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How scholarship programs facilitate first-generation college students' involvement

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How Scholarship Programs Facilitate First-Generation College Students' Involvement

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Abstract

As a first-generation college student, I am interested in the on-campus involvement and experiences of other first-generation college students. First-generation college students are those whose parents did not receive a university degree and tend to come from low-income families. This project explores programs designed to support and enrich the experiences of such students. The Centennial Scholars Program at James Madison University and the Presidential Scholarship Initiative at Virginia Tech aim to increase the socio-economic diversity on each campus. These programs provide students with full funding for four years, mentorship, professional development and social benefits, among others. In turn, students become involved with the campus and outside communities. I argue that these programs provide more than financial support; they are vehicles for further community involvement and allow students to leave their mark.

Chapter 1: My Story

My interest in first-generation college students is highly personal. When I was seven years old, my family immigrated to the United States from our home country of Colombia. The lack of economic opportunities in Colombia and the abundance of them in the United States were the main factors for our move. After hearing about the success of her friends, my single mother believed that the United States would offer our small family a better life. In 2000, she migrated on her own in hopes of returning to Colombia with plenty of savings. However, after her return to Colombia, she had lost her competitive edge in the work force and was unable to find new employment. My mother once again returned to the United States and promised that we would meet again soon, to start our American life. For a year, my maternal grandmother cared for my younger sister and me as we longed for the day that we would be reunited with our mother. My mother worked day and night to save up enough money for a two-bedroom apartment and three plane tickets. My younger sister, grandmother, and I arrived in December of 2001. My mother did her research to find the area of Northern Virginia that would provide us with the best education. She decided on Ashburn. At that time, it was a predominantly white and upper middle class area that was quickly growing and welcoming more and more families.

When we arrived, we immediately became immersed in a new culture, language, and lifestyle. The challenges we faced upon our arrival were both physically and emotionally draining. We did not speak the language, we did not know the cultural customs, and could not turn to our extended family for support. As the eldest, I took responsibility for looking over my sister and helping care for my aging grandmother. Luckily for me, my mother quickly made the efforts to enroll me at Dominion Trail Elementary School in a first-grade class. Once school started, my days were split among my English as a Second Language class and my regular class.

In the mornings, I was bused to another school where I attended class with other students that had also recently arrived in this country. We learned English using flashcards and hands-on activities and were required to practice by speaking to our classmates in English. In the afternoons, I returned to my home school and joined my classmates for the rest of the day's activities. The hardest thing about the transition was that I missed out on the activities that occurred in the morning and felt that I had to catch up. However, I remember how much my teacher tried to make me feel welcome. She would save the work for me, so that I could work on it later at home. To this day, I still remember the kind faces of the caring teachers and administration that provided me a home as my family was working on creating our very own.

As the next school years came around, I realized school had become a sort of safe haven for me. I loved my family, but more than anything I loved going to school and what I learned, I brought back home to share with them. By the time I enrolled in third grade, about two years after arriving in the US, I was reading, writing and speaking in English as effectively as my peers. I began to excel in my classes and enjoyed reading, which allowed me to connect with some of my classmates.

As I grew up, I recognized the sacrifices my mom was making to provide for our family. She often had to sacrifice emotional support for financial support because she was a single mother responsible for her two daughters and mother. I remember by the time we were up for school my mother was already at work and made it back home as we were headed to bed. Most of our time away from school was spent with my grandmother, who played a vital role in our childhood. Taking all of this in, I began to mature quickly through elementary and middle school and came to terms with the life circumstances we found ourselves in. I knew that the way to improve our lives would be education and became fully invested in school.

As the eldest child, I had to establish the way for my sister to follow in my footsteps. This meant that the responsibility of "finding the way" fell solely on me. As the eldest, it was always expected by my mother and grandmother that I set a good example, but I went far beyond that and took this way-finding role on my own. My mother and grandmother could not help me figure it out, they had not been students in an American school and did not know about all the rules and expectations. These were things I had to learn as school went on, I watched others around me and mimicked proper behaviors. Teachers at school were the greatest source of support and help for me. I actively asked them questions and paid very close attention when they were discussing matters that pertained to school or extracurricular activities. Also, I was not afraid to ask my peers what they did after school and on the weekends. I wanted to lead as much of a "normal" life as I could, with school and outside activities. This wish was accomplished, as my mother enrolled my sister and I in karate classes and put us on a cheer team. On the weekends, my family attended church and we were enrolled in Sunday school. In both of these settings my family was starting to find different communities and individuals that would become great friends. Ever since I can remember, we have always been very involved in our communities and in building relationships with friends.

Later, my family got a desktop computer and this became my new fountain of information. Like many teenagers during this time, I spent a lot of my time on the computer and became pretty internet savvy. Other than being active on popular social media sites, I read forum discussions and browsed many other websites. I used Google and Yahoo Answers to ask the questions I would not be able to receive answers to at home. This provided me great independence, as I often knew more than my mother and could explain things to her. For example, I searched for summer camps and activities and was actually able to participate. Since

my mother was so busy working, she did not know what my sister and I could get involved in and she was lucky not to worry about child care, since our grandmother still lived with us. Looking back, I realize that all the information I had about school and college, I had gathered mostly on my own. This was in part due to my own curiosity and willingness to reach out to those I knew could help me.

When I got to high school, I was thrilled with the idea of taking more challenging classes, participating in extracurricular activities, and getting my first job. I became involved quickly and formed strong bonds with staff members who would become great mentors later. All throughout high school, I pushed myself to work hard to get into a good college. In Loudoun County, the school environment was competitive and students were ambitious and high-performing. Many of my peers had parents and family members that had attended college and beyond. Many of them are children of doctors, government officials or business owners and had the know-how for the college application process. On the other hand, no one in my family had even set foot on a college campus here in the United States. Again, it was implied that it would be up to me to research possible universities, the financial aid process, and everything else associated with this new life transition.

I took on this new challenge like I had all the others, with confidence that my hard work would pay off and that ultimately, I would be successful. No matter what, I knew I wanted to attend college and further my education. During my senior year, I was a guidance helper and spent a class period in the career center. My role was to assist the career and guidance counselors by delivering student passes or giving new students tours of the school. The most beneficial part of this was that I was constantly surrounded by the staff that was helping our entire senior class apply to college. I attended several visits by college admissions representatives to get more

information about the application process and what student life was like and I started imagining what college I would attend for the next four years.

Mrs. Develli, the career counselor, became my biggest mentor while I was in the career center. She shared with me stories of her own children's journey through college and provided me with lesser-known information about the application process. In addition to the career center, my county also provided us with a search engine for universities called Family Connection. I spent a lot of time on this website, filling out personality tests and creating my resume to see what schools I would be matched with. It was interesting to see that my high grades and involvement would make me a competitive applicant at elite schools. However, I had established from early on that I would only apply to public institutions in the state of Virginia because of my family's financial situation. The idea of paying for a private or out-of-state university by taking on thousands of dollars of debt did not make sense to me. This helped me narrow down my options and I started seriously considering James Madison University, Virginia Tech and George Mason University.

Since I was the first one in my family to apply to college, my mother became pretty invested in this process as well. We toured the three universities together and attended different informational sessions about financial aid, picking a major, and residential life. My mother's educational experience in Colombia was completely different than mine would be at a four-year residential college. I remember on our tour of Virginia Tech, we were walking by a dining hall and saw two friends eating lunch. Although it is commonplace sight for many, it meant so much to her. My mother said to me how neat it was that in college you could set up times to meet up with your friends over lunch and then go to the library to get school work done. The idea of living where you study was new to her and it excited her that I would get this opportunity.

During all our visits, my mother was very attentive to the presentations, thoroughly read all the pamphlets, and asked several questions. She showed me that she wanted my future to include education that would put me on a path to greater success. I think, like many immigrant parents, she wants education to open to doors for me that for her were inaccessible.

