one and

pursued a career that was outside of her major. She explained it had taken her sometime after she graduated to find a job. So, the first offer she received, she just went for it. A constant for her throughout college was her passion for following the basketball program and she felt like that was her primary connector once she graduated. It was not until she got more involved that she saw what resources or support might be available to alums. Shay mentioned that when you graduate from college, in some ways you feel like you're supposed to move on with your life but do not know how you can stay connected. She talked with fondness about how much the university meant to her and how much she learned.

Sienna

Sienna moved to the United States when she was 15 years old and did not think she would be in the United States for college. Her parents had the expectation that she would go to college. She also described the societal pressure that she felt was there to receive a bachelor's degree. Her parents wanted her to pursue a pre-med track. However, they could not help her navigate the process of applying to and understanding the university system. She had to figure out all of that on her own. She chose Future University because she was a resident in the state, and she received additional financial aid from TRIO as a first-generation, low-income student. She described feeling like an imposter in college and saw a lot of ways that she was at a disadvantage as a first-generation student. She felt completely alone as she navigated programs and resources. She had always been given advice to build relationships with professors, but she didn't feel like it helped her in any way. She had to find people that were in roles that she wanted and then pursued relationships with them.

As she was preparing for graduation, she said she called hundreds of people and applied to hundreds of jobs. However, the way she was able to learn the most as she navigated life after

graduation was to meet with and ask people who were in her ideal job. She was able to ask them a lot of questions about their resources and what she might need to do. She described receiving her bachelor's degree and gaining more respect from individuals as she entered rooms. In terms of finding a career, she wanted the university to have stronger connections with employers because there weren't any direct connections that she made because of Future University. Sienna was thinking about pursuing graduate school and described similar feelings of imposter syndrome and the unknown. She described how she saw other Ivy League schools assisting with getting their graduates into rooms or initiating connections to build them successful careers; however, she did not see that happening from Future University.

Stephanie

Stephanie described how her parents instilled that education was important especially with the challenges that they had faced in the segregated South. They invested in her education from the beginning, sending her to a private school. Neither of her parents made "a ton" of money but prioritized her education. They wanted her to do all the things to set her up for success. She felt she was building a legacy for her parents and family by attending college. She transferred to Future University after her Mom was in a near-fatal car accident. She wanted and needed to be closer to home and her family. During that time and throughout college, she also took on more responsibilities to support her family. While in college, she joined a sorority where she found support and relationships that assisted her all throughout the years.

After graduation, she found that she was responsible for her own success. Because she was an only child, she felt she had to find her community and a network that would be a support system for her after graduation. Stephanie described having to navigate her wants and desires for her career with her life obligations. She got a job right after college but made a few career

decisions based on the financial concerns and family responsibilities. Stephanie talked about college being the preparation for life after graduation, but adulthood included a long list of responsibilities. She felt like she had less of her network of support post-graduation.

Steven

Steven knew he always wanted to go to college, and there were no other options. And his parents wanted him to have that experience since they never had the chance. He toured a lot of campuses but ended up choosing Future University because of the city feeling, the nature, history of the city, and the diverse student body. As a first-generation college student, he felt he had to make the best of his college experience and take advantage of everything that his family did not have the opportunity to do. He felt like a bit of an outsider because many of his peers and friends' parents had gone to college. But he was going to make the most out of his journey. As a student, he often felt like the only AAPI (Asian American or Pacific Islander) student in class. But he had the opportunity to develop a close relationship with a professor, who also identified as AAPI, and supported him throughout his time at Future University. This professor was able to share personal experiences or advice that assisted Steven throughout his time in college.

As he prepared for graduation, he realized that no one was going to tell him what to do after graduation. So, he had to make a lot of decisions to figure out what was next. In a lot of ways, he thought the school part was the easiest part and what came next was to be determined. He felt like he had to seek out opportunities to stay connected after graduation; it did not just happen naturally. He connected with people, especially when he was looking to get more involved within the political industry. Steven cited that college provided him with the chance to work with a variety of people and with people that he might not agree with. This translated into a life skill after graduation.

Tammy

Tammy started at Future University when she was young. At only 16 years old, she was not exactly sure what she wanted to pursue. She did not do as well as she had hoped in her first few semesters on campus. Eventually, she decided to take some time off, had a child, and then worked in the corporate world. She faced a setback when her company decided to let go all of their employees that did not hold a bachelor's degree. She then decided to go back to Future University and finish what she had previously started. She wanted to be a motivator for her own kids. As a first-generation college student, she felt this would be a way to encourage her kids and that once you start something you can finish it. She pursued education and wanted to take advantage of everything that was offered but was also realistic that she wanted to finish her degree. She shared that if she had been younger she might have done more. But even with some of the challenges, she was selected to serve as the commencement speaker for her school's ceremony.

Tammy described her age as being a barrier, and she felt like she could not connect with other students during college. Then, after she graduated, didn't feel like she was getting hired because of her age. She worked part-time and then decided to go back to school for a graduate program that would allow her to be successful in the field where she found her passion. She wished she had asked for more help before and after college; however, she did not feel she had that network or mentor that she could go to for advice. Through it all, she appreciated learning from others and as time passed saw more opportunities to share resources and seek out other alums.

Trinity

When thinking about college, Trinity really only wanted to pursue the one thing she was truly passionate about— which was playing the clarinet. She described music as being her identity and something she felt she was good at. So, it felt natural that she would pursue that as a career option. She did not know that she could explore other options. She talked about the culture of her high school as one that did not really encourage higher education. She chose Future University because she had not been accepted to another school's marching band program. She had never visited Future University prior to her first day on campus.

When Trinity graduated, she didn't have a job lined up but started working at a restaurant where her boyfriend also worked. She had more personal than professional connections from her college experience and wished she had utilized her professors in a more formal capacity. She thought because her program department was so small there would be more direct connections to job opportunities. Ultimately, she decided to go back to school to receive a graduate degree in education and had to be a self-advocate to find her future career path. Trinity mentioned that she didn't think about her identity as a first-generation student and alum until more recently. She can now see how it might explain things about her personality and how it influenced her experience in college.

Discussion of Participants. The participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. The majority of participants were more recent graduates, but I was grateful to have the few interviewees who graduated more than ten years ago. It was easy to talk to each one of these individuals and, for the most part, all of them felt comfortable talking about their experiences. I mentioned in the limitations sections that I had some concerns because I do not personally identify as first-generation and cannot share in the lived experiences. However, I felt where I might not have been able to share a common understanding, I did come from the

understanding of their individual journeys and how I could support students and alums due to my work in the alumni office. Generally speaking, we might think that a first-generation alum is more reluctant to talk about their experiences, not wanting to seem different, or wanting to keep their experiences to themselves. However, in my experience, these alums talked openly and honestly about their experiences which is uniquely special to this study.

There were some overarching themes amongst all the participants that emerged after spending time with each. These themes included the instilled value of education from family, their involvement as alums, and that across decades and years they shared similar experiences. In the following section, I will share more details regarding these themes.

Instilled Value of Education. Almost all of the participants said that when they decided to pursue higher education and to attend Future University, it was because of the value that either they themselves or their family placed on higher education. Many of them mentioned how their parents or family members encouraged learning and prioritized education. Kennedy shared that it was important to her Mom for her to attend college. Amanda described something similar, her Mom encouraged her to attend because she did not have that same opportunity. Her mom also gave her that drive to pursue higher education. Shay explained that her parents said that if she wanted to have the life that she wanted in the future, college should be a part of that. Beth, Corrine, Emily, Joslyn, London, Steven, Serena, Stephanie, and Sienna all shared that there was an expectation as well as the encouragement from family members or parents to attend college. Overall, there was a sense of opportunity and future possibility that families extended to their children.

Involvement as Alums. The majority of participants had become involved as alums in some capacity; 14 out of the 23 alums interviewed had taken part in some formalized type of

leadership or volunteer position. These positions included leadership in affinity, academic, or regional chapters or councils, a council for recent graduates, or roles on the greater alum governing council. They did not often describe why they chose to get involved or how it contributed to their personal successes. But they saw how it had been a positive contributor to their alum experience. Corrine reported that “once you graduate, you’re not in an environment where it’s so easy to meet people, because I was so involved as a student, I had to figure out what extracurriculars I wanted to do which is why I joined the alumni society [name removed for anonymity].” She recognized that the student organizations she was involved in as a student were important to her and she wanted to continue with that post-graduation. Some described “building community” or creating a “sense of belonging” as important to them and ways in which they were able to find that within the alum community.

Shared Experiences Across the Decades. One alum had graduated in the 1970’s, one in the 1980’s, two in the 1990’s, three in the 2000’s, 14 in the 2010’s, and two in the 2020’s. From the 1970’s to the time of these interviews, alums shared experiences that were similar to what students are experiencing today. Many had transferred to Future University and had chosen the university because of financial reasons or close distance from home. They appreciated the diversity of the campus. Many were able to work while also attending college. They described the feelings of uncertainty or scariness but also willingness to try new things or ask a lot of questions. They all had shared experiences that informed who they were and what got them to those points in their lives and careers. Those shared experiences were rooted in motivation and determination.

Institutional Agents

Table 3 includes summary information for each of the institutional agents interviewed, their division or office, and the number of years they had been with the university. Institutional agents are defined as an individual within a relatively high position within an organization or structure (Frett, 2018). In this study, institutional agents were defined as staff or faculty from the university because they were within a position at the university; and their work directly or indirectly impacted first-generation students. Although Erica and Brie had been with Future University for a shorter time period, their work and prior experiences were vast. The institutional agents were selected based on their work with first-generation students or their focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Some of the participants interviewed recommended others that would also be beneficial to interview. As part of the research study, these institutional agents were interviewed in order to glean more information regarding their support as well as to corroborate what the participants were sharing. They provided information regarding the first-generation student experience, adding clarity, and context to experiences shared. In the following section, I provide a brief description of each interviewee regarding their work experience and time at Future University.

Table 3

Institutional agent profiles

Pseudonym	Office or Department	# of Years in Position/Role
Jacqueline	Development and Alumni Relations	4
Eva	Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success	8
Bryson	College of Humanities and Sciences	16

Erica	Career Services	1
Brie	Division of Student Affairs	1

Jacqueline

Jacqueline had been working for four years in the Development and Alumni Relations office at Future University. Within her scope, she helped to cultivate gift interest for the university regionally and centrally for schools and colleges. She led a team of three major gift officers who all met and talked with alums, discovered their passions, and tried to find interests where they might give back financially. She chaired the department's inclusion council to assess its efforts towards strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion. She also led the summer internship program that brought students to Future University to gain experience in the field. She had an expertise on constituent and identity-based engagement and fundraising practices. After the interview, she left the university to pursue another opportunity helping to direct a program to attract and support Black students to the institution.

Bryson

Bryson had been at the university for 16 years serving as a faculty member in health sciences. He served for 10 years as department chair and five years as associate dean. He had research interests on the impact of stress and fitness level on an individual's health. His doctoral degree was in psychobiology of exercise and sport. He was primarily in a faculty role. During the Fall, he taught a course on the psychology of physical activity as well as a research seminar. He served as the faculty fellow for the grant to develop a first-generation student success research center. He identified as a Hispanic, first-generation college graduate.

Eva

Eva had been working within the Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success division for eight years as the Director of First-Generation Student Experience and Student Success. She worked with Bryson in helping to develop the first-generation student success research center. During her time, she led the summer program for first-year, first-generation students; supported and advised the student organization for first-generation students. She also led the university programmatic efforts to help students that identify as first-generation connect, mentor, and engage with other first-generation college students. She also organized the National First-Generation College Student celebration week of events. She held a doctoral degree in counseling, taught a masters level course for higher education administration, and a service-learning course on peer mentorship.

Erica

Erica had worked for a short period of time in the career center supporting students that were undecided or undeclared to determine a major or career path. She assisted students in their post-graduate life with career exploration or career transitions. Previously, she worked as a consultant with the campus writing center and before she transitioned into higher education she was working as a high school counselor. Although her parents have graduate degrees, she considered herself a first-generation doctor, having received her doctoral degree in education psychology.

Brie

Brie served as the inaugural Assistant Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within the Division of Student Affairs. Initially, the division was not clear on what they wanted this role to include. But she had been flexible and creative to fit the needs of the institution. Her work focused on staff-facing initiatives. But she believed that by creating or shifting a culture

that centered diverse perspectives and creating an inclusive environment for staff, would translate into a more welcoming and inclusive environment for students. She oversaw the department of multicultural student affairs. Previously she had served as a Dean of Students, directed diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and served as a Title IX coordinator at other institutions.

Discussion of Institutional Agents. It was important to share biographical information on each of the institutional agents in order to highlight their career backgrounds, their roles, and how they might work with students and alums. Some of the institutional agents also shared personal information and their own backgrounds that contributed to their work and understanding of first-generation students and alums.

Artifacts

Finally, I asked alum participants in the focus group to bring an artifact that represented their relationship with their degree-granting institution. The artifacts that were brought to the focus groups included a class ring, a painted wine glass, and a branded luggage tag. The last alum said that she was the artifact because she was at the pinnacle of her educational goals, and was a three-time alum of the institution. The artifacts were a representation of the pride and value that each of the alums had with Future University.

When Darrell described his artifact, his class ring, he stated “the reason I brought this class ring is because it has the [location on campus] in the middle, the [mascot] on the side, the fountain with my degree and the year I graduated which represents all my successes at [Future University].” He also brought his alum journal that he used for all of his notes related to his leadership work within the alum community. Amanda, the most recent graduate within the group, brought the painted wine glass and mentioned that she had made it a week before

graduating at an event. There was a speaker at the event, she connected a lot with the speaker and how he was inspiring her in that moment right before graduation. She also brought the luggage tag and said she loved the opportunity to “rep” her school wherever she went. She acknowledged that when she was given the tag the individuals had said, “wherever you go, you have [Future University] with you,” again highlighting the pride but also illuminating the lifelong connection. Finally, when it was Serena’s time, she noted that she wanted to share something that she was excited about, being a three-time alum. She said, “being first-gen and ending up with a terminal degree is like, wow, my education has ultimately been the pinnacle of what [Future University] has had to offer, I can call myself doctor.”