After submitting my applications, all we could do was wait and hope that I would receive a generous financial aid package. I was very excited to find out that I had been accepted to all three schools. Now, it was my choice to decide where to attend. Because I was the first one going to college and I knew it would be expensive, I wanted to commit to whichever school offered me the most in scholarships, grants, and loans. However, after visiting James Madison University's campus several times, I just felt right at home. I know many other students who share a similar experience on a campus visit, a feeling of "this is it, this will be my home for the next four years." I loved the proximity to my family—only two hours—the campus, and most importantly, the environment and people. The only catch was that I had not been offered any financial aid and would have to take out loans to cover all the costs of attending. After discussing this issue with my family, we decided it would be worth it because I had felt that I belonged at JMU. That June, I became the first of my family to graduate from high school and realized all the encouragement I had from friends and family to do well in college.

The idea of moving away to go to college was purely an "American" thing, as my grandmother often said. In Colombia, students are known to live at home and attend classes at the local university, much like a commuter student here. The familial bond in Colombia, like many Latin American countries, is quite strong and the idea of voluntarily moving away was strange to my family. However, they knew it would be best for me to move away and focus on my studies. After all, that is how it is done in this country. I am very grateful that my family did

not try to pressure me into staying at home and going to Northern Virginia Community College. I say this because it is true of other Latino families we know; the eldest child is forced to stay at home and commute or attend community college. This is so they can still provide help to their family and parents, but unfortunately, some of them have ended up dropping out of school and committing to full-time work. In a 2014 National Journal poll, 66% of Hispanics who were employed or joined the military after high school graduate cited the need to help support their family as a reason for not going to college, compared with 39% of white students. I realize that my family always wanted the best for me and for me to expand my horizons, even if that meant moving away from them.

The summer following graduation, I spent a lot of time on JMU's website, browsing and learning about everything it offers its students. I learned about the health and counseling center, alternative break trips, intramural sports, and opportunities to volunteer and give back to the community. I was accepted into the Honors College and would be living in one of the newest dorms on campus. The Honors College was the last thing that had sold me on attending JMU. I would be surrounded by other students who valued their education and were devoted to their studies. This was not always the case in high school, so taking classes with students that were just like me was exciting. I looked forward to newfound independence, new classes, and opportunities to get involved on campus.

By the time August rolled around, I was more than ready to move away to college. I had spent the summer working as a nanny and was anxious to start this new chapter in my life. My family helped me move all my belongings into the dorm and waved goodbye. It was strange to think that would not see them again for a couple of weeks. But this idea did not upset me as much. Sure, I would miss them and it would take some time to adjust to being alone, but I looked

forward to it. I think this mindset goes back to my ability to adapt to change quickly, or so I like to think I do. It could have also been the motivation to thrive and do well to make them proud.

JMU's week-long orientation program was a great introduction to college life. My group was led by two upperclass students and they facilitated a lot of discussions and workshops about college life and academics. I attended a lot of the events during this week and learned even more about the campus resources. During this week, I developed friendships with the girls living on my hall as we found out we had a lot in common. Once the semester started, I was thrilled to be at JMU and became very excited about the next four years. I got into a groove of going to classes, eating at the dining hall, and hanging out with friends.

The biggest issue I encountered was communication with my family. Professors and older peers alike advised us to call home every week or keep in touch with mom "because she might be worried" and I followed their advice. To be honest, it felt strange calling home and asking what everyone was up to, mostly because the answers were usually always the same. My mom was always working, my sister was always at school and working, and my grandmother was sick, but hanging in there. It felt strange to share with them how great I felt at college; I had a sense of guilt feeling this way while I was away from them. At the same time, I found out they were deciding not to tell me about the negative things happening at home out of fear that it would distract me from my studies. This upset me; I felt blindsided when I later found out about it. I addressed this with them, stating that I felt alienated for not being included, and that, whether good or bad, I wanted to know. Still hesitant to possibly "stress me out," they did not immediately start sharing everything with me. It took some time. Later in the semester, I visited home and felt better by being with them. It seemed that all it took was clear communication and spending some time together in person to feel connected once again.

At school, I always felt the need to stay informed with what was going on around me and to take of advantage of the opportunities I was granted. I read every email I received, was attentive to the students handing out pamphlets on campus, and regularly read the campus newspaper. My first semester I participated in a leadership program that aimed to encourage first and second year students to leave their mark on campus. Student leaders and faculty led discussions that became a catalyst for my later involvement. For the rest of my first year, I enjoyed my general education classes and the company of my new friends. Unlike some students, who struggle with the academic rigor of college courses, I felt prepared by the Advanced Placement and Honors courses I took in high school. By the end of my first year, I felt completely at ease at JMU and was looking to returning the next fall.

When I returned for my second year, I knew I needed to get the most out my time at JMU by getting involved. It would no longer be acceptable just to attend class and hang out with friends. At the beginning of every semester, JMU hosts a Student Org Night in which they showcase all the student organizations and clubs on campus. I attended this with my friends and identified organizations I was interested in joining. One of these was Psychology Service Organization, an outlet for psychology students to volunteer in the Harrisonburg community. This was a great introduction to service and a look at the diversity that exists in our area.

Later, I applied and was accepted to join a popular student organization, SafeRides. This is a student-run non-profit organization that provides free and nonjudgmental rides to JMU students on the weekends. It was a great and fun way to give back to the community. Another way I gave back was by co-teaching an introductory course for Honors College students. Myself and another Honors student met with around 15 first-year Honors students weekly and addressed student concerns. I also participated in a peer mentoring program designed especially for

underrepresented and international students. My mentee was an exchange student from Japan and, by meeting weekly for lunch or dinner, we got to learn a lot about each other and our cultures. The other mentors and I also coordinated events for all the mentees to meet and get to know each other.

For most of these experiences, I sought them out on my own. Like I said earlier, I read all emails and actively researched more opportunities. I did not have a mentor or anyone telling me what to do to enhance my educational experience. At a university of more than 20,000 students, I knew that it was my responsibility to step outside of my comfort zone and apply to organizations and programs. My involvement was allowing me to meet people from all over campus, learn about JMU, and learn about myself and my interests.

Since I had not received financial aid during my first year, I was determined to get a job so I could help with paying for college. Luckily, I was offered a federal work study position at JMU's Center for Assessment and Research Studies. My responsibilities as a student office assistant are standard: I provide administrative support to the faculty and staff of the Masters and Ph.D. programs in the Quantitative Psychology and Assessment and Measurement programs. My biggest role, however, is helping with the preparation of institution-wide assessment days that occur in the fall and spring semesters. I appreciate this position as it has been a great way to grow professionally and to learn to work with a team. During the summers, I also sought out a summer job position and worked with an educational enrichment program for students entering high school at Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

As the semesters went on, I sought out more opportunities and was fortunate enough to be provided with great experiences. Some of my early psychology classes were positively informed by different co-curricular opportunities. Through the Honors College, I opted to complete a

Service and Civic Engagement area of emphasis. This consisted of a series of seminar-style courses and a semester-long practicum. My practicum with The Reading Road Show promoted literacy to local children of different ethnic backgrounds by providing them with a mobile library. I volunteered weekly on the bus and facilitated activities, usually working with those who did not speak English. That experience sparked my interest for working with immigrant populations and using my bilingual abilities to serve. During my junior year, I participated in an alternative spring break and volunteered with La Union del Pueblo Entero. LUPE is a community union founded by César Chávez that provides its members with support resources such as English classes and tax preparation. I spoke to many individuals and learned of the hardships they face as undocumented immigrants living in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Once I realized that service was becoming a rewarding pastime, I rushed Alpha Phi Omega, JMU's only co-ed service fraternity. Even though it is competitive and I was afraid that as a second semester junior I was too late, I was extended a bid to join the fraternity. I became a pledge and served as the service chair for my pledge class. As the service chair, I was responsible for organizing a five-hour long service project for my pledge class of twenty students. This was a very valuable experience for me, as it allowed me to reach out to members of the Harrisonburg community to organize a day of service. Through APO, I also became an active volunteer with Skyline Literacy and teach citizenship classes to older adults seeking to obtain their American naturalization. Other ways in which APO has allowed me to serve the community is by advocating for and participating in service projects with local agencies in areas of youth, community wellness, geriatrics, and environmental issues. I believe that APO had been the missing puzzle piece of my JMU experience. I was involved around campus, enjoyed participating in service, but had not exactly formed a community to do this all with.