The artifacts represented visual reminders as well as the intrinsic connections to Future University. The focus group participants did not describe it as a challenging task but were able to reflect on items that were most important to them at that time. It was interesting to see the depth of the artifacts, since we had representation from a variety of graduation years. I felt there was a gradual progression regarding the items and meaning for the participants. This was especially apparent as Serena described herself at the culmination of everything that Future University had offered her and provided to her over the course of the years. I believe the artifacts helped to develop a broader perspective of the participants' connection with the Future University and how that might have influenced their relationship with the institution.

In the next sections, I unpack the themes and trends that I wove together between and among participants. I begin by including how participants described their identity as first-generation students and alums, and then break down the categories related to each of the research questions.

Perceptions of First-Generation Status Beyond College

Overall, it is important to shape the experiences of the participants around their identity as first-generation students and alums. This is especially critical as it relates to their experience as alums since there isn't a considerable amount of research discussing first-generation experiences post-graduation. It was important to the participants, their identity as first-generation, as they described their experiences and perceptions of their college experience and beyond. In the following section, I provide the themes related to a question that was asked of them three times throughout the interview process: what did it mean to them to be first-generation; to see if it changed during their journey; and as they navigated life after graduation.

The intersectional identities of first-generation alums contributed to their overall experience. In general, participants did not always discuss their individual race or ethnicities and how that might have contributed to their experiences. But data has shown that first-generation college students are more likely to be female, many of whom have dependents or are single parents, students of Color or belong to an ethnic minority group (RTI International, 2019; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wilsey, 2013; Ward, 2013). This was confirmed with the demographical breakdown of the alum participants in this study. In the focus group, Darrell mentioned specifically how he was a first-generation graduate and an African American male who studied Biology. Thus, he felt that the graduation rates for African American men were low. So, he set the bar for himself and others by having graduated from Future University, and by being first-generation.

The focus group consisted of all African-American/Black participants which, in my opinion, brought out a level of comfort for individuals to speak more openly about their race and how that related to their experience on a predominantly White campus. Darrell also highlighted what it meant to be a student of color, the majority of first-generation students. He also

commented on what that meant not only for himself, but how, in the future, he could be someone to look up to. It was important to highlight how his race impacted his lived experiences and the historical challenges and barriers he faced as a Black male. In addition, prior data showed that first-generation students might have dependents. Three of the participants shared that they had started college, left for a time, and then went back while supporting their children. This was another example that supported prior research.

For 18 of the participants, their identity as first-generation alums defined who they were and were a point of pride. The participants described their commitment to completing their degree while overcoming obstacles, managing working full-time, taking care of families or children, starting college, taking a break, and then going back, and not knowing exactly what they were doing as they navigated through college and beyond. But it was also an opportunity for their families to be proud. Future family members would be motivated to follow in their footsteps and feel confident that they could do the same. These alums felt as though they were not only role models for family members but also friends, peers, and future students. Steven said that he wanted to take advantage of everything that his family could not or did not have the opportunity to do. College was about giving it his all and having those experiences for his family. Kennedy, Anthony, Trinity, Steven, and Lisa mentioned how they noticed subtle differences between friends or peers who had parents or family members who attended college, compared to their own experience. Steven noticed that he felt like an outsider in a lot of ways because it seemed common among his friends that all their families had gone to different colleges, whereas his family had not had that same experience and he could not share in their common bond. Trinity thought that her peers who had parents who had gone to college encouraged their children more. So, she felt like she had to be a self-advocate throughout her

journey. These participants recognized differences between themselves and their continuing-generation peers, and may or may not have realized how it impacted their experiences.

There was also a feeling among many of the participants that they had to be their own source of motivation and success. Richard realized that even though he did not have a roadmap it empowered him in a lot of ways, he was able to chart a path. Eventually he wanted to share some of those same tools with someone else. Kennedy shared that she thought being first-generation gave her access to more opportunities, such as pipeline programs or federal grants while she was in college. She had the opportunity to start school early and receive one-on-one support from a direct staff member and through the community that was built within the program. It was a newfound privilege to be able to get a college degree. Darrell stated “wow, some people didn’t have these other opportunities that I have now and I’m pretty lucky or blessed to be able to.” Steven noted similar feelings, even though he said he felt like an outsider at times. He also acknowledged that there was a new sense of privilege in being able to go to college and complete the journey.

When thinking about their first-generation identity post-graduation, Darrell mentioned that he thought more about it when he met with current college students: “I think about it mostly when I go speak to other current students or attend something and everyone introduces themselves and I share that and I am reminded of it more.” However, he cited that in the “real world,” he didn’t think about it as much because he had fulfilled his goal of graduating college, so didn’t have the same feeling for him.

A few of the participants described how they had similar first-generation sentiments when they began to research advanced degrees. Mia said she was reminded of those similar first-generation feelings when she started graduate school. She felt like she had imposter syndrome

and thought to herself, “I don't belong in grad school. I am not an academic star, no one in my family has done this.” Mia stated:

I had first-gen feelings again post-graduation. And sometimes I think back to when I did have imposter syndrome, or I think back to something that just makes me feel really good about myself and it's often graduating from [Future University]. Because I crossed the finish line and shattered that wall so I feel like I can do anything.

Sienna felt the same way when she was thinking about continuing her education after her undergraduate degree. However, as she started to think about graduate school, the same feelings started to bubble up again: feelings of uncertainty; how to pay for it; and the general cluelessness of the application and decision-making process.

A specific first-generation identity that stood out to me was the feeling among participants, like Joseph, Lisa, and Trinity, that once they graduated it was on them to find their next opportunity, and to achieve their post-graduation goals. They were not going to rely on anyone but themselves for those next steps. Because they didn't have a family member that had gone through a similar transition and journey, they did not have anyone to necessarily reach out to when they joined the “real world.” Thus, it felt like another step that they had to take individually to reach their goals. Trinity shared that, in the past five to six years, she had reflected on what being a first-generation student meant to her. But prior to that, she had not really thought about it. In those few years, she realized that her identity as a first-generation alum explained some of her personality tendencies like nervousness and the feeling that she could not do something. But she also had the feeling that shouldn't be discouraged. Beth said she did not reflect on her first-generation identity as much now that she had achieved the accomplishment, similar to Darrell. But it was still important as she pursued other degrees, and she wanted to

support future generations. David noted that he really did not identify as a first-generation college student until he was done, “because I just didn’t feel comfortable claiming something I hadn’t finished.” Thus, to him, being first-generation and a college student lived independently from each other. In his case, he said he wanted to accomplish graduation, to meet that goal before claiming his identity as a first-generation alum.

These feelings, thoughts, and notions supported the literature describing first-generation student experiences. The interviews also confirmed that first-generation alums faced similar experiences in their lives post-graduation. The participants agreed that their identity as first-generation alums had positively contributed to their lived experiences in college and beyond.

Research Question 1: Perceived Engagement with Degree-Granting Institution

The first research question asked how first-generation alums described their engagement with their degree-granting institution. This section identifies the themes related to the first research question. Initially, I found that it was challenging for alums to describe their engagement with Future University. In some situations, alums could name a number of ways they had engaged with the university, they attended events, or they cited a specific program they supported; but this was more common if those individuals held some type of leadership role with alum organizations within the office. However, if alums were not as involved or connected in a specific way they had a harder time describing what engagement meant to them. When participants described engagement, I found that a theme was the level of support they needed or specific needs post-graduation. They sought out help or support, and that was how they engaged with their degree-granting institution. Over time, and from alums that were more seasoned, their perceived engagement had evolved, or they had an easier time reflecting on what it meant to them and how they would encourage it for other alums. In order to understand alums perceived

engagement, I described several themes related to what alums sought or found in engagement with Future University post-graduation.

(Perceived) Support or Lack Thereof

There was a general consensus that Future University provided resources and support that helped the participants navigate college life. Of course, there were also feelings of wanting to do more or wishing they had taken advantage of other opportunities and resources. Hindsight being 20/20 was a common sentiment among participants. However, when I asked about what that support looked like after graduation, four of the participants specifically mentioned that they did not think there was any support at all. David stated, “I don’t believe that [Future University] really supports the transition for first-gen students,” and Joseph said, “in my experience, there really was no support. I very much felt like it was mine to forge.” There was a general feeling that they were alone in figuring out their next steps. I think there was a sense or feeling of “why would Future University have helped me after graduation.” But I think many participants expressed that it was the university’s responsibility to help them. Additionally, Lisa did not think there was anything specific for first-generation alums because she felt like being first-generation was rarely talked about, other than receiving something when she graduated. There was this overwhelming feeling that they had to navigate life after graduation on their own and with their own motivators. Mia stated that she did not think about what she was losing when leaving school; it did not occur to her that she might need that support system or resource as she navigated life after college. Mia had not really thought about the safety and security there was in college and that she might not experience a similar sense of security once she graduated. In a sense, college was a small bubble and alums did not really recognize all that was at their fingertips. Sienna specifically declared that she felt like she had not experienced any support

post-graduation and that the “relationship with [Future University] had been completely severed after graduation.” She described,

When I was going through a housing crisis, I reached out to my advisor, to a bunch of people, to the housing department. And they basically told me straight up to my face, that if you’re not a student, there is nothing we can do for you. Even though all throughout college they were like if you’re an alum there is going to be all this help and resources there, kept for you to utilize. In my experience, so far, neither myself nor my friends have had anything that has been helpful. It’s basically been like our relationship with [Future University] has been completely severed after graduation. Maybe it’s one of those things if you don’t reach out first or inquire. The resources aren’t going to be presented to you. So maybe it’s on my end to look into what I can access as an alumnus.

Sienna was seeking support for living and housing arrangements from the university and thought it was their responsibility to help. When she did not receive that, there were negative feelings that developed because of that specific situation. And I think that impacted the ways that she might have sought engagement from the university.

Participants with opposing views said either that they were unsure if there was support or that it did not seem easily accessible. It was not that they did not think it existed or was available to them, but they did not know what form or type of support was available. Kennedy said “I was unsure about the support after graduation.” She continued, “It feels like we probably get the same campaigns and marketing as everyone else,” meaning that none of the support was tailored specifically to her needs or expectations as a first-generation alum. She also stated that she found it hard to seek out engagement. The times that she asked for specific resources or support, there was not much response. This was similar to Sienna’s experience in the sense that they both

reached out but did not necessarily get the response they were seeking for. Emily also was not sure if there was anything specific that Future University did for her post-graduation. She attributed her success to the fact that the student body was so diverse. Whether she realized it or not at the time, that helped her find others going through the same thing, and gave her the opportunity to meet new people and open her mind. She was able to engage with people similar to her or going through the same experiences. This almost felt like a direct contradiction to Kennedy's feeling that nothing was tailored specifically to her individual identity or needs. Reflections from participants highlighted a lot of the unknown or feeling that their perceived engagement might not have been what they needed at the time.

Corrine felt like there was a dramatic shift from being developed as a student to becoming more of a resource for the school, in terms of monetary donations and volunteerism. She felt like she had paid her tuition and now was donating her time. But she did not necessarily see what she was getting in return. For many, alum engagement was often thought of as a way to support current students. College officials often forget that alums might need the support as they graduate. This was the case for Corrine since she didn't feel like she was getting the support but was being asked to help others.

Some of the participants that got more involved as alums had different perspectives on the level of support, as their volunteerism impacted their perceived engagement. Richard highlighted the organizations and councils that alums could get involved with, as well as the tools and programs that were available for networking, mentoring, and skill-building. He was able to name many of the programs and engagement opportunities that were available to alums. He thought there was a huge amount of support that was available to alums, but it was not something he knew about until he took more of an interest in discovering those resources and

became an employee within the department. Darrell and Kennedy also described that once they connected with organizations or had gotten involved as an alum, they were more aware of what was available. They recognized how those involvement opportunities helped them with refining skills and networking, asking other alums questions, or building a social network in a different way. They saw how engagement could help with their personal and professional development. However, they recognized that there was a lack of knowledge from alums until they chose to get more deeply involved. Emily declared, “unless you’re involved with the [Future University] alumni and staff directly, it’s really hard to get reintroduced without someone sticking out their hand first.” She was alluding to the fact that she did not appreciate how it was on the alums to take the initiative versus the university showcasing meaningful opportunities. The varying levels of support that alums viewed and the discrepancy in experiences contributed to their perceived engagement. Some in a more positive way than others. As another layer of perceived engagement, a common theme that was mentioned by many of the participants, was that they sought out engagement via job connections or career support.

Career Connections

For many of the participants, part of their perceived engagement after graduation included help with finding a job. Participants did not perceive or describe positive engagement with Future University if they did not feel like they had help or assistance in landing a job after graduation. As some of the participants were preparing for graduation, they mentioned the expectations of the university or the relationships that did or did not exist in navigating the job search process. Joseph felt that job opportunities did not always present themselves easily when he was getting ready for graduation or life immediately after graduation. He shared, “there were no professors or advisors or anyone saying, hey, here's a job, you should consider applying for it.

There was nothing like that at all. It was just, you know, the skills to kind of forge new networks.” He thought it would have been nice to know that he could have engaged with the alum office to help find a job or to connect with potential employers or alums; but felt it was all on him. This was often a common comment for many first-generation alums; the idea that they had to figure everything out on their own. I shared this description earlier when I discussed the identity of first-generation alums.

Because alums felt like they could not engage back with the institution to seek job help, they offered suggestions or improvements. Anthony realized that, “especially if you don't have a job [after graduation], you want someone to reach back out to see how you're doing and share resources that might be helpful.” Both Richard and David mentioned that for them the easiest way to stay connected and engaged with the university was if there was a continual push towards sending alums job opportunities. Steven noted how it would have been nice to have some sort of career coach post-graduation, to check-in with alums and see how they are doing in their professional career. Emily suggested:

Maybe Future University could be more proactive about visiting different employers around the local community, every other year or once a year, re-introducing themselves to local employers and businesses. Because, you know, we have a lot of alumni spread out everywhere. And even though [Future University] is a community, if you don't live in the city, it can be hard.

She wanted the university to bridge the gap between students-turned-alums, the alum community, and potential employers, to meet with and hear from employers, and to make those connections and feel like she was getting solid support for what she needed after graduation. Anthony, Richard, David, and Steven all described ways in which they thought the university

could provide more direct assistance that they did not see when they were navigating the job market.