When I reflect on my time at JMU, I could not imagine doing all that I have done here at any other institution. I have learned that the most important thing in college is to seek out and find ways to use your skills, talents, and time, instead of just going to class. Sometimes it takes a lot of your own effort and persistence, but it is rewarding when you find that organization that makes you feel at home.

I acknowledge that my undergraduate career may be very different from other first-generation college students, but that is exactly what I want to explore with this project. If I had had a faculty or staff member telling me exactly how to spend my extra time, I am not sure it would have been as satisfying. I believe a lot of my success and involvement while at JMU was due to my resilience and history of having to find things out for my own.

However, while I take great pleasure in knowing that I figured college out largely on my own, I cannot ignore the people that helped me. I credit a lot of my success to the support and encouragement of my family, especially my mother. She was actively involved in the entire college application process and always encouraged me to do the best I could. As a first-generation college student, I experienced a type of "tug of war" pull between my family and school. I knew that my priority was being a student, but I also knew that I was an important part of my family. At times I wanted to put family issues aside and just focus on academics, but my respect for them would not allow it. Instead, I sometimes put school second and focused on resolving issues that were occurring at home. After many instances of this constant pull and struggle, I realized establishing open and honest communication would be the solution. Honesty about family issues and my own stressors at school seemed to set boundaries, and allowed me to focus my energy on what was really necessary. I am also grateful because my mother helps pay for my apartment rent. As a senior soon to graduate in a couple of weeks, I look back to my

undergraduate years with a smile and sense of accomplishment. I did what no one in my family

has done, and I have been successful and engaged in the community.

Chapter 2: Andrea's Story

Earlier in my writing, I mentioned that I had a younger sister. Her name is Andrea and she is two years younger than me. When it was time for her to apply for college, our family believed we had it all figured out. Just like me, she applied to the same three universities: JMU, George Mason University and Virginia Tech. However, instead of falling in love with JMU, my sister was captivated by Virginia Tech, their campus, and the sense of community. She applied and we all crossed our fingers that she would be accepted and perhaps provided some scholarship money, since finances would be tight with two children in college. Much to our surprise, my sister was awarded a full-ride scholarship to Virginia Tech through the Presidential Scholarship Initiative (PSI).

My sister did not have to apply for this program; all she had done was submit the general admissions application and her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In talking about it, she mentioned she had never even heard of PSI because it was not listed among the general pool of scholarships for prospective students. This is because students who are considered for this program demonstrate financial need, academic excellence, and leadership potential on their general admissions applications. When Andrea got the e-mail awarding her the scholarship and announcing her acceptance to PSI, she forwarded it to our mom, but neither of them could believe it. This scholarship would cover her tuition and room and board for the four years that she attends Virginia Tech. It does not cover books, but if you decide to move off-campus, they will provide you a stipend to pay for rent. This award was such great news to our family because it was a blessing to know that my sister would not be responsible for paying for her education.

I sat down with my sister and we talked about what it is like to a Presidential Scholarship Initiative scholar at Virginia Tech and what her experience has been thus far. Overall, Andrea says that this allows her to be a happier, less stressed person and believes it helps her mental health. Whenever she gets stressed about school or work, she says remembers that she does not have to pay for school and it makes her feel better. She told me a story of a peer that had transferred from Northern Virginia Community College and was paying her own tuition and fees. This student could not keep up with the academic rigor and decided to withdraw because it made the most sense financially. This stress of payments and loans, which is common for many first-generation students, is nonexistent for my sister.

Other than finances, my sister believes PSI has helped her in other ways and is very grateful for their generosity. The main takeaway from being a PSI scholar is the opportunities that students are made aware of, through weekly newsletter emails from the program's coordinator. This email consists of important dates, tips for academic success, guidelines, announcements of different opportunities, events for multicultural diversity and student well-being, and enrichment events with dates and descriptions. The enrichment events are the main requirement for PSI scholars, as they must attend at least one per semester. They can be any type of event for students on campus, such as seminars or workshops. For example, my sister attended Gobbler Fest to fulfill her requirement for her first semester. Gobbler Fest is the way Virginia Tech showcases all their student organizations, by hosting a festival on their drill field, a central location on campus. Enrichment events are a great way to expose students to the community and different opportunities they may take advantage of. To provide proof to the PSI coordinator, the scholar must then write a reflection essay with responses to the provided questions. Usually, the questions are about major and career goals, as well as overall experience at the enrichment event.

Scholars also complete a survey after attending, to provide feedback about the helpfulness of each enrichment event. Another event my sister attended was Chips and Salsa, a social event with members from some of the Latino student organizations on campus. She says she is glad to be required to attend these events because she would not go otherwise.

Other than the enrichment events, scholars must also maintain a 3.0 GPA. If a scholar falls below this threshold, they risk being removed from the program and no longer receiving the full-ride scholarship. Although this sounds extreme, Andrea notes that the program is very accommodating to student concerns, such as taking a break for the semester due to personal or academic reasons.

The coordinator of the program utilizes a Canvas page to keep all scholars informed and connected. In terms of community or cohorts, the program hosts "Meet and Greet" events at the beginning of the semester. Although these are not mandatory, it is a great way to meet others in your cohort and network. My sister says if she did not attend these events she would not know who else is a PSI scholar. At the Meet and Greet events, there are snacks and small gifts like notepads and pens. This is the only time during the entire year that most PSI scholars are together, even though it is not a requirement.

Another component of the program is the mentorship provided to scholars by the program coordinator, Ayesha Yousafzai. She is a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Virginia Tech. Meeting with Ayesha during the semester is not required, but it is in the best interest of scholars to do so. Andrea says Ayesha is a great mentor for her and facilitates success by providing academic and professional plans. Even though some scholars solely meet with Ayesha when they run into a problem or are having difficulties, Andrea meets with her up to three times a semester. In our conversation, Andrea reflected on the idea that there are not many

faculty and staff members at Virginia Tech with our same life experiences. Ayesha's family is from Pakistan and she was raised there. When she was a young girl, much like my sister and myself, her family decided to immigrate to the United States. Ayesha, too, went through a similar experience of having to learn a new language, adapt to a new culture and ultimately persevere as a minority and immigrant. This allows for them to share a common set of experiences, which helps in establishing rapport as a mentor-mentee pair. My sister believes Ayesha is the backbone of PSI and said "she is doing what I'm doing but on a different scale" which also serves as a form of motivation. It is because of Ayesha that Andrea feels that someone at Virginia Tech truly cares about her. Ayesha seems to be a great role model to Andrea, because she is an example of a child that immigrated to a new country and was able to realize her educational and career goals.

One of the greatest opportunities granted to PSI scholars is exclusive access to certain campus events. For example, Andrea attended a luncheon in the President's box of Lane Stadium. This was a networking gala to thank sponsors that provide scholarship money to the scholars. She also attended another luncheon with the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors to share student insight and feedback. These exclusive events are great ways to network with working professionals, professors, and distinguished faculty and staff.

Andrea believes that PSI scholars are investments to the university and "people they want to succeed". The program checks their progress by keeping tabs on their grades and involvement. By requiring them to attend enrichments, providing exclusive events and mentorship, they are put in positions to succeed. She believes that as long as scholars are doing well academically and getting involved on campus, Virginia Tech is happy because they will eventually get a return on their investment.

Overall, Andrea is grateful to be a PSI scholar at Virginia Tech. By having to meet the requirements discussed before, she is held accountable. She enjoys the enrichment events because it forces her out of her comfort zone and reflecting on her experiences. Andrea says some of her peers feel uncomfortable being part of a minority group at Virginia Tech because of their socioeconomic status. This often makes them anxious or hesitant to get out into the community and campus. However, because of PSI, she has no choice but to do so. Andrea also knows some others that do not like Virginia Tech, but are there for the financial opportunity of having a full ride scholarship. She says they would rather be a different college for social reasons, but the money does not allow them to. Thankfully, she does not feel like this at all. Instead, she had enjoyed her time at Virginia Tech and credits a lot of her happiness to the Presidential Scholarship Initiative.

Introduction to the Project

After reflecting on the differences in both my sister's and my own experiences at our respective universities, I became interested in the benefits of her scholarship program. My sister and I were both young when we arrived in this country, but she was the younger one and could look to me in setting an example. She benefited not only from my family's new knowledge of the college application experience, but she was also at school for free. On the other hand, I was not attending school for free. Instead, I had to take out loans to cover tuition, and was lucky to receive a couple of scholarships and grants to make up for the rest. I also did not have a mentor like Ayesha, who could check up on me about my academics and career plans. I wondered how having your education paid, plus having additional mentorship, would impact a first-generation student's involvement and engagement on campus.

This thought stuck with me and, as my educational interests shifted from psychology to higher education, I decided to further develop that question into my senior thesis project. I wondered what other universities were doing to provide for their first-generation and low income college students. I found much research on student retention, development, and involvement, but was curious still about these programs. First-generation college students are missing critical and often undervalued information: the know-how of navigating a college environment. Jehangir (2010) devotes an entire chapter in her book Higher Education First-Generation Students to the idea of Strangers without Codebooks. She writes that when FGCS first arrive on campus,

> "they are not merely lost in the expanse of campus; rather, they have arrived without the 'codebook.' Both must now traverse an alien landscape while simultaneously figuring out the rules and expectations, both implicit and explicit, which shape every facet of the collegiate experience" (p. 30).

This piece further lead me to inquire about scholarship programs targeting first-generation and low-income students. When a university develops a scholarship program, it is providing students with a "codebook. This hypothetical "codebook" consists of financial aid, mentorship, service and community building, among other benefits. It is important to note that institutional efforts should not just be rewarding students with a scholarship, but also a staff fully dedicated to their needs.

The rest of this project explores the research regarding first-generation college students and involvement, as well as a detailed look into two Virginia state institutions' efforts to provide for first-generation college students: James Madison University's Centennial Scholars Program and Virginia Tech's Presidential Scholarship Initiative.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

A higher education in American society today is practically a requirement for those seeking career prospects and professional growth. However, as time goes on, the makeup of the student body at four-year universities is shifting. A university education that was once limited to white upper class males is now accessible to individuals of all genders, races, and socioeconomic groups. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reveals great changes in the percentage of 18 to 24 year-olds enrolled in universities by level of institution, sex, and race or ethnicity. For example, in 1970, 20% of 18 to 24 year-olds attending universities were female, by 2015, that number had risen to 43%. Hispanic students only accounted for 13% of the university make-up in 1970, and now it is 36% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016).

The differences in the demographics of the undergraduate student body at four-year universities can often pose a challenge for institutions aiming to provide for all of their students. In recent years, one specific group of students has attracted the attention of researchers and universities: first-generation college students. There is no single definition for first-generation, demonstrating that this term can come to encompass students with varied life and educational experiences. The commonly used definition for first-generation college students (FGCS) are those whose parents have no college experience (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). This can mean that their parents may have attended college but did not receive a baccalaureate degree. Federal TRIO programs and other organizations that create educational opportunities for underserved students use this definition as well (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Originally created under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, a trio of federal programs were designed to "foster increased educational opportunity and attainment" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017). Now, there are eight programs that fall under this umbrella, and they are

targeted to serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities to get through their schooling and into college educations. Some TRIO programs include: Student Support Services, Upward Bound, Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers.

Often thought of together are low-income and FGCS, because socioeconomic status is a central identity for both. Students that are considered first-generation may also be considered low-income, as family income dictates the educational opportunities available to a student. As determined by the U.S Census Bureau, low-income levels vary by the size of the family unit and the state of residence. As an example, as of January 31, 2017, a family of four in the state of Virginia is considered low-income if their annual income is below $36,900 (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017). This can also be calculated as a family income equal to 150% of the poverty level amount. For the purposes of this project, I will consider FGCS as low-income as well.

FGCS: Characteristics and Challenges

There is no single profile of what a FGCS looks like; rather, this profile constitutes several distinct characteristics. For one, FGCS often come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds with low levels of academic preparation (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Experiencing a university environment as an ethnic or racial minority brings challenges of its own, especially on campuses that are predominantly white. Students may face discrimination and the lack of academic preparation in high school can hinder their performance upon arrival their first semester. Compared to their non-FGCS counterparts, these characteristics often place FGCS at a disadvantage in their experiences as they pursue a university education.

FGCS students also tend to be older, less likely to receive financial support from their parents, and likely to have other responsibilities outside of their university demands (Engle & Tito, 2008). For example, students may have outside jobs or may be responsible for caring for elderly family members. These outside responsibilities take up a student's time that may otherwise be spent on their academics or extracurricular involvements. Kuh (2008) found that FGCS tend not to participate in "high impact educational practices" as often as non-FGCS, even though evidence shows that they would benefit just as much or even more so. Examples of these educational practices include learning communities, first-year seminars, common book experiences, studying abroad, and other experiences that enhance an undergraduate career. Some of these experiences can also enhance social interaction among students, and lack of involvement could pose extra challenges in forming and developing close interpersonal relationships with faculty and peers.

Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) found that FGCS tend to live off-campus, which makes it hard for them to establish friendships that are readily available in residence halls on campus. Living off-campus can result in less participation in extracurricular activities, sporting events, or volunteer work. It is also more likely for FGCS to enroll in and earn fewer credit hours, work more hours, participate less in out-of-class activities, have fewer non-academic peer interactions, and earn lower grades, when compared to their non-FGCS peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). These findings together show that FGCS tend to devote their time outside of class to other priorities, which are often not the same for non-FGCS. Perhaps for these reasons, FGCS are more likely to leave their four-year universities at the end of their first year that non-first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Individuals with college-educated parents reap the benefits of cultural capital, which is the "degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the 'dominant' culture of a society" (Bills, 2000, p. 90). This takes the form of understanding what the college experience is like and what to expect, because it has been passed down to them from their parents. FGCS, on the other hand, lack this cultural capital; they are less likely to fully understand how a college education can affect their personal and professional development. Cultural capital can also be conceptualized as the "codebook" idea developed by Jehangir (2010) that was earlier discussed. These students must figure many things on their own, such as what activities to participate in, when to seek assistance from professors, and what opportunities are available to build their resume.

A key obstacle that underlies all the barriers FGCS face is their ability to function and thrive in two opposing worlds. Hsiao (1992) states that the two competing worlds for FGCS are home life and higher education life. For FGCS, the idea of leaving home is often one that is hard for all, as many families depend on them for support. As mentioned before, FGCS must figure out how to live in a new world, as the university environment is unknown to them due to a lack of cultural capital.

This idea of a duality can also be explained as "code-switching," a sociolinguistics term that describes how bilingual speakers alternate between languages in interactions with other bilinguals (Heller, 1988 in Molinsky, 2007). Molinsky (2007) builds on this notion to describe moving between two *cultural* systems as cross-cultural code-switching. More specifically, cross-cultural code-switching is "the act of purposefully modifying one's behavior in an interaction in a foreign setting in order to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior" (Molinsky, 2007, p. 624). For a situation to quality as cross-cultural code-switching, it must have norms that are unfamiliar to the switcher or in conflict with values of the switcher.

Molinsky (2007) also explores the emotional challenges faced by an individual who is constantly engaging in cross-cultural code-switching, such as threats to a sense of efficacy and conflict with his or her values. This can result in embarrassment, performance anxiety, or even feelings of guilt and distress (Molinsky, 2007). Even if individuals understand the cultural differences and are motivated to adapt to changes in their environment, they may be "unable to cope with the emotional challenges of switching behavior in a particular encounter" (Molinsky, 2007, p. 32). This idea of cross-cultural code-switching is evident in the experiences of FGCS. As discussed above, the university environment can be a whole new culture for students who are the first in their families to seek a higher education. To find their way through this new environment, FGCS constantly engage in cross-cultural code-switching. They also often realize and acknowledge that they will need help in realizing their academic potential to successfully transitioning into their new college life.