However, Richard believed that social capital and connections from Future University opened doors for all the jobs that he had ever had. He recognized that by engaging with the university after graduation, it allowed him to advance his career and provided him opportunities to network with like-minded individuals. Richard particularly cited social capital. The topic was addressed more when alums specifically talked about the alum network and how that did or did not play a role in their life after graduating. Social capital was not discussed naturally among the participants, only when I asked about the theory. The concept of community cultural wealth was important in Corrine's comments. From her viewpoint, she was a diverse candidate for jobs and was able to apply to specific diversity scholarship programs because of her identity and background. Because she was a first-generation student aligned with being diverse. Thus, she felt she was able to get an internship and job with her company. She questioned if she would have gotten the same opportunities if she hadn't been first-generation. It gave her confidence that she had acquired going into situations, especially since she felt like she did not have a network of individuals. The aspects of her own community cultural wealth assisted her in finding a job. Again, Corrine did not acknowledge her own community cultural wealth directly, but her comments directed me to the concept. Finally, when participants talked about engagement with Future University, they highlighted their opportunity to connect and help current students.

Connecting with Students Now and Then

When I talked about alum engagement, many participants saw the term engagement as opportunities to connect with and help current students on campus. Anthony noted that it was a natural or intrinsic benefit. He said, "alums could benefit from just being involved with things on

campus, because I think alums can help students, they can provide students with an additional level of support.” Anthony, and many others, talked about how they did not have the opportunity to meet alums while they were on campus. So, to be able to do that for a student now could be incredibly impactful. Darrell shared that he had seen the growth and change in Future University. He felt like there was more support now for students than when he was there. He recognized that more as he had the opportunity to serve on panels and connect with students, he wished that was something he had experienced as a student to be able to see alums navigate life and provide advice. Finally, Richard stated, “giving back to the university, your time, talent, and treasure, helped to create a better opportunity for an incoming student.” He saw the potential for so many alums to be a resource and guide for current students that could help them navigate life and provide those connections. He used a common phrase in advancement, “time, talent, and treasure,” to describe what alums can provide back to the institution. He also said, “I want to give back to students and help them because I know when I was in college I didn’t know what I wanted or wanted to do. But knowing what was out there would have been so helpful.” Many of the participants stated that they wanted to make a difference and support other first-generation students.

But alums also shared that there could be more of an emphasis on alum engagement while you are still a student. Serena commented that there could have been a “more intentional connection to resources and people. It really felt like what it had been [for me] the whole four years of college, you figure it out, you graduate, what else do you want. But more intentional programming [from alumni] or connection with students.” To be able to build the awareness and understanding regarding what ways that you can engage back with the university once you graduate, would have been helpful while Serena was still a student. Corrine felt that as an alum,

the feeling of connecting back with the university was reversed. This meant that as a student, professors, faculty, and staff continuously work to find ways for you to be successful. But then post-grad it was not so much about what the university can do for you but how you can help current students or give back to the community. I mentioned this feeling from Corrine previously. But I think it is important to include that there were some challenges when describing engagement, because so much of the term engagement did not feel like it was for alums. Many of the alums felt strongly about wanting to help students. But they also had a sense that immediately after graduation they wished the university had been there as a resource. The first research question addressed the topic of engagement and how alums perceived engagement with Future University, but I also tried to narrow down how alums saw engagement as a connection with their network of other alums. And that brought me to the second research question.

Research Question 2: First Gen Alums Connecting with their Networks

Throughout the interviews, I also asked participants how they had connected with their alum network, in what ways, and ways in which they might have engaged with their alum networks. I think it is important to note that engagement and connecting with alum networks could overlap, as many of the descriptions were similar from the first research question. But I tried to specifically identify how and in what ways participants connected with the alum community. In understanding how alums had or hadn't connected with their network, I found struggles that first-generation alums had in understanding the role of their network, how they recognized it as a common bond, and then the ways that the network might have assisted them post-graduation.

I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know

When I first asked the alums how and in what ways they had connected with their alum network, many of them talked about how they did not see or know how their alum network helped or could have helped them post-graduation. The network of alums was not seen as a tool or resource. Particularly, Amanda mentioned, “I worried about and wondered how I would utilize my alumni network. How do I connect intentionally with other alumni? How do I approach alumni?” Lisa expressed a similar feeling, “when you're first-generation, even if you have your family, no one has those resources because they haven't been to college. They don't have those things to help you post-college because they haven't experienced that.” There was a sense that she needed that additional support because her family couldn't relate in the same way because they hadn't been through the same things. Family members could not offer the suggestions of connecting with other alums because they hadn't been through that specifically, and did not know that it could have been a resource. An institutional agent, who was the faculty member and researcher, shared his thoughts that when first-generation students graduate, they don't know what it means to be an alum. They also do not know you have a network and that individuals will be reaching out to communicate with you regarding those connections. They do not know that first-generation alums might want to stay connected and why that might be helpful. His perception of the experiences of first-generation alums supported the statements of participants that they had no prior knowledge or understanding of how the alum network might be beneficial to them post-graduation. There was an overall knowledge gap for first-generation alums regarding the alum network and what it might mean for them. The connection was not easily made in why an alum would want to connect with another alum and what that might mean for their personal or professional development.

There was a feeling among the alums that there needed to be education or awareness regarding what it meant to connect back as an alum. Kennedy stated that there needed to be a focus on letting alums know that Future University is still there and wants to keep the relationship open. Serena reiterated that she thought others, including herself, did not “clearly understand what it is that the alumni organization does and how that benefits me, in what ways is that helpful to me, there could have been stronger messaging around that.” Beth shared that she did not connect with the alum network. It is not for a lack of opportunities, but it did not seem like the opportunities were intentional or aligned with her professional and career development. She did not see any value or benefit to her in connecting with other alums that would be meaningful for her career development. It is important to differentiate that sometimes I asked about the office that works to connect and provide support to alums from the institution. But I also wanted to know about that greater alum body, i.e., the individuals that made up the alum community just by virtue of graduating from the same institution. The alums that I talked to often did not see a difference between the alum organization (meaning the work that is fulfilled from the office mission and goals) versus the greater alum community. They almost described those concepts as one and the same; not necessarily citing a difference between the two. In my mind it was not always about the organized programs from the office or from the institution but about the greater community of those who graduated from the same university, creating a built-in support. I wanted the alums to talk more about the people that supported them, even if it was other alums. But they did not always see their community as other alums but as friends, peers, or colleagues.

The few alums that had taken the next step to get involved in their alum network represented a bit of a different take on their experience. Emily mentioned that unless an alum is

directly connected to the office or the staff, it was really hard to get involved or engaged. She suggested bridging the gap between alumni relations and the alum community. Again, this referenced the feeling that alums did not see the office and community as two distinct units. She provided the suggestion that there needed to be a better understanding into the programs but also the people that are a part of the community that could be a resource. Darrell noted that when he talked to other alums they said they do not know things are happening for them and they are not receiving information on ways that they can stay connected. He did not understand the disconnect. He felt like he knew of all the opportunities that were available, and saw how they could be valuable to alums. But then heard from his peers or other alums that they did not have the same feeling. Next, I began to see that although alums described not knowing how or why they should connect with the alum community they did see that they all had this common connection by virtue of graduating from the same institution.

Network Equates to Social Capital

As I asked participants about their alum network, I wanted them to also think about their network in terms of social capital, cultural capital, or community cultural wealth— which I discussed throughout the literature review. Table 4 breaks down the definition of networks described by the alums. I thought it was important to include the definitions because almost all of the participants could describe a network or had their own definition of a network. But the discrepancy was whether or not they saw it as a connection to their degree-granting institution or to social capital. The alums did not cite a connection of acquired or gained social capital.

For many of the participants, they had common definitions. But in some instances, they were vastly different. In most cases, alums talked about the relationships and the people that were a part of their community. Their network could include their friends, peers, colleagues,

supervisors, etc. It seemed that for most participants, their network included people that might have known them well or with whom they had some kind of preconceived relationship. It was rare that participants described the network as this greater body, as people they may not have ever met or by having the common connection by graduating from the same institution.

However, some participants discussed how their network might be people that they may or may not need something from and how it could be a personal or professional relationship.

Finally, some equated their network with networking or only thought about it in the context of their college experience versus how they might view “a network” in terms of family, friends, or work colleagues. I was trying to see if they understood the alum community as a network they had access to. I hoped that someone would describe their definition in that way, but no one did. One participant described a feeling that a network might have had a negative connotation and was too-often used as jargon that might not have had any meaning. These varied definitions can be seen below, giving a glimpse of how the alums were approaching the conversation regarding their view of alum networks (see Table 4).

Table 4

Definitions of a network

Participant	Definition
Richard	Those around you professionally or personally that challenge you to grow and that you can also just connect with and learn from.
Mia	It's not just about pulling resources from the people that you know but maybe from the layers of that relationship.
Serena	Access to knowledge about resources that I may not know of or need help accessing and they can help connect me.

Emily	Not a lot of activities on campus where you could organically grow your network, but classes were the best places to connect with others.
Joseph	The concept was a bit lost on me.
David	Network was built out of relationships, the relationships with individual professors or students that were meaningful. Created a feeling of belonging.
Beth	People that I've interacted with in various settings that I built connections with on my shared interests. Something we can both help each other with.
Anthony	Meeting people who could serve as a resource to you.
Joslyn	Different links that I can connect with for any kind of support, whether it's professional or personal.
Amanda	Individuals who know a little bit about your personal journey or have a thorough understanding of your goals that you can intentionally connect with them in order to help each other. Also, friends.
Stephanie	Supporting each other and building on skill sets that pay it forward.
Corrine	Type of relationship, how you develop that relationship and have a connection with them.
Kennedy	Felt like an overused professional word and always felt like a business transaction, but someone shared that a transaction can still be a relationship.
Trinity	My networks were always personal, I wish they had been professional.
Steven	Maintaining relationships with different people through interactions.
Sage	I think there are two separate ones. There's a

	professional network and there's a personal network, but I feel like at the end of the day it is all personal.
Serenity	The people around you who will support you but also call you out at times, when you need to be called out.

After asking about their definition of a network, I asked about their network in conjunction with the term social capital and whether they viewed their alum network as a type of capital. Stephanie stated that she felt she had “social capital from being a part of a group and making connections, not just through the sorority but outside of that, allowed me to navigate professional politics.” She described evidence of how she saw social capital supporting her in her professional career, including those that she could lean on for advice and help in various situations. But she also thought of her sorority as that initial form of capital, not just the university as a whole. David did not think that he had established enough connections while he was a student, and he stated:

I don't think social capital played a large role. I like this concept, but I don't believe it played a role because I hadn't taken the time to develop that social network in college, so there was no social capital to utilize... [This] makes me curious if we were to compare first-gen and non-first gen college students on this concept of social capital regarding their employability after college. Because I wonder how much their parents or something like that plays a role in them getting a job after college, versus someone who didn't have parents that went to college or parents at all.

He did not think he had done enough “work” as a student to develop those connections that he might take advantage of post-graduation. Serenity viewed something like social capital playing a role in her life five years after graduation when a college peer connected her to a job, and then

encouraged her to pursue the industry. She saw the benefit of direct connections from her degree-granting institution, and it helped her find a job to discover her future career path. Amanda reflected on a similar situation in which someone from her network referred her to a job. Emily talked about her level of capital playing a role in her success. She described:

The more robust the social capital is, I think the more confident you'll be going into the real world after graduation. I think unbeknownst to everyone, those relationships that you form that increase your ability to navigate uncertainty. If I hadn't made those bonds with classmates, if I hadn't spoken with professors, I would be a lot more lost. If I hadn't had a manager that advocated for me I would be a lot more lost. I would be lost even now. I think it's a huge indicator of how successful you'll be and how quickly you'll be successful.

She described much more about how she saw forms of social capital assisting her in navigating life and her jobs.

There were also times that alums described, more generally, how they were grateful for the alum network. I heard several times that they were thankful and appreciative of their network of other alums. Amanda felt like, "having a network of individuals allowed me to feel like I am in this new stage [of life], but I am not in outer space all on my own." She shared that she thought about the alum community as a space to go to if she ever needed anything. Emily thought that no matter the location and time in your life, it should not make alums think differently about the alum network. She felt that no matter how far along you are in your career or how far away you are from the university itself you can always grow or maintain your network because there is "direct access to a network of people and there is camaraderie."

In the focus group, participants discussed that Future University was the conduit that brought their network together. However, they did not always think of Future University as that thing that kept them together or connected. In response to the statement from Darrell and Amanda about the university not necessarily keeping them together, Serena commented:

I don't know if that's a bad thing. It [Future University] was this catalyst that helped further propel relationships that perhaps I would have never formed or these networks that have these connections that I would have never made and because it brought us together, it allowed us this opportunity for us to learn. You start to form deeper relationships that go above and beyond what your school is.

The others agreed, mentioning that Future University was that commonality that forged relationships with others. Although they might not always attribute that to Future University, they knew that was what ultimately brought them together.

Two of the participants recognized what they had gained through their college experience, but it did not always present in the ways that they understood as helpful. Anthony knew that the social network he gained through college was insurmountable and that it was because he attended the university. But he felt like he missed out on professional relationships and networks because he just didn't realize what that network was and how it might benefit him later. Serena and Stephanie both noted that they saw their network more closely within the sororities that they joined, and those were the individuals that they felt were most closely tied to their network. Shay had a similar experience regarding her network through a student organization,

It played a huge role in my life post-grad. I tried to stay involved with [Future University] as much as I could after graduation and that was mainly through [organization name

redacted]. I was able to do that because of that network I had, seeing the things that they did after college, and seeing how they stayed involved, that kept me involved. For life after graduation in general, I could follow in the footsteps of my peers.

The relationships built through specific student organizations created a stronger feeling of a network.

Darrell recalled that he had to build new networks after he graduated, and it was more intentional through his company because he felt like his parents were not able to provide those direct connections. Everyone back home did not know how to assist him in his new career endeavors. Beth also felt that her career provided more of the network versus the university. Beth mentioned that she felt like her network was stronger and she was closer to the people at her job versus the alum community as whole. David reiterated a similar sentiment, “it was having to create new networks after college because I hadn’t built the networks that I needed to build during college.” He felt like he had to find those networks related to his career path that would be more useful to him at that time in life. Again, just because they attended and graduated from college they didn’t see it as a built-in network.