Involvement

Student involvement is described by Astin (1984) to be the amount of time and energy a student spends on his or her academic experience. A student who is highly involved devotes a lot of time to his or her studies, spends a good amount of time on campus, is part of campus organizations, and interacts with friends and faculty. On the other hand, an uninvolved student does not spend much time on studies, is not on campus much, does not participate in campus organizations, and has few interactions with friends and faculty. The spectrum of involvement is wide for students on a university campus as each student crafts his or her own unique experience.

Astin (1984) reviews different pedagogical theories that such as subject matter theory, resource theory, and individualized theory. He suggests these theories can account for the actions of faculty and administrators at colleges and universities in regard to how and what they provide

to their students. Subject matter theory, also known as content theory, poses that "student learning and development depend on exposure to the right subject matter" (Astin, 1984, p. 520). This approach places a large emphasis on course content, most often delivered in the form of a lecture by a professor with specialized knowledge of the content matter. The downside to subject matter theory is that it may exclude students that are underprepared for the rigor of university academics, or those that have no "intrinsic interest in the subject matter of a particular course" (Astin, 1984, p. 520). Resource theory is focused on providing students with the right resources, such as physical facilities, human resources and fiscal resources (Astin, 1984).

While subject matter theory was central to professors, resource theory is often the concern of college administrators as they believe "acquisition of resources is their most important duty" (Astin, 1984, p. 520). However, there is often a trade-off between the quality and quantity of resources, and just as important as it is to have the resources, their use and deployment is also vital to the student. The individualized theory poses that there is no single approach that will be adequate for all students, but rather the needs of the student should be met in whatever way necessary (Astin, 1984). This can take the form of course electives, advising and counseling, independent studies, and self-paced instruction. Of course, the greatest limitation to an individualized approach is how expensive and time-consuming it can may be to implement (Astin, 1984). Realistically, there are unlimited ways of implementing individualized approaches, because it is unique to every student and their individual needs. Astin (1984) concludes that subject matter theory, resource theory, and individualized theory all focus on developmental outcomes, the *what* of student development.

On the other hand, student involvement theory is concerned with the "behavioral mechanisms that facilitate student development, the *how"* (Astin, 1984, p. 522). Student

involvement theory suggests the "most precious institutional resource may be student time" (Astin, 1984, p. 522). For example, if participation in research labs and an experience in a field practicum is of utmost importance to psychology majors, the extent to which psychology students reach these goals is a function of the time they spend working on research alongside a professor and their experiences outside the classroom in a practicum position. University administrators and faculty ought to be aware that virtually every policy and practice affects the way students spend their time and the effort they put towards their academics. The more time students devote to outside things such as family, friends, and other activities, the more there will be a reduction in time for their educational pursuits. Since involvement theory is rooted in a study of college dropouts, results indicate what kinds of activities retain students. Although not specific to FGCS, the findings shed light on significant environmental factors that contribute to student retention.

The most obvious environmental factor was the students' place of residence, regardless of their sex, race, ability status, or family background. A student who lives in an on-campus residence hall can get more involved in all aspects of campus life because of physical proximity. The convenience of living in the middle of the campus action can contribute to developing a strong identification and attachment to undergraduate life. The study also found that students who join social fraternities and sororities or participate in any type of extracurricular activity are less likely to drop out. Some extracurricular activities can be sports teams, honors programs, ROTC, and undergraduate research. An interesting finding was regarding the "fit" of students at their respective college. Students find it easier to be involved when they can identify with their college environment (Astin, 1984).

While this research is dated, it is consistent with more recent work on the involvement of FGCS by Pascarella et al. (2004). They found that FGCS who participated in extracurricular activities had more positive effects in their critical thinking skills, educational degree plans and aspirations, sense of control over their academic success, and preference for higher-order thinking tasks than students who did not participate in such activities. Other research has explored whether FGCS involvement has an impact on their later success. Inkelas, Daver, Vogt and Leonard (2006) found that participating in living-learning communities helped FGCS with the academic and social transition to college compared to FGCS who did not participate in a living-learning community.

Also, results from a 2014 Gallup poll show that there are six experiences (the "Big Six") that strongly relate to whether students felt that their university prepared them for life after college. The "Big Six" may have also increased the students' chances of receiving their degrees on time. These results were found from a web study of nearly 30,000 U.S. adults who had completed a Bachelor's degree. Out of the six experiences, the most strongly agreed to, by 63% of survey respondents, was having "at least one professor who made me excited about learning" (Gallup, 2014). On the other hand, with only 22% strongly agreeing, was having "a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams" (Gallup, 2014). Other experiences included working on a project that took a semester or longer, having an internship that allowed the student to apply classroom content, and being active in extracurricular activities and organizations (Gallup, 2014). The poll found that 82% of students who strongly agreed to having all six experiences as an undergraduate student also strongly agreed that their universities prepared them well for life after graduation (Gallup, 2014). Seymour and Lopez (2015) suggest that universities should "create on-campus environments that harbor the necessary experiences to

increase preparedness and four-year attainment rates" and including "deep, experiential learning and faculty care and support".

Further research has explored ways in which service learning courses and mentorship by faculty can enhance a student's educational and social experiences. In service learning courses, which gained popularity in the early 20th century, "students are encouraged to identify social issues, examine and analyze them" with the goal of accomplishing social change (McKay & Estrella, 2008, p. 359). The key of a successful service learning experience is the critical guided reflection, used to integrate the academic content back to the service experience. Faculty decide to adopt service learning into their curriculum because it engages students in social issues and can teach them the value of community and citizenship, while enhancing critical thinking, writing, and oral communication skills (McKay & Rozee, 2004). Even better, service learning encourages student-faculty interaction, which in turn encourages student autonomy and commitment to the task at hand. The obvious need for proper communication between student and faculty member in and outside of the classroom enhances the potential for stronger student-faculty ties and interactions. This can also result in a mentor-like relationship between the students and faculty. Research shows that mentoring can reduce the barriers to successful college experiences by giving FGCS an opportunity to cultivate a relationship with someone that can guide them through an unknown place.

McKay and Estrella's (2008) research on the benefits of service learning courses for FGCS resulted in three important findings. The first is that interaction with faculty is a significant factor in realizing academic and social integration. The second is that the quality of student-faculty interaction is related to the students' perceptions that they will accomplish short- and long-term academic goals. Lastly, service learning can act as a link in facilitating the process

of goal completion and academic and social integration. Students reported that service learning courses and community volunteering provided them with motivation and enthusiasm about the work they were doing. They reported that the opportunity to have conversations with faculty and their peers was key to understanding the academic activities and their own personal growth.

Students also shared reasons for why they believed service learning courses can encourage them to participate in other community service projects. Again, three themes emerged: ways in which their work contributed to achieving goals of working with their community, ways in which the course gave them the opportunity to accomplish important work, and ways in which their work elucidated their understanding of the concept of social justice (McKay & Estrella, 2008). The most important finding was that participating in service learning courses can positively impact the ability and motivation of FGCS to achieve academic goals. Overall, the study confirmed the important role of communication between FGCS and faculty regarding service learning courses as way to enhancing student academic success.

Another important line of research by Wang (2012) explored the memorable messages FGCS receive from on campus mentors. Mentors are incredibly helpful for FGCS, as their parents often lack the college experience needed to understand their children's experiences (Wang, 2012). This means FGCS need to find guidance from a more knowledgeable source and turn to college mentors, since they do know what it is like to experience university life. Wang (2012) posits that memorable messages remain salient through a student's college experiences and mentors' messages serve as a support system and socializing force.

After coding 476 pages of interview transcripts, Wang (2012) found that FGCS received a wide array of messages from their mentors, resulting in five distinct themes about either academics or family. The five types of messages regarding academics included pursuing

academic success, valuing their education, increasing future potential, making decisions, and general support and encouragement. For the family theme, messages were about comparing and contrasting between the student's and mentor's families, counting on family, and recognizing the importance of family. FGCS in this study revealed that their mentors shared these messages with them early on in their college life and vividly remembered how these messages impacted their decision making. These findings demonstrate the importance of memorable messages from mentors in shaping a student's university and career experiences.