Some of the participants described feeling like they did not have access to networks. Lisa said that it seemed like “other people tend to have more connections and more opportunities than me. It doesn’t matter that I have all of the education, but it’s also based on the network, and I don’t feel like I have that.” She described disparities between what she perceived others had and herself. Shay said that she did not see her alum network as access to capital that might have assisted her after graduation. But she also realized that alums in her life played a huge role. There was a discrepancy between seeing other alums as helpful but in not seeing them as a form of capital. I previously described how specifically she saw value in the student organization

members that she relied on after graduation. They were important individuals in her life. I think she saw that differently than what I was addressing through the question I asked about social capital. Stephanie had a moment where she reflected, “You invest a lot in the four years and think that it’s done. But moving into adulthood can be the loneliest time because you don’t have the forced time to build connections with people. And I feel like the alumni group could be that community that you need.” She did not describe that as something that she had always experienced but recognized that had she thought that way immediately after graduation things might look differently. Nearly everyone interviewed recognized that Future University was that common denominator that brought alums together and helped to forge relationships that might not have been there otherwise.

Connections with Others

Within the university, alums had formed connections with others. But for some, there was a lack of connections. Amanda and Joslyn both felt that they knew that their alum network was evident, but they might not have always engaged with it in ways that were meaningful. Amanda said the alum network provided an opportunity to build connections with those with similar interests and goals, and that those individuals “might connect you to others.” But she did not describe a specific situation where this had happened for her. Joslyn declared that she always felt like she had someone to reach out to if she ever needed help. Mia found that she had “forged connections with people just because they went to [Future University] ...when I meet others that also went to [Future University], it's nice to make those connections.” As alums, the fact that they all had attended the same university created a shared experience and automatic connections.

Some felt like they had missed out on the connections, David stated that if “I had connected in that way [with others that were first-gen], it might have created less barriers for that

communication after [graduation].” He recognized that he wished he had made more meaningful connections. I would argue that alums do not always have to form those relationships prior to graduation. But, again, the common denominator of graduating from the same institution helped to facilitate those connections. Anthony acknowledged that he didn’t realize it was going to be so important to have those connections, “I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” And it felt like a missed opportunity for him. This was similar to what I described earlier, a sense of not realizing that there was a network and how alums could take advantage of it. Darrell, and others, emphasized that it was important to meet alums before graduation because it could greatly impact the experience while you are a student and then when you graduate. They described value in connecting with alums, seeing what they are doing, and being a resource. This also brought up the concept of networking, in this case the term networking went hand-in-hand with network.

It is important to recognize that for many alums, the concept of networking was brought up in conjunction with their thoughts on their network. Many of the participants made it clear that networking did not always have to be job related and it did not have to mean that you needed something in return. Steven explained that “by connecting with all these people, you might think that one day they might help you with something, but it's also how you both can help each other.” The mutual benefit was an important aspect to networking. However, for Sienna being a first-generation alum felt like it put her at a disadvantage for accessing networks. She commented:

For low-income, first-generation college students, we don't have access to people who can give us the life that we want to live. Your professor can get you to grad school, but to know the Vice President of Disney, that could get you to a C-suite position. That kind of networking is the one I paid attention to...people like me when we think about

networking, we don't understand that, you don't know that we're capable of talking to people who are leading the greatest Fortune 500 companies. So, when I first graduated I didn't think that I would or what right I had to take up someone's time.

The expression of taking up someone's time, referred to the confidence building that many first-generation alums felt while navigating their spaces after graduation. There was some concern from Sienna that she did not think she should reach out to people for her own benefit or for help. Similarly, Joseph described a time where he had a friend who attended another institution that their parents had also attended. The friend knew immediately what they wanted to do because it was part of the family business and had already started networking, but Joseph felt as though all of those benefits, especially networking, was lost on him. The parental assistance felt most evident in that situation. There was also more of a direct link to how parents who attended college and how they had assisted their students with making decisions and connections.

Serena shared the idea of networking within her chosen field of study when she was an undergraduate student. She observed that her peers in her major were predominantly White; but her neighborhood residents were predominantly Black. She saw a small number of students of color and a large number of White students in her program. She learned quickly that she had to navigate both, i.e. socially among her predominantly Black network and again within her predominantly White classes. She also saw that as an opportunity to diversify her network. As she reflected back, she did not know at the time if navigating these two spaces was intentional but recognized that it had been helpful in the long-run. Darrell echoed that he had a similar experience, balancing predominantly Black in White spaces, and felt like he had to learn to adapt quickly when growing his network. Stephanie recognized she had to fight to get into certain rooms. She said as a Black, queer woman, she often felt like the only one of her as she entered

the working world. She had to balance the perceptions, judgements, or biases that might block her from networks. She did what she had to do so she could command a room and get the investment from the powerful networks within her field to help her advance or feel confident in the industry. It was important to these participants to describe how their race, ethnicity, and identity played a role in how they connected and networked with others. Again, networking was included within the overall perception of a network, but participants also described what they wished their institution had done to make it easier to connect intentionally with their alum network.

Institutional Support

As participants described connecting with their network, they also expressed concerns about how the institution did or did not support them after graduation. Throughout the interview protocol I posed this question thinking that respondents might bring up the alum community as a group that facilitated that support. However, as discussed previously, many felt like they did not know what the support was. Additionally, they did not feel like the university was there for them after graduation and they did not describe the community that was particularly helpful. But others shared how they recognized the alum network but felt that it was not necessarily there in the ways that they needed it. Beth concluded, “I don't connect much with the alumni network that we have at [Future University], but I feel like there are plenty of opportunities, all the events that they email out.” She acknowledged that she doesn't take advantage of the events. However, she could not describe why she does not take advantage of them. She felt like there could be more intentionality to the connections and how the university might serve her as an alum. Beth only equated the alum network as the events and programs, and not the people that were a part of the community. After asking these questions that related to their network and the alum

community, the majority responded with what they hoped to see from the institution. Some of the responses related to what alums hoped for from the institution included

- An advisor that was specifically for recent graduates. Similar to the advisor that you might receive in college, it would be helpful for that to carry over to the first-year post-graduation. Some of the participants suggested this in the form of a career coach.
- Participants mentioned that, as students, you can take a college success course when you start college and they suggested a similar program for recent graduates. A non-credit course that recent graduates could enroll in for a year or so after graduation. The course could also provide a network or program to connect with other alums or guest speakers that assist alum after graduation.
- There should be an emphasis on articulating the goals for alums of the institution. Are alums a priority? Participants felt there was a disconnect between alums as a continued goal for their degree-granting institution and assumed their only focus was on current students.

I included these thoughts and suggestions because participants could not provide specific examples of how they viewed institutional support. Alums did not identify other alums or the alum community that assisted them along their journey. Again, my assumption as a researcher was that participants might describe a scenario or experience, but they did not. However, this factor could be attributed either to their first-generation status, their experience as a student, their experiences post-graduation, or to the institution itself. The last research question sought to understand how faculty and staff at Future University served first-generation alums.

Research Question 3: Institutional Agents Serving First-Generation Alums

The institutional agents that I talked with all came from a variety of backgrounds at the institution and supported first-generation students and alums both directly and indirectly. For those that directly assisted first-generation students, they identified more opportunities for the university to assist with the post-graduation transition. These individuals recognized that their priorities had been to assist students while they were students. They saw that there were greater opportunities for assistance post-graduation. A comment that stood out to me that embraced the experiences of first-generation students came from Bryson:

You know, first-gen don't know how to be a college student, they don't know what it's all about. And I think, similarly, when they graduate they don't know what it means to be an alum, what do I do, what does that mean. They don't know they have a network that they are a part of and that folks will be reaching out to communicate. And they don't know any of that.

He best summed up what a lot of the first-generation alums that I spoke with experienced. There was a similar comment from Brie, who felt like there was some fear or shame from first-generation alums of not knowing what they should know and potentially being too embarrassed to seek support. She also commented that when first-generation students graduate they may feel like their relationship with the university is done. The institutional agents described similar feelings from their students and how that carried over into future alums. There were several other themes that emerged from the institutional agents regarding what support existed and should exist for first-generation alums.

Changing First-Gen Mindsets

An overarching theme from the institutional agents was that first-generation college students need help in changing their personal mindsets and reframing their new educational experiences. That effort will further help them as a student and alum. Eva shared:

[Future University] really prides itself on helping students with upward mobility and a big piece of that is educating them [students] on navigating the new world, new space that they are occupying, owning that space, and helping them navigate the difficulty of being from a community you want to give back to. But how do you balance that, to maintain your own sense of self and your own accomplishments without going back into the poverty cycle.

Many of the alums mentioned their newfound sense of self and privilege by attending college, and Eva shared a need for helping students understand what it meant for their future and their personal goals. I recognized that throughout my conversations with the alums, alums described navigating different spaces or building the confidence to do what they perceived others doing that might be in different circumstances. In assisting first-generation alums, Bryson reflected that we:

Need to encourage first-gen grads to adopt this viewpoint that I've graduated from [Future University] and this is what I have to offer, this is what [FU] is all about. And it is different than any other university in the state. And these are the experiences I've had, and I can contribute to any work environment.

He thought that alums were proud of their education and degree. But he thought they also had to confidently state how Future University set them up for success for the future job or career they were pursuing. He also mentioned a scenario where students enroll in [other in-state private school]. Many of them said they expected that when they graduate, a door would be opened or

there would be opportunity. Those students thought that way from the beginning and it was indoctrinated into the system or the culture of the school. He then went on to say:

But for first-generation students at [Future University], it's hard to describe that to them, they think now I have this ticket to a job opportunity, but it's beyond that, it's changed you as a person, you have more of an appreciation, more knowledge that others might not have received at another university.

He thought that as an institution we have to say to graduates from Future University that they had a different experience than a student at another institution and that is a good thing. We have to encourage alums to use that experience to their advantage which wasn't something that he thought Future University students were always doing. We continuously have to build confidence in first-generation alums and highlight how it expands their opportunities in many different ways.

Jaqueline, who worked in advancement, described how staff within her field had to change the mindset of the university donors. She stated,

When I am talking to donors or prospects, I tend to think about first-generation students, and my mom and the struggles that she had. I try to make sure that although someone might have graduated from the business school, there are students in the business school that are first-gen and might not know about support. Some donors might have the privilege of going to college. But they don't know what our students are experiencing as they are going through college.

She described having one parent that did attend college, but then one parent who did not. So, she had personally experienced many of the challenges as first-generation students. She wanted to ensure that the donors were in touch with the realities of the student experience on campus. For

some of the individuals that gave back to Future University, their own experiences could be very different from a student experience. They needed to understand the needs of students. This is not only changing the mindsets of the first-generation alums but those that support and give back to the institution. Similar to the alums who discussed what they wanted to see from the institution in terms of support, the institutional agents also discussed what they thought that the university could provide to alums.

Additional Support

All of the institutional agents discussed how the university could and should provide more support for first-generation alums. Brie discussed that there were programs available to students while they are enrolled, which not every student may participate in. But she said, “it would greatly benefit our student population to have an office or department that mentors and helps students as they graduate.” I shared previously similar suggestions from the alums. Ideally the support would come from the alumni relations office or through a collaborative effort from the institution. But Brie didn’t see Future University as providing that support. She mentioned that Future University could do a better job of supporting alums within one to two years after they graduate. She felt like those were some of the most crucial years that alums are seeking support or assistance. Also, in regard to office support, Bryson thought that the alumni relations office tended to take more of a blanket approach to their connections with alums. He did not think alums would respond to this approach as excitedly versus if it was directly related to being a first-generation alum (or any other way that the alum most closely identifies). Erica also thought that as an institution Future University acknowledged that the experience is different for first-generation students– which might be different from a “traditional” student. She recognized that providing resources for first-generation alums was important. But she asked herself in the

interview, “how often do we check on students after graduation, what kind of questions are we asking them, are we asking them if they are enjoying their job, did they negotiate their salary?” She highlighted several questions that we should be asking alums once they graduated. She thought this could be done through a specific person, coach, or advisor. Many of the alums and institutional agents also mentioned that this approach would be beneficial.

There was a general consensus that Future University could be doing more as students graduate, and specifically for first-generation alums. But I gathered that so much of their time was focused on the time while students were students. Eva shared that she had strengthened her relationship with the career center more recently in order to provide more content around what it looks like to be a first-generation alum and professional. While thinking about additional institutional support, the institutional agents also mentioned specific programs or resources that could be provided like mentorship and career advice.

Mentorship

The topic of mentorship was valuable to several of the institutional agents. Eva and Erica wanted to build mentoring relationships that would last well after graduation for first-generation students. Erica spent time brainstorming a potential program that would combine a multi-tiered mentorship program. This would be for those that identified as first-generation, as students and alums. She offered that the services could include topics related to landing a job, figuring out life, and building connections among a network. Brie also mentioned that she felt that for most first-generation alums, they often want to provide direct support to students like them, to be role models, and be examples for all that is possible. They could serve as mentors. Bryson reflected on his own experience as a Hispanic, first-generation college student and alum. He noted how he really enjoyed his college experience and was on scholarship during his time in college. It

encouraged him to want to give back to the next student that was on scholarship. As a first-generation alum, he felt a responsibility to give a little bit back to his institution and to future students. However, mentoring did not come up throughout the interviews from the majority of participants. One mentioned a specific online platform that she utilized and a mentorship program that was facilitated out of an alum organization that could be valuable to first-generation alums. She did not mention how either of those had helped her but that they were seemingly valuable programs. I did not ask any of the alums about specific mentors in their lives but that could have been a valuable aspect to discovering their network. Since career connections came up frequently for alums, institutional agents also mentioned that there was a need for support for alums who are attempting to find a job.

Career Connections (Part 2)

The institutional agents brought up that first-generation alums were in school to get a job but needed the support to make those connections and find careers that aligned with their skills. They mentioned job related concerns for alums. Eva said:

There was an article or two that just came out within the past six months that said first-gen graduates are getting lower paid jobs out of college. And I believe it said it takes them longer to find jobs. I notice it within my own students that they undershoot and when the graduate they don't necessarily recognize their own potential or leverage their newfound privilege as a college degree holder to get a job that they are qualified for.