Institutional Efforts

The Pell Institute report (2008) on the status of FGCS describes various ways in which college can promote the success of its FGCS. The report acknowledges the challenges faced by FGCS and describes four ways institutions can provide for these students. The first way is to focus on the first year. Pascarella et al. (2003) found that 60% of low-income and first-generation students leave after their first year. For this reason, it is important for universities to implement bridge courses and programs the summer between high school graduation during the first semester of college. Bridge courses and programs bring students and often their parents to campus for a preview of college life. Campus administrations can use this space to communicate the university's expectations in regards to academics and residential life. Involving parents is important because it can help them understand the academic and social demands that will be placed on their children (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Since FGCS are known to delay getting involved when they arrive on campus, Engle and Tinto (2008) advise institutions to make concerted efforts to reach out to students as early and as often as possible during the first year. Another way to provide for FGCS is to monitor student progress in their coursework, perhaps by developing early warning or advising systems and

intervening when necessary. Programs like this would allow students to take action before it is too late, if their academic performance is on the verge of academic suspension or expulsion. Universities could take action to provide FGCS with advising, counseling and tutoring, or study skills workshops and courses. They note that in order for these programs to be successful there has to be a high degree of collaboration and information-sharing between faculty in the classroom, staff in support offices, and the students themselves. It is clear that these programs would help all students succeed in college, but research has shown that they are especially effective with FGCS.

The next method provided by Engle and Tinto (2008) to provide for FGCS is simply providing them with more support. This must be a wide range of academic support programs, like developmental coursework, learning and tutoring centers, supplemental instruction, and learning communities. It is key that these programs align with the specific student needs in the classroom, as it will be easier for the student to translate that back to their academic performance. Aside from academic success, Engle and Tinto (2008) also note that FGCS also need and will benefit from social support services like academic advising, personal and career counseling, and mentoring programs. Programs that are exclusively for at-risk populations such as FGCS and low-income students, "scale down" the college experience as they provide individualized attentions, services and referrals from dedicated staff who act as "first responders" to students' needs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students may also perceive these programs as a type of "home base" on campus where they can connect with their peers that have similar backgrounds and experiences.

The last two methods for institutions seeking to provide for their FGCS are to increase student engagement and to create a culture of success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The authors pose

that faculty should find ways to require students to get more involved in their learning process and interact more with their peers. Institutions need to first teach their own faculty and staff the proper ways to target at-risk populations like FGCS. To create a culture of success, there must be strong leadership from top administrators so it can trickle down to campus leaders and later to the students themselves. Retention of FGCS should be a primary goal and institutions should allocate the proper resources to all the programs described above. It is best if these campus-wide initiatives and programs are intentional, structured, and require coordination and collaboration from different functional units (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Thayer (2000) states that "in order to be successful, interventions must address the obstacles often associated with low-income and first-generation college students" (p. 5). Usually these are lack of financial resources, lack of knowledge of the campus environment, academic expectations, bureaucratic operations, lack of adequate academic preparation, and lack of family support. In addition, Thayer (2000) states that interventions must "ease the difficulties of the transition to college, mitigate to some degree the cultural conflict students encounter between home and college community, and help create a more supportive welcoming campus environment" (p. 5). Such comprehensive programs ought to be multifaceted and included resources for students to improve their academic skills, promote connections with student activities and support services, and find connections with major, academic disciplines and faculty in and outside the classroom.

The research is clear, pointing to the differences and challenges faced by FGCS and similar at-risk student groups. The solution is for institutions to step forward and provide for students, going further than covering the cost of tuition or room and board. Providing "entry to and a road map through the institutions" is what truly helps FGCS excel and thrive during their

undergraduate year (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 26). Pascarella et al. (2004) conclude that "access to higher education must be understood to mean not only admission to some postsecondary institution, but also access to the full range of college experiences and to the personal, social and economic benefits of which those experiences and degree completion lead" (p. 281). As such, "it would be a cruel irony if current financial aid policies and packages removed the barriers to college attendance for first-generation college students but then had the effect of denying them the opportunity to participate fully in the educational experiences and benefits that lay beyond the collegiate threshold" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 281).

Director of JMU's Health Center, Dr. Lee Ward, and colleagues Michael Siegel and Zebulun Davenport wrote a book dedicated to understanding and improving the experience of FGCS from recruitment to commencement (2012). The book's six chapters provide an overview of FGCS and their transition into and through college, and provides readers with a holistic approach to student success. Ward et al. (2012) pose that efforts to support first-generation college students must be made by faculty and staff through intentional collaboration. Furthermore, they suggest that such a systems approach should be taken; to "integrate people, programs and services" that "accounts for and balances competing interests, prepares campuses for the unanticipated consequences of otherwise reasonable actions and wraps students in a cohesive and supportive environment that would otherwise appear segmented" (p. 106). They pose short and long term changes institutions can take to focus on the success of their first-generation college students. Ward et al.'s recommendations echo that of Engle and Tinto's (2008), Thayer (2000) and Pascarella et al (2004).

The first thing universities can start to do is increase and distribute faculty and staff knowledge regarding the circumstances and needs of FGCS, so they can serve as mentors and

role models. Since parents of FGCS are not usually actively involved in their child's academic or extracurricular pursuits, staff and faculty could serve to develop relationships with students that will help them navigate college. Another action universities may take is to develop a library of retention resources related to FGCS, promoting common readings and conducting forums and discussions. In doing so, there could be an increase in the knowledge of faculty and staff about FGCS. To create a campus culture that understands and appreciates the differences between FGCS and non-FGCS, the authors suggest instilling in FGCS the "importance of institutional norms, values, and culture" (p. 108). Other short-term changes institutions can begin making are to provide targeted orientation programs for FGCS and advising FGCS in ways that help them understand their academic, experiential, and career options. While it is important for institutions to develop and implement such changes, it is also critical to evaluate these efforts. By benchmarking institutional efforts relative to FGCS of other institutions, a university can understand what is working and what is not.

Ward et al. (2012) acknowledge that some of the barriers impeding FGCS's success are systemic issues such as poverty and segregation, unequal resources and dysfunctional educational practices and student success is "a puzzle with few easy solutions" (p. 110). There are some caveats about working with FGCS and programs that target FGCS should be developed and implemented with sensitivity. There exists the danger of creating a stigma based on this group's unique identity and life circumstances.

The authors provide recommendations for future practice to conclude their book. The first is to treat student success broadly and holistically; success is not just retention, but also engagement in campus life, both in and out of the classroom setting. Institutions should also create a cross-divisional infrastructure that is committed to assessment, improvement and

institutional change. Collaboration that is intentional and thoughtfully developed may provide

students with the best outcomes because it provides context for discussions, initiatives, and

evaluations (Ward, 2012). Next, they suggest creating intentional pathways to student success in

the form of learning opportunities or support services. The planning of institutional activities is

critical, and faculty and staff should find purpose behind such activities so that students are

engaged and learning. Ward et al. pose that by identifying the best practices on each campus,

administrators can analyze what programs are already set in place and how they can be

improved, rather than just adding another program. They emphasize the following:

> "colleges and universities should employ systemic and comprehensive efforts to identify,
> develop and maintain programs that address both academic and nonacademic efforts in an
> integrated manner" (p. 122).

These systems, which can essentially be scholarship programs, are carrying out the duty of a

university to provide for its FGCS. Because FGCS do not arrive at college with a "codebook" for

university life, university programs provide them this know-how. Providing FGCS these tools

and resources will not only retain them, but encourage them to get involved in their university

and surrounding community.

Chapter 5: James Madison University's Centennial Scholars Program

My undergraduate institution, James Madison University, has its own program to provide support for first-generation and low-income students. It is called the Centennial Scholars Program (CSP) and was founded in the spring of 2004. At that time, JMU's Commission on Diversity found that many students were not applying to the university because of financial need. CSP would become the solution to this and would increase the culture of diversity at JMU. According to their website, CSP has graduated over 500 students and maintains an 88% graduation rate. The CSP offices are housed in the Student Success Center and are run by three professional staff members as well as fifteen graduate assistants.

The mission statement of the Centennial Scholars Program is as follows: *"The Centennial Scholars Program provides financial assistance and a multi-level academic support network, to retain eligible under-represented students. We believe that qualified and deserving students who are not able to finance the cost of attending college should have the opportunity to graduate from a higher-education institution. In addition, we feel that a holistic support system is essential in order to provide assistance and help students grow throughout their undergraduate careers"* (Centennial Scholars Program, n.d.). To meet their mission, the program offers its scholars a multi-tiered support network upon their arrival at JMU. It is important to highlight that the program has a focus on all-around support, not limited to financial support, to help students grow and develop.

Prospective students must first be accepted to JMU before they can apply to the Centennial Scholars Program as applications become available in mid-January. Regardless of whether students applied during the early action wave or regular decision, they can still apply to CSP once they receive their offer of admission. To be eligible, students must be residents of

Virginia and demonstrate financial need as determined by the Free Application for Financial Student Aid. Students should also demonstrate an interest in the program activities, such as group meetings, community service, and professional development. Applications must be turned in by the deadline in mid-March and within 3-4 weeks, they will be contacted with a decision. If all requirements are met, candidates will be invited to an on-campus interview. Interviews usually take place during the last week of March or beginning of April. The interview consists of questions regarding the student's educational and career goals and how becoming a Centennial Scholar will impact his or her college career.

Within one to two weeks, students are notified of the final decision. According to the CSP website, financial eligibility only determines a student's ability to receive an interview, and the interview is what determines if students are accepted into the program or not. JMU's Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships has to verify tax information make sure students are indeed eligible.

The benefits Centennial scholars receive are essential to their success at JMU. In terms of financial assistance, scholars receive a full scholarship. The funds cover tuition and room and board for four years for first-year students and two years for transfer students. (Note that CSP also offers graduate students the same benefits, but the focus of this project will be on the undergraduate student body.) Scholars are provided with academic support, such as required study hall hours during their first semester and a requirement of a minimum 3.0 cumulative GPA. Personal and professional development is possible through culturally enriching activities and career-oriented workshops. For example, a requirement of scholars is to complete 100 hours of community service every year in the Harrisonburg community. Scholars volunteer with many local agencies such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and Second Home.

To foster a sense of community, each scholar is assigned to a small cohort with other undergraduate students in CSP. Cohorts are led by graduate assistant (GA) mentors who hold mandatory group meetings every week. In addition to small group meetings, all scholars are required to attend bi-weekly large group meetings. Both the large and small group meetings serve the purpose of social and professional development. Workshops are usually presented about different topics pertinent to student life and success. Students are also required to meet with Mrs. Diane Strawbridge, the executive director of Student Access & Inclusion and their graduate assistant mentor throughout the year. CSP does not allow students to hold outside employment while in CSP, unless approved by Mrs. Strawbridge.

Interview with Mrs. Diane Strawbridge

To gain more perspective about Centennial Scholars and its operations, I conducted an interview with Mrs. Diane Strawbridge. After the inception of the program in 2004, she was hired as the executive director. When the program first started, there were only fifty students in the cohort and four graduate assistants. Mrs. Strawbridge quickly took initiative to structure the program, because only the financial resources had been established. The program is funded through state grants, federal Pell grants, and available JMU scholarships.

At first, students were selected to participate in the program based on their financial need; no outside application had been developed yet. Mrs. Strawbridge noted that her job for a while was to educate the students about Centennial Scholars and its goals. Many students did not seem to believe that they had been granted a full scholarship, but were excited to participate in the program. Now more than a decade later, CSP receives over 200 applications each academic year and conducts over 100 interviews. However, the scholarship funds and program resources only

accommodate fifty students. According to Mrs. Strawbridge, the interview portion of the application process is what determines whether a student will be admitted to the program.

The interview is very important to Mrs. Strawbridge, as she wants to get to know each student on a personal level. It must be completed in person and is conducted with graduate assistants, council members, and Mrs. Strawbridge herself. The program has developed a rubric on which to rate prospective scholars. However, she says it is the "intangibles" they look for, a desire to participate in the program and leadership, among other characteristics. The prospective scholars have already been admitted to JMU, so she says she does not bother asking about high school grades or involvement. Rather, she wants to make sure they know what to expect from the program and what they can contribute. Mrs. Strawbridge said that these interviews often become very emotionally charged, as students may break down in tears when talking about their family life situations. The interview gives prospective scholars a chance to show the program who they are, hoping to exceed the expectations set forth and be granted admission into the program.

Mrs. Strawbridge said she makes it very clear to students that "it is a full ride, but there are a lot of strings attached" (personal communication, February 6, 2017). These "strings" include the weekly and biweekly small and large group meetings, community service hours, and study hall requirements. After my interview and conversation with her, what seem to be the greatest benefits for scholars are mentorship and a sense of community. CSP is intentional with all its requirements for scholars and its programming, as they want to ensure that students are benefitting from the program and enriching their undergraduate experiences.

Mrs. Strawbridge references higher education literature as evidence for the importance of mentorship for students. She says, "They need someone that is in their corner… that won't judge or critique them… this person is not always giving advice, it can be someone [students] can

simply go and talk to" (D. Strawbridge, personal communication, February 6, 2017). The GA

mentors help scholars out in any area of life, but mostly with the challenge of balancing school

and outside demands. Mrs. Strawbridge notes that underrepresented students usually have a lot

of things going on at home, such as illness or death in the family or may be responsible for

providing for their family financially. Even though most first-year students may have a hard time

adjusting to college life, for underrepresented students, she believes these struggles hit harder.

Since students often play caretaker roles in their families; they feel pressured by their families.

The issue is that CSP is also pulling on the students and they need to choose where to direct their

time and attention. This puts students in a position to make important decisions, which Mrs.

Strawbridge views as a role reversal. Sometimes mentors are faced with the duty of asking

students questions like "do you really need to go home?" or "what's more important at this

moment?" in hopes that students recognize they must place their education first.

It is especially important that scholars and mentors build a sense of trust and have shared

experiences. Mrs. Strawbridge said this is the great thing about the graduate assistants, as they

have been in the scholars' shoes. All GAs have attended undergraduate universities and are

currently students themselves. Two of the current GAs are completing their doctoral degrees, so

they have several years of practice of maintaining a proper school-and-work-life balance. Several

of the GAs also come from underrepresented student groups, which is another area of similarity

for further connection with the undergraduate students. This mentorship can help ease the

transition of college life for many students. Students and GAs are in constant communication and

meet during small group time, as well as outside of small group in individual meetings.

Mrs. Strawbridge also views herself as a mentor to the scholars, and some may regard her

as a family member or authority figure. She said it is "important for [her] to know the students,

up close and personal" and she strives to cultivate relationships with all of them (D. Strawbridge, personal communication, February 6, 2017). Scholars can request to meet with her or she can also request to meet with them. Right now, mid-way through the spring semester, she is meeting with the senior cohort to get a sense of their post-JMU plans, whether it is more schooling or joining the workforce. Mrs. Strawbridge does not only mentor the undergraduate scholars; she also mentors and supervises her fifteen graduate assistants. She meets with them individually to see how they are adjusting to their new roles and addresses any concerns they may have about their small group or specific scholars.

For Mrs. Strawbridge, it is all about fostering relationships. She admits it takes time to build great relationships, but that is why CSP has small group and large group meetings. Scholars form friendships with their small group peers and their cohorts. The GAs have the duty to help their small groups gel and bond. Mrs. Strawbridge said there are some groups that are very tight and connected. This is an extra support system for students and many of them share personal things with each other during small group meetings or with their GAs. For underrepresented or first-generation college students, this support system and community network is instrumental for their well-being and success.

CSP tracks student success regularly to make sure all scholars are fulfilling their requirements. The program reaches out to all the professors of all scholars to get feedback on their grades, attendance, and skill level. Mrs. Strawbridge said professors are generous with their time and provide good comments. Scholars must give CSP access to their transcripts and all grades. Mrs. Strawbridge said that analyses comparing Centennial scholars' academic success to the rest of the JMU students shows that scholars are equal to or surpass their peers academically. CSP boasts a graduation rate of 88%, while James Madison University's overall rate is 82%.