[Thus] we are partnering with the Career Center to see how we can help students who are transitioning out of college.

This suggestion above was similar to some of the statements from many of the participants.

There was a lack of confidence or knowledge as they pursued life after graduation. I described

that previously from an alum who shared that they did not think they had the right to talk to a leader of a Fortune 500 company. Several alums said they just needed to find a job, thus they could not think as much about weighing options. Eva described the lack of confidence or mindset as negatively influencing first-generation alums' decisions post-graduation. Again, first-generation alums had to change their mindsets to know that they had the skills and abilities to find a career that fit their strengths. Erica thought the institution could be more intentional about tracking the job placement of first-generation alums. Subsequently, it then could provide timely check-ins to see how alums were doing, how they were liking things, and if they felt prepared going into their new job. I mentioned this previously as an additional piece of institutional support. As Bryson said, first-generation students see college as their ticket to get a job. But they did not necessarily see the bigger picture of what that might imply for themselves or their families. There could be new doors and new opportunities that first-generation alums have available because of their degree from Future University. Alums, faculty, and staff alike were concerned about job security, prospects, and preparation that are potentially available to them after graduation.

The Value of their Education

Finally, I think it is important to report that all of the alums that I interviewed were thoughtful and reflective of the meaning of their education as it spanned a lifetime. As alums described their college experience, they were largely satisfied with their experience and journey. Alums reflected on the value of their education over a lifetime, their comments included:

- “It helped me develop critical thinking skills.”
- “The value of my education has increased over my lifetime.”
- “I learned so much from the experience itself and from [Future University].”

- “I came to the best college for me.”
- “It has been invaluable; I wouldn’t be here without those experiences.”
- “It prepared me but also made me curious about other things.”
- “I appreciate the camaraderie between alums.”
- “I feel like I owe everything to [Future University].”
- “My education got me the job but what I learned allowed me to advance.”
- “It exposed me to new people.”
- “I am so glad it was somewhere like [Future University] with such a diverse student body.”
- “Because I have a bachelor’s degree, I can build from there.”

These quotes are important to highlight because they reflect their overall satisfaction and experience with their education. The findings described alums not feeling completely engaged or supported but that did not impact their feeling that the education they received was something that changed them forever. Although they experienced many unknowns and often doubted themselves, they still thought it was all worth it. They commonly expressed that the experiences, successes, and challenges have all been a part of their greater journey as a first-generation student, and now alum.

Conclusion

This chapter included a more in-depth biographical description of the participants from the study as well as the conclusions drawn from the interviews. The use of interviews with first-generation alums and institutional agents provided the opportunity to learn from the participants on their perceptions and experiences of alum engagement. Most participants reported both that they could have benefitted from more support from their degree-granting institution and that they

may not always recognize the value of their alum network. They had hoped that the institution could have provided more information about the potential benefits of the alum network. As the majority of participants were alums of color, a few of them described how they navigated predominantly White spaces at the university and they also acknowledged that others were going through similar experiences. The similar experiences impacted their post-graduation life. They experienced many firsts and faced many unknowns throughout college and after graduation but their identity as first-generation was important to their experience and to their attempts at finding community.

Alums described their lack of support and how they wished there had been additional career connections. They presented ideas of how the institution could have provided more support after graduation. Many could not see if and how the university had supported them at all. They also reflected that they wanted to connect with alums now. However, they also acknowledged that they wished someone had connected with them while they were a student. There was a big emphasis on their lack of knowledge, with several stating, “I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” There was a general lack of awareness regarding what was available for them.

A major finding was that alums did not see their alum network as a source of social capital. There were several areas of improvement that participants mentioned, especially as it related to career connections or direct support after graduation. In addition, those alums that had gotten more involved, recognized that there were more opportunities at their fingertips than they had utilized. They also asked why more alums were not taking advantage of the opportunities. However, they conceded that a major barrier was having to seek out those opportunities yourself. There were significant differences in the perceptions and experiences of the alums based on how involved they had gotten after graduation.

Alums were proud of their identity. And as a first-generation alum, they wanted to pay it forward to future students. In all, alums were grateful for all of their experiences at Future University, sharing that it brought them to where they are today and how it contributed to their individual growth and development.

In the next chapter, I will expand on the recommendations that alums described and provide additional future recommendations and conclusions.

Chapter 5

IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The 2018 Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey concluded that only a small percentage of alums reported that neither other alums nor their alum network was helpful to them after their graduation. The participants from this study also shared that they did not see how the university or alum network supported them post-graduation. The result was due, in large part, to a lack of knowledge regarding what services were available to them, as well as a lack of awareness on what alums actually needed from their network and a concern that alums had to be the initiators of alum engagement. Previous research focused on how alums intended to give back to the university monetarily. But there had not been significant research into the benefits of the alum network and their use of the alum network post-graduation, particularly for first-generation students.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand the experiences of first-generation alums; how they described their alum network; and the relationship and their experiences with their degree granting institution post-graduation. By conducting a qualitative research study that included interviewing 23 first-generation alums and five institutional agents, convening a focus group, and gathering artifacts from first-generation alums, this study was able to better understand how first-generation alums related to their school whether it remained a valuable part of their lives after graduation.

The focus was on first-generation alums because literature has highlighted that institutions of higher education are continuing to become more diverse. Furthermore, the number of first-generation college students has been steadily increasing over the years (Ward, 2013; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Stebleton et. al, 2014). The data gathered from the participants in this

study, who were all first-generation alums and primarily alums of color, provided perspectives that will allow colleges and universities to assess the ways in which alums might not feel a sense of capital, community, or network post-graduation. Historically, institutions of higher education have not focused on the needs of our students of color, as the beginnings of higher education were rooted in the education of the privileged, majority, who were serving White men.

The most significant findings of the current study revealed the experiences and insights from first-generation alums, the majority of whom were Black/African American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latine alums. The results highlighted their lived experiences pre- and post-graduation. This study also explored in the focus of institutions of higher education, specifically on how they are serving, retaining, and supporting students of color. It also added to the growing research on diversity in higher education, the alum experience and the understanding of capital. This study highlighted specific ways in which alums saw the university playing a role in their success as well as areas for improvement. This chapter begins by including a summary of the findings and from those findings what institutions may implement within practice. Finally, I highlight recommendations for future research and conclusions.

Summary of Findings

This study centered the experiences of first-generation alums. The participants acknowledged that they had a positive experience at Future University, maintained friendships and connections in some way to the university, but rarely acknowledged other alums, the alum network, or the institution playing a direct role in their life after graduation. In agreement with the alum survey that was conducted, alums rarely saw value of their alum network or other alums post-graduation (Gallup, 2018). The participants supported the literature findings that alums who were more involved and aware of the opportunities described a level of engagement that was: more cognizant of the connection; their commitment to the institution; and, finally, their sense of fulfillment with the institution (Fleming, 2019). There were several other important conclusions from this study. These included a general lack of knowledge or support from alums with the alum community. Alums felt that there needed to be specific access to things like career exploration and networking. They did not understand how the definition of a network applied to engagement. Alums celebrated their first-generation identity. However, they also recognized that there were many unknowns regarding their understanding of the alum network, and its potential in providing direct benefits to help them.

Key Finding #1: The First-Generation Identity

The identity of a first-generation alum was an important component to this study. At times, some of the participants reflected on the importance of their first-generation identity more than others. But mostly, all recognized that it was a part of their identity, was important to their experience, and would continue to be important to their journey. The feeling of pride for first-generation students was shared often throughout the literature. Participants shared similar sentiments and expressed that they were extremely proud of all that they had accomplished

(Olson, 2014; Gillen O'Neel, 2019). First-generation college students were especially resourceful, resilient, and independent because of their first-generation status; not in spite of it (Olson, 2014). One participating alum described that she understood more of her actions and behaviors at college looking back were because of her identity as first-generation.

Alums acknowledged that their goals were to have more opportunities or to achieve more for themselves and their families. This was similarly described by Blackwell and Pinder (2014) in the discussion of first-generation students' determination to have a better life. In the present study, participants described feelings of wanting to do things that their family members may not have had the opportunity to do. They wished to leave a legacy for those following in their footsteps. Alums reflected on their new-found privilege by attending an institution of higher education, which was a similar trait shared throughout the literature (Olson, 2014). Also, alums shared some unconfident feelings, such as not knowing what they were supposed to do, feeling like it was all on themselves, or experiencing impostership. These feelings were almost contradictory to their feelings of pride. As Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) argued, first-generation students had to balance their independence with the interdependence of being a part of a college community. Although they experienced the independence and pride of doing college on their own, they struggled to realize that they may need to reach out to others and find a community that would assist them throughout college.

Previous research shared that first-generation students thought they were isolated throughout college; many of the alums also felt it was all on them and they had to do it alone (Olson, 2014). I think a similar feeling carried over into their life after graduation. Alums faced a balancing act as they walked through higher education and maintained the relationships with

their families and homelife; and also, as they embraced the new opportunities at their fingertips and created community (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016).

Alums shared that they experienced college differently than their peers. Commonly seen in the literature were disparities and differences between the first-generation and continuing-generation student experiences. Researchers often cited that continuing-generation students had others to ask advice or questions of during college and after (Schwartz et al., 2018). Although the alums described the strong connections with their families, they also regretted not being able to go to their families, or cutting their families out, so they could deal with challenges themselves. They reflected on how their first-generation status not only impacted their experience but how it highlighted that they might have had a vastly different experience than some of their peers. This alluded to the fact that some of these differences could continue post-graduation. The personal reflections from alums of their first-generation identity framed their experiences as they navigated finding jobs or simply discovering what was next.

Key Finding #2: We Don't Know What's Available

The second finding concluded that participants lacked a general understanding of what was available to them as alums either from the university or from the alum community. Many mentioned not understanding what the alumni office provided or that they did not see an intentional connection to their specific areas of interests or needs. They did not see direct support and when they sought it out, they did not receive anything in return. Their observations supported the literature regarding engagement of first-generation students, it was not that they did not want to be engaged but rather because they were not aware or knowledgeable about the benefits of engaging in such behaviors while in college (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Because

alums were not aware or knowledgeable about the benefits or opportunities, they often did not take advantage of them.

The institutional agents also reflected on first-generation alums, reporting that they may not realize how or why the university might want to stay connected to them post-graduation. For first-generation alums, staying connected after graduation or utilizing other alums was foreign to them. It could have been because they did not have other family members that had been through similar experiences or because no one shared why it might be beneficial to them.

Participants also discussed the idea that they had to tackle college and life after graduation on their own. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) found that first-generation students had “an individualistic mindset, in that they felt alone and responsible for their fate (p. 258).” Since they did not have family members they could ask questions of or reach out to, many described that they forged on their own and sought out their own opportunities. But this observation also supported the literature on some alum behaviors with their degree-granting institutions. Gallo (2013) also found that alums tended to forge ahead and not turn back to their university for support. Thus, they were completing life on their own terms and not thinking about their institution as a means of support.

Key Finding #3: Awareness of the Alum Network Potential

Social capital theory was utilized in this study to discuss aspects of the community, and in this specific study, the alum community. In order to get to their individual understanding of social capital, one of the interview questions asked each participant to describe their definition of a network. This is a term used in conjunction with social capital to describe those within and outside of someone’s circle of influence (Lin, 1999). Participants could easily define a network, many describing it as differing relationships, access to people or resources, or opportunities for

mutual benefit. The combination of resources, support systems, networks, and people were a few of the descriptors and terms also used to define social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, participants had a difficult time describing their alum network. Within this study, the alum network was perceived to this researcher as the resources, support systems, and people who played a role in their lives after graduation. This connected to the community cultural wealth model, which believed individuals were able to draw upon their own strengths and their own social capital in order to succeed in education and beyond (Gardner & Holley, 2012, Yosso, 2005).

Many of the participants described friendships or relationships that were built from the common connection to Future University. Key literature discussed the importance of students forming campus-affiliated relationships, such as formal and informal mentors, and connecting with peers, faculty, or staff. Those relational networks were beneficial to their academic and personal success as students (Havlik et al., 2020). The ability to connect with others and create a community made students feel comfortable and confident while they were students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Most of the participants shared similar feelings regarding their community and the people that were a part of their lives because of Future University. Prior research also suggested that interactions with peers and others while in college positively influenced the overall college experience. Furthermore, those interactions built upon an accumulation of people and resources that helped an individual succeed (Wittner et al., 2020).

Although it was not mentioned by the alums very often, institutional agents discussed the importance of mentorships. They described intentional mentorship opportunities that followed students after graduation which could come from an alum or industry leader. Research stated that students who had built relationships, like formal and informal mentors or with peers, faculty, or

staff found that those relational networks were beneficial to their successes as students. I assumed that those same factors would translate to their success post-graduation (Havlik et al., 2020), as people and resources could be beneficial to their continued professional growth. However; alums from this study did not describe similar communities' post-graduation that contributed to their success.

Participants in this study rarely mentioned that the alum community had led to an important connection or provided them with some form of capital or inherent access to a network. They did mention that peers, friends, and family were supportive. As they each defined a network, they were aware of the network but never really thought about it as an acquired sense of capital. This result was unlike the research on first-generation students who described their experience with cultural and social capital. Those students reported that they believed that if they utilized their sense of capital it promoted social mobility (Lane & Taber, 2012). But the same feeling was not expressed from the majority of participants in this study because they had not utilized their social capital. Alums from this study did not often consider the accumulation of resources after graduation. They did not necessarily equate their alum community to a new-found sense of capital that might be a benefit to them in the short or long term. I also discussed community cultural wealth throughout the literature. Although I did not specifically ask about community cultural wealth throughout the interviews, it was interesting to see how it came up among some of the conversations and reflections.

The community cultural wealth model defined how first-generation students of color drew upon their own strengths, their ability to navigate social institutions, their legacy of resistance, and their own social capital in order to succeed in education and beyond (Gardner & Holley, 2012; Yosso, 2005). One alum saw her first-generation community providing her with

future opportunities, like job opportunities. Other alums talked about how their individual communities supported their growth. Alums described their ability to utilize capital within the community cultural wealth model, finding support or motivation within their own communities. However, they also conveyed that they were having difficulty navigating different spaces in order to build the network that they thought would be beneficial for their career trajectory. The concepts of capital that I brought up in the literature were not ones that the alums had originally thought of. However; when they started to describe some of their experiences, I saw how their definitions and concepts of capital were evident. Thus, I pondered on the central challenge of this subject: how do we help first-generation alums understand that their acquired capital could be a potential benefit and resource?

Key Finding #4: Direct Benefits are Essential

The last key finding found that participants wanted to see more direct benefits from their university that would assist them after graduation. This support could be in a variety of ways. But alums most specifically emphasized that they sought more direct support towards navigating the job search process. Whereas some alums had jobs lined up prior to graduation, for the majority that was not the case. They wanted to see that the university was providing more direct connections to jobs. Alums felt that it was the responsibility of the institution. But, it was interesting that they did not see the institution or the alum community directly helping them if they were having trouble actually securing a job. Apparently, they did conclude that this was their own responsibility.

The institutional agents also suggested that the university do more to prepare students for their first job. Schwartz et al. found that the development of skills and attitudes empowered students to see the importance of social capital and then increased their likelihood to seek

support (2018). More skill building and information sharing would help students transition into full-time jobs and would increase their understanding of social capital, and connect social capital to future career accessibility (Lane & Taber, 2012). They also suggested that the university should provide systematic check-ins after graduation. This suggestion confirmed the Gallup (2014) survey that was conducted, which concluded that the most valuable to graduates was help from the institution in locating connections to jobs (Bowen et al., 2005). The survey revealed that alums wanted to experience the benefits of attending college that extended beyond the college experience. However, this assumption was not always evident in the post-graduation interactions of the alums. Some of them also expressed that they wished the institution had reached out more post-graduation. Their feeling was that the only contact from the university had been when they were asking for money.

Participants described positive experiences with Future University. However, they were then most interested in determining how the university could directly help them in finding jobs. The research cited that first-generation students utilized similar job search strategies as their non-first-generation peers (Eismann, 2016). However, the participants in this study specifically highlighted that they did not feel like they had the same job opportunities presented to them (as their continuing-generation peers) and they wanted more engagement with the institution in providing career connections. Though alums took advantage of different resources or job search strategies, they had to make the most important career connections themselves.

The key findings from this study highlighted the perceived engagement by alums. In addition, it also revealed how alums and institutional agents had a difficult time describing engagement with the institution. More often than not, alums brought up how the university

should engage more with them post-graduation. These questions have important implications for alum organizations as they plan for the success of first-generation alums.

Implications for Practice

The following section addresses the actions and strategies that institutions should consider when providing support to first-generation alums. The conclusions and recommendations are based on the literature gathered and the data from this study. Many of these recommendations could apply to the entire alum population, no matter their first-generation status. But an important finding from the study highlighted that institutions need to consider individual needs of alums. The intersectional identities of the alum's centers on their experiences and frames how they view and experience life. For example, participants racial or ethnic identity from the focus group was threaded throughout more of their experiences. But their identity also represented their age, if they were parents at the time that they enrolled in college, where they were from, their family history and so much more. The pieces that they highlighted about themselves contributed to their identity. I considered it important to highlight first-generation alums' experiences, knowing that they could be vastly different from those of their peers who were not first-generation alums. I also thought it was important to highlight the success and challenges that they might face post-graduation.

It is important to note that these recommendations are defined by the context of the site and individuals from this specific research study. Qualitative research is not to be generalized to entire communities or populations. They represent the views only from the individuals in this study. Thus, they hopefully assist in helping to corroborate, modify, or reject the theoretical concepts. And, they may also help develop new concepts related to the research questions and topic (Yin, 2018). The feelings from first-generation alums, like navigating the unknown, the

lack of support or the feeling of being alone could be felt by first-generation alums no matter the institution. Although institutions of higher education are each unique in their own right, the information gathered from participants at Future University could be used to inform the work that supports alums. I described how my own work within the field led me to this area of research and I can utilize these findings as a way to provide research-informed decisions regarding alum engagement. The findings and experiences shared by the participants contributed to the growing amount of literature related to first-generation alums. The implications shared will help inform how units or departments approach their work with first-generation students and alums as well as inform the research related to alum engagement.

Units within Higher Education that Support Students and Alums

In general, there could be important improvements in the ways that institutions of higher education approach their work with alums– and specifically first-generation alums. I found that there were several areas that could be improved as organizations and offices think about their work and how they can better understand that the alum community is a source of support to the individual and the university.

There are two units within higher education that specifically come to mind that could increase and grow their efforts to support first-generation students and alums. In the next section I have broken down these relationships between development and alumni relations, and student affairs or student services. These recommendations are based on my understanding from the role as an alum support officer at my university. I could easily project that there could be additional offices that support first-generation initiatives. However, these would look vastly different at differing institutions. The recommendations below are how Future University could improve connections with students and alums.

Division of Development and Alumni Relations

The first area is the department that works to directly support and engage the alum community. As mentioned in the literature, advancement offices are charged with engaging constituents in supporting the institution as well as providing meaningful connections to constituents. In this case, those constituents are alums. In the interviews, alums were specifically asked about their perceived engagement with their degree-granting institution, informing my recommendations. Previously, I explained how CASE defined alum engagement which was through the buckets of awareness, experiential, volunteerism, and giving. My first recommendation would be to reevaluate how alum engagement is defined. Based on the findings from this study, a major flaw of the current engagement model is that it does not consider what engagement means to the alum. I believe this is an important recommendation as it is shaping how universities across the country are measuring engagement with their alum communities.

Update the Definition of Alum Engagement. Throughout the literature, I shared that engagement was defined in buckets of awareness, experiential, volunteerism, and giving; but for many of the participants and from my analysis, the alums' experiences did not clearly always fall into one of those buckets (CASE, 2018). In many instances, I could have placed some of the experiences that were shared within the identified buckets. But I do not think that truly approached engagement from the alum perspective. For example, most of the emphasis is on what alums are doing for us (as institutions of higher education). Current engagement metrics reiterate what the alum is doing for us as an institution. But they do not provide adequate insight into what we are doing for them. The focus is only on how alums engage with the content provided by offices of alumni relations. Current efforts focus on how the university engages with social media, increases event volunteering, or attendance at events. Other efforts relate to how to

get alums to give back financially. But there is less of an emphasis on what engagement looks like through the eyes of alums. For example, are they meeting other people, forming relationships, learning anything about an industry or professional path, discovering resources, or finding help through either the institution or from other people?

My recommendation would consider an additional outcome or engagement bucket for universities. This additional bucket could potentially be titled “Impact” or it could involve the term “Capital.” As a way to specify the type of capital, the term “Alumni Capital” could be utilized, which was used by Gallo (2020) as a way to describe the people, knowledge, and resources that are shared among alums from an institution. This bucket would include more of the transformational elements of the relationship with alums post-graduation, versus only considering what the alum might be doing for the institution. This bucket would also include outcomes related to job acquisition, readiness for the “real world,” or satisfaction one to two years after graduation. This could also include descriptions of the relationships alums have made and how that impacted their lives. Another outcome related to this new bucket could be an alums' sense of belonging once they have graduated. This could include if the alums were confident and prepared as they took their steps after graduation and found a community that supported their career and personal journeys. If the definition of engagement included these types of outcomes, I think alums would have more of a natural connection to their institution, thus producing a better understanding of how they might engage. Another recommendation is to consider a specific office or sub-office for first-generation alums.

Consider a First-Generation Organization or Specific Programming. Findings from this study indicated that participants would have liked to see opportunities that specifically connected with their needs and identities as first-generation alums. Throughout the literature,

many institutions found a need for affinity groups to connect with alums and allow alums to affiliate with organizations based on how they identify. This was reiterated by the participants in this study.

Within an organized chapter or council, alums could get involved and provide programming or opportunities that fit their interests and needs. This type of organization could also be a pipeline from the student experience. A few of the more recent graduates shared specific programming that was provided to them as first-generation students through either an office or a student organization. For those that may have been involved in the first-generation student organization, there could be a more intentional transition to the alum community from the student organization. There could be an official ceremony as students are graduating to welcome them to the organization as alums, automatically connecting them to the organization. There could also be an official event a few weeks after graduation, sharing that they are now affiliated with this alum organization and how it can be a continued resource. I think if there is an automatic way for students to hear from the organization, it would help facilitate that communication as they transition to alums, and then the alums can choose whether or not they want to continue hearing from the organization. Having a shared-identity community allows them to feel like they have a safe space to ask questions and get advice from others that might be going through the same thing.

Alums also explained that they wanted to share their own experiences with other students. I think they would enjoy sharing their experiences with others, both the good and the bad. But it might also be a source of motivation to others. If a specific organization for first-generation alums existed after graduation, it could also provide easier connections from student to alum. Additionally, through this organized effort, programming and events could highlighted

the needs of the first-generation population. This effort does not have to be through an official group. But if specific staff members were tasked with providing programming, resources, and support for specific populations, they could work with first-generation alums to provide events and connections that make sense within the first-generation population.

At Future University, there was already an office that existed for first-generation students on-campus. This office could be further utilized to create a more formal transition as students became alums. This transition could include an introduction to the staff, information about support and resources, and identification of affinity groups. There could be a more official “handing off” of students so there is a built-in connection and understanding that the network continues after graduation.

Encourage Displays of First-Generation Status. In this study, alums described how they identified as a first-generation alum. They shared how it was an important part of their life. However, they also expressed the view that it did not come up often in professional or personal scenarios, or it was not something that they thought of regularly. I would advocate for more opportunities for alums to showcase and display their pride. For example, some schools have a first-generation graphic or emblem that students can proudly display and many alums shared that they received a pin that they could wear on their graduation robes. Those same graphics could be made into an electronic file that alums could add to their *LinkedIn* profiles or email signatures. I believe this would create an easier way for alums to connect with each other and with students. Additionally, this did not necessarily come up from the participants, but these visual displays could also be used as a form of student recruitment. Future students would be able to see visual displays of pride and affiliation which might make them feel more connected to the institution. As storytellers within the advancement field, we often want to share alum profiles in emails, on

social media or in a university magazine. These physical displays of their status as first-generation is another way to showcase pride and build community.

Highlight Alum to Alum Connections. Within this study, I wanted to highlight the alum to alum connection. However, that actually did not display itself as something meaningful to the participants. I still believe there is value to connecting with alums and utilizing the community as a form of social and cultural capital and community cultural wealth. For example, I described this in my own personal experiences, how my fellow alums connected me with job opportunities but also gave me the sense that I could contact them at any time just because we attended the same institution. As prior research stated, when students form supportive relationships while they are students, those relationships could provide a sense of support after graduation and are a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Havlik et al., 2020). Alum networks can sustain social capital by providing organizations, social, and informal activities that provide value to individual alums (Hall, 2010). But they can also utilize the networks, community resources, and acquire social capital that exist from their own communities (Yosso, 2005).

Moving forward, there could be more marketing and storytelling around the alum-to-alum connection. Offices could highlight the relationships or connections that alums have made with other alums that have been beneficial to them. It seems that institutions rarely highlight those relationships, often sharing more about the relationship with students or even an alums' continued connection with a faculty or staff member on campus. There could be a greater impact regarding the alum community if more meaningful stories were highlighted between alums, supporting the goal of engaging and the intrinsic benefits of social capital.

Collect Accurate Data. It is important to track how alums identify in the official database of the alumni office. This information could either be self-identified or carried over

from the student experience. This is not only important for accurate record keeping but also to personalize the alum experience, making it easier to share events or opportunities that closely align with their identity and interests. A formalized process would need to be developed to ensure that alums were being acknowledged as first-generation, and that they were receiving information based on how they identify. Without that information, it is much harder to send targeted information to meet alums' individual needs.

Education and Awareness of the Alum Population. Finally, one institutional agent shared that she educated the donor population on the current student population, who they are, and what they need. In this recommendation, I think it is important that education occurs for those that are employed in the department. Although they are employees of the institution, if they are not interacting with the student population regularly, they may not feel knowledgeable about who the students are. Based on the student population, advancement professionals should become more aware of what alums need and how their needs might vary depending on experiences and backgrounds. As Erica shared during her interview, “It's important to provide equitable services and for different populations that could look differently.” We cannot approach our work as a one-size fits all model or in a way that assumes everyone needs the same thing. We have to spend time educating ourselves and others regarding the populations that we are serving from the institution. This could mean consistently connecting with campus partners to learn more about the campus climate or student trends so that it might be shared with staff in the advancement unit. It could also mean completing regular professional development to stay current with trends in the field. Next, I discuss more of the implications for the student affairs and student services units.

Division of Student Affairs or Student Services

There were a few areas situated within the student space that I would recommend to support first-generation alums. While they are students, institutions provide opportunities both within and beyond the classroom to support a holistic college experience. These experiences could be adapted to educate students more about the alum experience or to support alums.

Build Alum Connections into the Model for Student Engagement. The first recommendation influenced how higher education define student engagement. I went back to review definitions of student engagement. Within the field, notable student affairs practitioner George Kuh (2009) developed a model for college student engagement. He referenced several opportunities for students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. These experiences highlighted connecting with faculty and student contacts, peer interactions, experiences with diversity, co-curricular activities, and student satisfaction (Kuh, 2009). And more recent research (Museus, 2014) has developed a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment model for student engagement and success. This model suggested that external factors, pre-college characteristics, individual influences, and culturally engaging campus environments shape student engagement and college success (Museus, 2014). Thus, I would encourage that these models incorporate the relationships that could be developed with alums, as well as the knowledge that could be shared via alums to students. Kuh (2009) emphasized the importance of student-faculty relationships. And Museus (2014) emphasized how culturally validating environments supported students, indicating that student interactions with alums who had similar experiences and backgrounds could assist those students as they persist and complete college. This supports a previous study that suggested, if we are able to challenge the systems that exist and incorporate new understandings, we can empower students and others to access and utilize social capital (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). A more robust engagement model will help to

emphasize that being a part of a group, making connections, and accessing networks aids in creating social and cultural capital that you acquire throughout college and can continue to utilize. As one participant described, the more robust the social capital as a student the more confident you will be in your career and post-graduation. As this study did not review student engagement theories, this idea only touches the surface. But I believe there could be further exploration into how the models on student engagement are incorporating alum relationships.

Plan and Implement Intentional Career Services. Next, many of the participants mentioned throughout their interview the need for a dedicated staff member that contacted them after graduation who served as a career coach or advisor. Alums were searching for additional help that they could utilize as they sought good jobs. By having a dedicated career advisor, the relationship with the alum might be more positive. In addition, the alum would feel as though they had more direct support with the university. Currently at Future University, the central career services office for students provides support for alums one year after graduation. The School of Business and College of Engineering had their own dedicated career services offices that provided lifelong career support. I did not investigate the usage of both of these offices by alums after graduation. I believe it would be helpful to gather those numbers in order to argue and justify the need for a dedicated career advisor. However, I recommend there could still be an increase in the number of career advisors available to provide one-on-one support. There could also be more of an effort to frequently highlight that alums have access to career services after graduation. At some institutions, career services offices work in concert with alumni relations to serve students and alums. This, to me, provided more intentional awareness that the services were available after graduation. The alums from this study consistently mentioned how they wanted to see the one-on-one, direct help related to the job search process.

There was an existing partnership between alumni relations and career services at Future University. They assisted each other in supporting a virtual platform that was for students and alums to connect with one another. The main career office showcased job opportunities on the alumni office website. They also tried to highlight employers that were alums and cross promote events that might be of interest to the student and alum population. However, there could be more opportunities for collaboration. For example, if the career services office is hosting one-on-one meetings with students or career fairs, they could also share how students might connect back to the institution as an alum, what it means to be an alum, what resources are available, and how the institution continues to be a means of support. Alums could use more one-on-one coaching on topics like resumes writing or interview but neither office was equipped to provide that direct staffing assistance. In general, students could use more dialogue from the career services office on the alum experience.

Alums also shared that they sought direct connections with employers and jobs. These could have been done through employer meet and greet events or industry nights to get to know certain companies and leaders. Typically, career services provide these types of programs and opportunities only to students. But they could be expanded to include alums. There could be separate opportunities for students and alums. If alums were included, not only would they potentially benefit from the networking opportunities but they could also be used as a resource. Alums often talked about wanting to give back to other first-generation students, giving back social capital to those following in their footsteps. These are just two examples of how offices can support each other and create a way for alums to feel more supported after graduation.

I believe the suggestions noted above could create a more unified and tailored approach to share the alum connection and how students and alums might continue to seek out support

from the office. In general, I think it was clear that both offices had competing priorities in terms of who they serve, students or alums. There was consensus from the institutional agents that they wanted to provide more support to their students after graduation. Based on their comments, they emphasized the preparation needed prior to graduation and the continued interaction post-graduation.

Expand National First-Generation College Celebration. The National First-Generation celebration was created in 2017 as a way for colleges, universities, corporations, non-profits, and K-12 schools to celebrate the success of first-generation college students, faculty, staff, and alumni (NASPA, 2023). November 8 was selected as the annual date to celebrate students, faculty, staff and alums. This is the anniversary of the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (NASPA, 2023). Future University has grown the celebration into a week-long series of events. The office coordinating the events had partnered with alumni relations to provide opportunities for students to network with alums. The week of celebrations could build more opportunities to create meaningful connections between students and alums. Alums shared that they wanted to be a resource to current students. There could be additional panels, profiles of alums, or opportunities for students to connect online with alums during the week. This could also assist in helping students expand their knowledge and awareness regarding what they can expect as an alum, and how they might utilize the university; when they get to see alums coming back to campus or speaking with them directly.

Encourage Personal Connections with Alums. There should be significantly more interactions between alumni relations and the student body. It is important that the alumni relations messaging and interaction starts when a student first arrives on campus– if not before. Students could be introduced to alumni relations and the alum community the first day they step

on campus or during the Admissions or Orientation process. This could be done through alum panelists or attendance during Admissions events, like receptions or open houses. Future University piloted an opportunity for alums to write letters to prospective students to encourage them to pick the university. During orientation, the alum office could provide an official welcome describing what it means to create a lifelong connection to the institution. They could also highlight the student alumni organization and explain how students can get involved and participate in events. When students are introduced early, they will begin to weave the understanding throughout their entire college journey. This can be even more pertinent to first-generation students who might have never seen or heard of the alum connection previously. This was constantly articulated by the alums throughout the study. They felt they had a lack of understanding or awareness regarding alum engagement. If we are able to incorporate messaging as early as possible, I think it would help build a better understanding of alum engagement. Students have to be informed about how they can maintain their connection to the institution and why that might be beneficial to them. Many of the participants described that they did not realize or didn't know how they could stay connected with the institution. As first-generation students faced many unknowns as they entered college, there were similar unknowns as they graduated and connected with the institution post-graduation.

There was a knowledge gap between alum awareness and the expectations of the institution post-graduation. Awareness and education could also be facilitated through interactions with other students. Students could have more interactions with the student alumni association, by seeing alum relations supporting campus-wide initiatives, or by more direct interactions with alums at the school, college, or department level. I think this leads to the need for more buy-in from faculty and staff to share how there is a lifelong connection with the

university, and how that connection might be beneficial. For example, students in their last semester could take a Capstone or senior-year course. That professor could include a lesson plan regarding life after graduation and continued resources. There are so many individuals on campus that interact with students. And I believe we all have to believe that this is important to the overall success at the institution. In many ways, the awareness building cannot solely rely on alumni relations.

It was clear that those alums who had made personal connections with faculty, staff, or other alums had a very different perspective than those that did not. They were able to build relationships that transcended the institution. It would be important to encourage students to make a connection. In those first few years after graduation it can be the most critical and helpful. These connections can serve as a resource and support, and they also show the value of what a connection or network can do for you in the short and long-term. Connections with alums could be facilitated by the university through mentoring or networking events. But they could also be through online initiatives like *LinkedIn* or other platforms that might be specific to the institution. Connections could also be developed within the classroom or student organizations. Faculty or staff could encourage students to make a connection with an alum as a class assignment or as a part of a leadership requirement.

It could be very valuable for alums to share their experiences and perspectives with current students, to be a guide, mentor, or resource. However, this does not always have to be in the form of a mentor. Formal mentorship can often be a big undertaking. Often, formal mentoring includes training that prepared someone to serve as a mentor as well as for the student to understand what a mentor/mentee relationship may look like. If we are able to connect students to alums, it would hopefully be valuable to them, as it showcases how alums continued

to stay connected. The connections that students build while they are attending classes potentially assists in helping future alums realize the potential connections they could make post-graduation.

Teach Students about Social Capital

Last, we should talk about social capital. It is not a term that is foreign to people, however; it is probably not something that is discussed often. Alums talked some about their friends or faculty that they utilized as a form of capital. But they did not think about all the people that were part of their network that could be a form of support. As institutions, we can share what it means to have social capital and how we might utilize that capital in the form of relationships with and between alums. We should also talk about what it means to have capital within one's own community, like the community cultural wealth model, and how we might access capital within the communities in which we identify. I think for some of the alums there might have been a hesitancy to access their forms of capital because they didn't have it all figured out and they felt like it was their own responsibility.

I shared a few of the practical ideas and implications that could be implemented at the institutional level to ensure that first-generation alums are finding a more intentional trajectory into the alum community. The alums themselves often mentioned some of these recommendations within their interviews. These recommendations were divided among the two units and included a more thorough examination of the current services provided to students and alums. Some were at the more theoretical and philosophical foundation; some that were more tangible ideas and program suggestions. Overall, a theme related to the recommendations encouraged a more thoughtful partnership across campus so students can continue to see a future

with the university after graduation. Next, I provide recommendations for additional future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research could be conducted in regards to alum engagement and alum connections post-graduation, specifically with identified populations like first-generation alums. First, since I was seeking to understand how alums might connect with their network, I think a social network analysis could be an interesting study. The analysis could ask alums to describe or list individuals from their degree-granting institution that were helpful or a resource post-graduation. Then among the participants in the study, there could be an analysis of the connections between the individuals and who they had in common. From there, there could be a discussion on how and why those connections happened and in what ways have they been beneficial. This type of study would get to more of the specifics of capital and individuals within an alum network that supported their success.

In my study, I sought to discuss those relationships and discover connections that were meaningful, specifically within the alum community but it was harder for alums to identify those individuals and it was not discussed as I had wished. Although I asked the participants about their relationships, more often family and friends were identified. I wanted to discuss their connections with other alums in relation to their sources of capital, but they did not clearly make the connections in that way. However, based on the role families play in first-generation students' lives, it is not unusual that their families might be some of the first people that they would consider influential.

Second, I think it would be beneficial to do a similar study that compares different types of institutions to discover if there are different feelings and perspectives based on the nature of

the institution and experience the alum had at the institution. For example, interviewing first-generation alums that attended a much smaller or much larger institution, an institution that had a significant athletic program, or a private institution, could all be compared in order to identify if there were commonalities or differences. This study could have zero impact, or it could change perspectives and experiences of first-generation alums altogether.

Finally, there could be future research that discussed much more about how and in what ways alums developed their connections. This additional research could bring more emphasis on what types of relationships or connections alums are seeking, how they went about developing those relationships, and how relationships might have been maintained. I think this could specifically highlight an alum to alum relationship, like I was seeking from this study. A study like that could potentially address some of the implied benefits of connecting with the greater alum community. Future research would support additional literature related to the alum experience and the support for alums post-graduation.

Conclusions

As one participant stated, “first-generation college students (and other alums) are resourceful and figure out how to get things done, but we’re also dealing with assumptions and fighting against them to figure out how to support ourselves and where resources are available.” The resourcefulness, endurance, and motivation displayed by first-generation alums contributed to their success. But it is also our duty as institutions of higher education to support our alums.

The lived experiences of first-generation alums were unique. The alums from this study shared how they navigated a lot of the unknown and battled imposter syndrome all while wanting to do it on their own. This study sought to understand the experiences of first-generation alums and the perceived value of their alum network as well as their relationship with their

degree-granting institution. For the 23 first-generation alums and five institutional agents interviewed in this study, they clearly shared that there was opportunity for growth in how the institution was connecting with alums. Although there were ways that alums could connect back with their institution, it was not clear how alums could.

Alums had a positive experience with their degree-granting institution, but there was a general consensus that the institution had not played a huge role in their success post-graduation. They recognized the value of people and networks within their lives. But that positive factor wasn't always attributed to their degree-granting institution or to other alums. For some first-generation alums, their perceived engagement was connected to their level of involvement as a volunteer or in a leadership capacity with an alumni chapter or council. The majority of the alums were not always aware or couldn't share how the alum community continued to stay beneficial to them or a part of their lives.

Final Thoughts

It was a privilege to spend time getting to know the individuals from this study. Alums who graduated twenty or more years ago as well as some of Future University's most recent graduates shared their personal experiences in order to improve how universities consider alum engagement. This research sought to explore relationships, like the relationships I was able to build with the participants before, during, and after the interviews. They are now a part of my network, a group of individuals that I think would want to continue to support the work of Future University. Based on this study, I could see that if alums were able to create similar relationships, then this might also be very impactful for them.

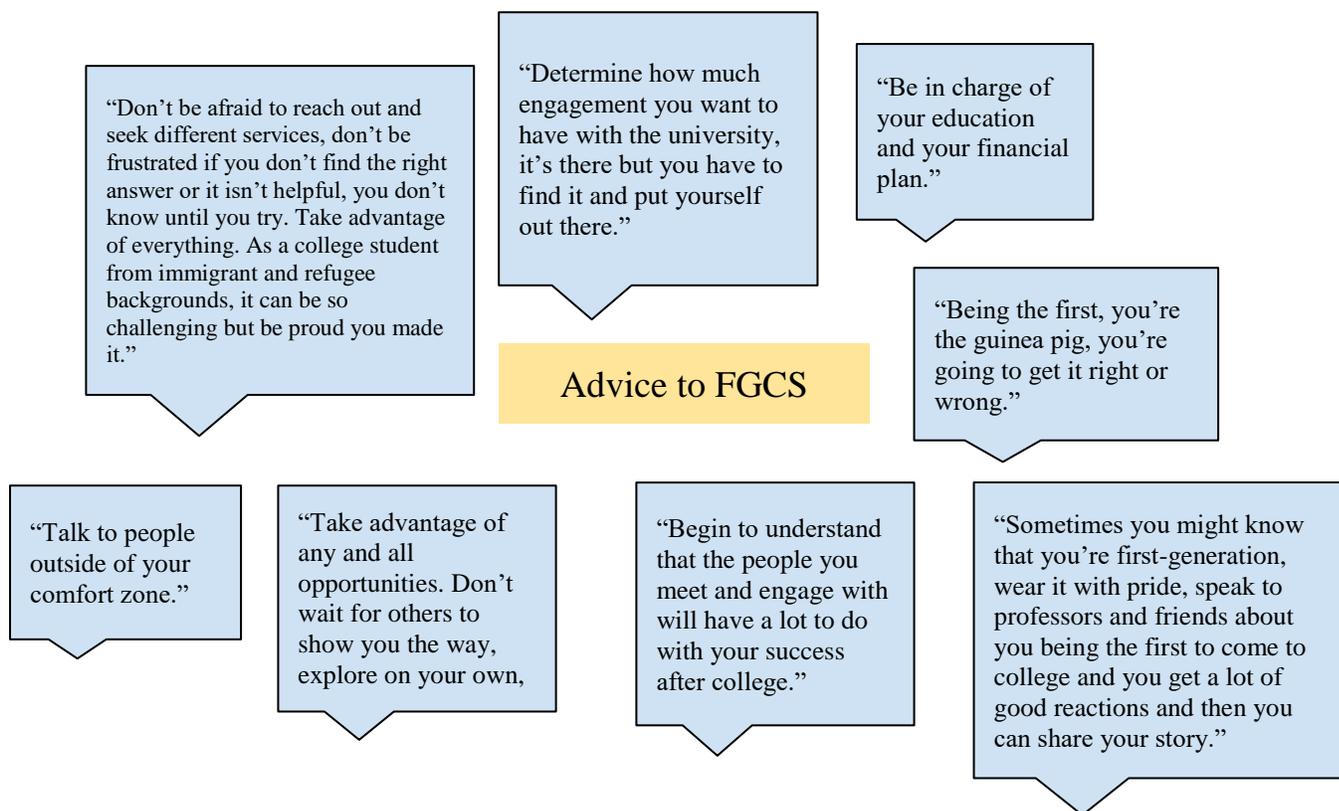
The findings from this study emphasized the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the first-generation identity, spending more time educating and bringing

awareness to the resource's available post-graduation, and cultivating the alum community as a network as a way to emphasize the direct benefits to alums. I shared ways that first-generation alums continued to stay connected, whether it was through events, organizations, or programs, or through their continued relationships with peers and friends from the institution. I also recognized that there could be more specific opportunities to engage as an alum related to their first-generation identity. The study confirmed that there was a lack of awareness among first-generation alums regarding the importance of staying connected to their degree-granting institution. They also lacked the implied understanding that by virtue of graduating from an institution, then you have acquired a network of connections.

Institutions of higher education historically have excluded individuals from certain demographic, ethnic, and racial groups from receiving post-secondary education. However, work has been done and continues to ensure that there are equitable opportunities to our diversifying student populations. These historical inequities have also posed challenges to alum engagement. For example, the student that is a second or fifth-generation family member attending the same institution is going to have a very different understanding of how that might impact them after graduation versus a student who is first in their family to attend college. We cannot put that onus on the student. We can place the students' lived experiences at the forefront, allowing them to connect in ways that are comfortable to them. But we also need to provide resources and educational opportunities that might be helpful to them in the future. This research is at the forefront in thinking about how we are providing value to our students, what they are receiving from their education, and reframing the alum community as a valuable resource.

As I look towards the future, I provided recommendations. But, I also thought about what future first-generation students might be thinking and feeling before, during, and after college.

During the interviews, I asked the alums what advice they had for first-generation students, if they could have shared advice with their first-year self. They had great words of wisdom and information to share with students. To further emphasize these quotes and descriptions a picture diagram was provided to display the comments from participants (see Figure 2). From those that had previously walked in their shoes, the advice from first-generation alums was particularly important.

Figure 2*Quotes from participants*

The alums highlighted the need to seek out help, ask for advice, and meet people that would be beneficial to success as a student and in the future. We all can feel nervous or self-conscious to seek help. But I think this study showcased that there could be many benefits in utilizing a network. However, university officials have to continue to broaden services and connect with alums right away to showcase the benefits. These alums recognized that they did not have to do their work alone, whether they had supportive relationships or not. There was an acknowledgement that additional support would have been beneficial. Alums described their own challenges but collectively came together to discover ways to better support each other, future students, and the existing alum community. As the alum population continues to grow, and as more first-generation students aspire to attain a college education, we have to find ways to

build community and engage with our alums so that they feel supported. Ultimately adding value to their experiences as a first-generation student, and thereafter; first-generation alum.

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Appendix A

Recruitment script from Allison Toney and/or colleagues

Address Line: Individually emailed participants

Subject Line: Request to interview as participant in dissertation research

Message from Allison:

Dear [Name],

My name is Allison Toney and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. For my dissertation, I am studying first-generation alumni to understand the lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they might perceive the value of their alum network. I hope my research will inform other alumni relations organizations and offices within higher education.

We have spoken previously about your college experience or you have self-identified as a first-generation college graduate. I would like to invite you to participate in a virtual interview via a video conference call. If you are interested and available, please respond affirmatively to my email address at aktoney@vcu.edu by [date], and we will find a time that works best for you. I will also send you a copy of the interview questions and consent form in advance if you are willing to interview. I estimate the interview will last around an hour. Participation is voluntary and confidential. This study was approved by the VCU IRB on [date], and is supported by the leadership and administration within Development and Alumni Relations at [Future University].

Again, if you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your consideration,
Allison Toney
VCU Doctoral Student
aktoney@vcu.edu

Message from colleagues:

Dear [Name],

I hope you are doing well! I am assisting a VCU doctoral student in identifying potential research participants. She is studying first-generation alums to understand the lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they might perceive the value of their alum network with the hope of informing other alumni relations organizations and offices within higher education. I mentioned that I would contact some individuals to see if they might be available and interested in participating.

If you are interested and available, please respond affirmatively to her email address at aktoney@vcu.edu by [date]. She will then follow-up to find a time to connect that works with your schedule.

I appreciate your support and if you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your consideration,
[Name]

Appendix B

Recruitment script University E-News

Message: Calling all VCU alums that identify as a first-generation alum! If you're interested in participating in a research study on the experiences of first-generation alum in relation to alum engagement and the value of the alum network, please contact Allison Toney at aktoney@vcu.edu. The study will request a 60-90 minute interview as well as the potential for a follow-up focus group.

Appendix C

Recruitment script from Allison Toney to faculty/staff participants

Address Line: Individually emailed participants

Subject Line: Request to interview as participant in dissertation research

Message from Allison:

Dear [Name],

My name is Allison Toney and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. For my dissertation, I hope to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation alums and how they might perceive the value of their alum network. I hope my research will inform other alumni relations organizations and offices within higher education.

I am reaching out to you based on your work with first-generation college students and/or within the field of advancement. I was hoping we could schedule a time to chat and discuss your thoughts and reflections regarding your work with first-generation students and/or alums. I would like to invite you to participate in a virtual interview via a video conference call for about 45 minutes. If you are interested and available, please respond affirmatively to my email address at aktoney@vcu.edu by [date], and we will find a time that works best for you. I will also send you a copy of the interview questions and consent form in advance if you are willing to interview. Participation is voluntary and confidential. This study was approved by the VCU IRB on [date], and is supported by the leadership and administration within Development and Alumni Relations at [Future University].

Again, if you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your consideration,
Allison Toney
VCU Doctoral Student
aktoney@vcu.edu

Appendix D
Consent Form
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

STUDY TITLE:

ABOUT THIS CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to participate in an interview. This consent form is mean to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to participate in this interview. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this interview. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the interview at any time. Your decision to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty.

PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

The purpose of this interview is to understand first-generation graduates' perception of the value of their alumni network, the relationship with their alma mater, and their experiences with their alma mater post-graduation. The study serves as the research dissertation for completion of a doctoral program at VCU's School of Education. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a first-generation graduate of Future University.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to participate in this interview, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

Participation will entail one individual interview, which will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Individual interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient to you and will be conducted via phone, in-person or Zoom. Individual interview questions will relate to your transition to college, experiences in college and transition out of college as a first-generation graduate. The individual interviews will be recorded. Transcripts of these recordings will be provided to all participants for review and accuracy confirmation. No identifying information will be included in either the recordings or the transcripts. The goal of this research is to inform future programmatic strategies with first-generation students and graduates.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

It is unlikely that you will experience any risks or discomforts from your participation in this interview. However, sometimes talking about personal experiences and thoughts can be difficult, and you do not have to share any information that makes you uncomfortable. You may request to skip questions or stop the interview at any time should you choose to do so.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

It is possible that the information that you share during the interview may benefit you by allowing you an opportunity to reflect on your experience in and transitioning out of college.

COSTS

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Potentially identifiable information about you will be kept separate from interview notes and recordings. Your first and last initials only will be used on these documents. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Access to all data will be limited to the researcher. Signed consent forms will be scanned and kept under a password protected folder.

QUESTIONS

If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, or if you wish to discuss problems, concerns or questions, to obtain information, or to offer input about research, you may contact:

Allison Toney
aktoney@vcu.edu

CONSENT

I have been given the opportunity to read this consent form carefully. All of the questions I wish to raise concerning this interview have been answered. My signature indicates that I freely consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of the consent form for my records.

Participant name printed

Participant signature

Date

Researcher Signature (if different from above)

Date

Appendix E

Individual Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

Hi there and welcome to our interview. Thank you so much for taking time from your day to participate in this interview. My name is Allison Toney, and I am a doctoral student from the VCU School of Education. As an education student and an alumni relations professional, I am interested in your perceptions of the value of your alumni network, the relationship with their alma mater, and their experiences with your alma mater post-graduation to discover if you see the institution continuing to support you as a graduate. This information will be shared in summary form; it will also not be possible to identify you for the way that this interview is reported. Our interview will be about 90 minutes.

II. Interview Session

The purpose of this interview session is to find out your thoughts and perceptions of your alumni network and the perceived social capital you have gained from your alma mater, to discover if you see the institution continuing to support you as a graduate, specifically as a first-generation graduate. I will ask you to explain some of your experiences transitioning to and from college.

Before we begin, we will review some plans that will help the interview run smoothly. First, we will record the interview so that I don't miss anything you say and so that all of your comments and thoughts are fully understood. Also, any information that could identify who you are, such as your first or last name, will not be shared with anyone outside of this interview in order to protect your privacy. If you want to state your name, please only state your first name. When I write what you say before or after the interview, your name will not be included in any of my documents. I am interested in hearing your positive and negative thoughts and experiences, so please be specific when you respond by explaining your experience, success and challenges.

Topic 1: Path to Post-Secondary Education

1. Tell me a little bit about your journey to higher education. Why did you decide to attend college? What was difficult or easy about the process? At that time, what was the goal for attending college?
2. Why did you choose to attend Future University?
3. What were you most excited for or nervous about when starting college?
 - a. Can you describe how you were thinking or feeling as you entered college?
4. What did being a first-generation student mean to you?
 - a. Did you think about what they might mean before you started college?
5. How did you navigate the transition into higher education? How did you prepare? What did you do? Looking back, what would you have done differently?

Topic 2: As a College Student

1. How did family, peers or your community assist you during college? How did your relationships with others affect your pursuit of higher education?

2. Tell me a story about a time in college that really stands out to you, a transformational moment or a time when you really learn more about yourself.
3. What did you get involved with as a student? What was most impactful about those experiences?
4. What resources did you take advantage of while you were a student?
5. How did you develop your network as a student? How did you define your network?
6. Were there any university structures that helped you develop your network? What were they?
7. As a student, did you connect with any alumni from your institution? Why or why not?
8. What were you expecting to be easiest or the most difficult in your final year in school and as you prepared for graduation?
9. How did family, peers or your community assist you as you were preparing for graduation?
10. Please share with me some of the fears or anxieties you felt regarding barriers or challenges to achieving your post-graduation plans.
11. When you think about your post-graduation plans, who comes to mind that helped you realistically meet your goal(s)?

Topic 3: Life after graduation

1. How did you transition to post-graduation life? How did you prepare? What did you do?
2. Did you feel as though the networks that you established as a student were no longer there as a graduate? Tell me more.
 - a. Can you tell me your definition of networks (personal or professional)?
3. Can you tell me more about who you went to and where you went to get critical information for your success?
 - a. Did you feel like you had equal opportunities to others when you stepped into life after graduation?
 - b. These descriptions are what we often think of as social capital. Tell me ways that social capital from college translated into social capital post-graduation. In what ways do you see social capital and social networks playing a role in your success after graduation?
4. In what ways do you believe that Future University supports the post-graduation transition for first-generation students?
 - a. How does the university offer lifelong support for career, personal and professional development?
5. How is your identity as a first-generation student a part of your identity as a graduate?
 - a. Can you describe a time where you thought who you were prior to going to college versus after college was significantly different?
6. What could Future University do to help maintain those social networks?
7. How could Future University better support you after graduation?
8. How would you describe barriers to engagement with your alum network and with the university after graduating?
9. How would you describe positive engagement with the alum networking and with the university after graduating?
10. Alongside the lifelong value of my education, what is the value of my university over a lifetime?

11. How do alums influence and seek out engagement at their degree granting institution for mutual benefit?

III. Closing

Option 1: Time still remaining: Before we send the session, are there any other comments that you have or topics that we missed in our discussion? Thank you for your time and participation. I will follow-up with the interview transcript so you can review for accuracy. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Option 2: Times is up: If after today's session you think of other comments or topics that were missed please feel free to contact me by phone, text or email. Thank you for your time and participation. I will follow-up with the interview transcript so you can review for accuracy. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Appendix F

Focus Groups Interview Protocol

Thank you all for joining me again for this focus group! I wanted to give you all the opportunity to meet others that participated in this study. Please keep in mind that we should be respectful of others' comments and opinions. Please be open and honest. You are welcome to build on each other's ideas and opinions. We will be recording but no identifying information will be included.

1. First, if you're comfortable, will you share what artifact you brought that described your relationship with your degree granting institution.
2. What does it mean to you to be a first-generation graduate?
3. Can you describe your most meaningful experience or interaction with your degree granting institution post-graduation?
4. In the interview, we talked a little bit about how you define a network. Who are those individuals in your network and how do you utilize those in your network and in what ways?
 - a. Are there things that your degree granting institution could do to improve your network?
5. What are some strengths of alum engagement from your degree granting institution? What could the institution do better?
6. Is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?

Appendix G

Institutional Agents Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

Hi there, thank you so much for returning for part two of this study. Everyone in this focus group has participated in an initial interview. I wanted to gather focus groups to help promote additional dialogue regarding this topic. Our interview will be about 60 minutes.

Before we begin, we will review some plans that will help the interview run smoothly. First, we will record the interview so that I don't miss anything you say and so that all of your comments and thoughts are fully understood. Also, any information that could identify who you are, such as your first or last name, will not be shared with anyone outside of this interview in order to protect your privacy. If you want to state your name, please only state your first name. When I write what you say before or after the interview, your name will not be included in any of my documents.

1. First tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you do for university? Can you describe your work?
2. How do you perceive first-generation alums?
3. How do you think about first-generation alums as constituents?
4. How do you reach out to first-generation alums?
5. In what ways do you believe that Future University supports the post-graduation transition for first-generation students turned alums?
6. How could Future University better support first-generation alums?
7. How would you describe barriers to engagement for first-generation alums?

II. Closing

Option 1: Time still remaining: Before we send the session, are there any other comments that you have or topics that we missed in our discussion? Thank you for your time and participation. I will follow-up with the interview transcript so you can review for accuracy. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Option 2: Times is up: If after today's session you think of other comments or topics that were missed please feel free to contact me by phone, text or email. Thank you for your time and participation. I will follow-up with the interview transcript so you can review for accuracy. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Appendix H
Member Checks

Address Line:

Subject Line: Review for accuracy

Message from Allison:

Dear [Name],

I want to thank you again for speaking with me the other day about your experiences. I really enjoyed our conversation and time together. In order to ensure that I gathered your information accurately, I wanted to follow up with a copy of the transcript and themes that I have developed. If you don't mind reviewing that would be greatly appreciated. Please let me know if you have any edits, concerns or revisions. Please let me know by [Date].

I look forward to hearing from you!

Thanks,

Allison Toney