Mrs. Strawbridge believes this rate is high because of all the support systems built into the program. She views them as safeguards for students that may not know how to navigate a university campus and lifestyle. Mrs. Strawbridge said, "you can give students all the money in the world, but that does not make students successful" (personal communication, February 6, 2017). These students often do not have an example of a college student because they may be first-generation students, whose parents or other family members have not attended college.

Centennial Scholars are great students and very involved on campus and Mrs. Strawbridge reflects on their efforts and dedication. She notes that the program does not officially track students' on- and off-campus involvement, but she is aware that they are involved. Mrs. Strawbridge notes that some scholars are residential advisors, Orientation Peer Advisers, and overall leaders on campus. Some scholars are involved with the Center for Multicultural Student Services and Diversity Education Empowerment Program (D.E.E.P.) Impact. D.E.E.P. Impact develops programs and services to increase awareness and celebrate the diversity of all JMU students. One scholar in particular was able to take his involvement on campus and make a career out of it. At JMU, he served as the editor of *The Breeze*, the campus newspaper, and now he works at *The New York Times*.

Mrs. Strawbridge believes CSP allows students to embrace campus life and she is proud of what students are achieving after they graduate from JMU. For the 10-year anniversary of CSP, Mrs. Strawbridge developed a mentorship program that pairs program alumni with current scholars. This mentorship is yet another great resource for scholars because they can talk about careers, life after JMU, and life in general with their alumni mentors. The program hosts a Meet-and-Greet event during homecoming, which has seen high attendance year after year. Mrs. Strawbridge notes that the program does not push for alumni giving, as many of them want to

give back on their own. Most of the most recent alumni say they want to wait until they reach a place of financial stability before they donate to the program.

When I asked her about students' family involvement within the program, Mrs. Strawbridge noted that, in general, families are not too actively involved. A lot of students have parents that work to support younger siblings and other family members. Students' families usually play a hands-off role, as they do not know what university life is like and want their student to experience it fully. It is unusual for families to give back monetarily to the program, because of their low-income standing. Regardless, the CSP staff aims to reach out to families and share with them their students' accomplishments. Mrs. Strawbridge notes that she enjoys meeting the parents and families of the scholars, because it helps her understand the students better.

During family weekend in the fall semester, CSP hosts an annual breakfast and welcomes all CSP families. Each year, over 200 people attend and it allows the program to connect with parents and family members. CSP creates a presentation with photos and videos to show families what their students are up to, both at JMU and in the program. Mrs. Strawbridge addresses the group and shares important updates. She also recruits current scholars, from freshmen to seniors, to talk to the crowd about their experiences. This is an important time, she says, because it is great to see the pride and happiness present in all the scholars' families.

Overall, Mrs. Strawbridge has very positive views of the Centennial Scholars Program and is proud of the successes of its scholars. She believes participating in CSP is life-altering for students and can change their career and educational goals. It also opens their eyes to the needs of the community and many students continue to serve even after graduation. Mrs. Strawbridge said, "research shows that students that are involved in their campus community are more likely

to be retained" which is important for the program and for JMU (personal communication, February 6, 2017).

The Centennial Scholars Program is doing a great service to James Madison University. The diversity of scholars, in terms of race and ethnicity, cultural, sexuality, majors, and many other characteristics is remarkable. Mrs. Strawbridge notes that some people are shocked at the diversity that can be found within cohorts of the program.

Her hopes for future directions are for the program to grow. She wishes she could serve more students and provide them with more opportunities, but "money and funding only go so far" (D. Strawbridge, personal communication, February 6, 2017). Even though the program only serves fifty students of an incoming class of about four-thousand, she said that is good enough for her. She appreciates the connections she cultivates with scholars and the sense of community that is fostered through small group mentorship.

Mrs. Strawbridge also notes that CSP has helped debunk some myths about underrepresented students. Her scholars have a reputation among faculty for being great students and campus leaders. The feedback she has received from faculty is very encouraging. She even recalls some professors stating, "I should have known [that student] was a Centennial Scholar" because of the scholar's drive and excellence in the classroom (D. Strawbridge, personal communication, February 6, 2017).

To provide a better idea of a typical scholar, Mrs. Strawbridge shared with me a story of a student who came into her office feeling overwhelmed and anxious about meeting requirements. This scholar is on the pre-medical track, he or she are in the Honors College, have taken seventeen to eighteen credits each semester of their career, serves as a teaching assistant, is preparing to take the MCAT, and is on track to publish a research article co-authored by a

professor. With all of that going on, this scholar kept up an impressive 3.7 GPA, on top of fulfilling all the requirements for CSP. This is just one type of student that participates in the Centennial Scholars Program. Mrs. Strawbridge's concluding remarks regarding CSP were that she believes CSP is making a difference, on campus and for the lives and education of its scholars. "The beauty of Centennial Scholars is that social economics crosses all identities" as all scholars have significant financial need, but vary widely in their cultural backgrounds, interests and life experiences. The Centennial Scholars Program is proud to be a resource for underrepresented students at James Madison University (D. Strawbridge, personal communication, February 6, 2017).

A Picture of the Centennial Scholars Program

To get a better idea of what JMU was like for Centennial Scholars Program students, I observed several meetings. Mrs. Strawbridge put in touch with one of the graduate assistants of a small group and invited me to attend large group meetings, where I observed and took notes.

During the fall semester, I attended several small group meetings for a cohort led by a GA currently in the School Counseling program. The meetings usually started with a quick presentation by the GA and then discussion of the presentation. There was also an icebreaker activity for students to get to know each other better since they were all from different years and majors. At the end of the meeting, there was an open forum when students could share upcoming service or social events. The next couple of small group meetings I attended all had a theme that guided the discussion for the day. For example, one meeting was dedicated to stress relief and students shared different techniques for how to manage classes and outside activities.

The large group meetings that semester were centered around the theme of leadership. After students found their seat, Mrs. Strawbridge or Mrs. Yankey (assistant director) would

announce reminders. Some announcements were about filling out the FAFSA, study abroad opportunities, alternative break program opportunities, and reminders to utilize university resources such as the Madison Advising Peers, the University Recreation Center adventure trips, and Career and Academic Planning. Students used the large group meetings to reconnect with friends and GA mentors.

A large group meeting I attended early in the fall semester consisted of a gallery walk activity. There were printouts of quotes from world leaders about leadership hung up around the room. We were to walk around quietly and read each quote and decide which one we agreed with the most. At the end of the allotted time, each quote had around four to five people next to it. In our groups, we got a poster board and markers and were tasked with drawing a picture to describe our leadership quote. All groups presented to the larger group and shared their ideas of what leadership was like. This was an interesting exercise because we all heard different perspectives of leadership.

The next large group meeting consisted of a presentation conducted by the Dux Center, which serves as a "leadership resource clearing house for the university" (Dux Center, 2012). Two student leaders gave a presentation on the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership model. This model states that leaders are effective when they model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Their presentation was informative and engaging; they had the group playing games like Simon Says and participating in a leadership circle activity. I noticed that during the large group meetings, groups of students usually congregated together and used the time before and after the meeting to catch up and chat. Scholars seem to form close ties with peers in their cohorts and the rest of the program.

Another large group meeting I attended in my time shadowing the Centennial Scholars Program was provided by another external campus organization. This time, it was a presentation regarding the importance of mental health provided by the JMU Counseling Center. The presenters were a doctoral student with an internship position at the center, a staff psychologist, and three undergraduate students. The undergraduate students were psychology majors completing a field placement practicum and independent study course. The presentation provided the audience with basic information about mental health and warning signs of panic attacks in friends or in themselves. This material was timely, as the week of the presentation was midway in the semester, known to students as a time of many assignments and midterm exams. The presenters also shared with students the different resources available to them provided by the Counseling Center. Students were surprised to hear about the Oasis and the Studio, spaces that allow students time to relax and conduct their own type of therapy by using massage chairs and yoga mats or creating art using a variety of art supplies. After their presentation, students could cycle through different stations and try out different therapy techniques. Some of the more popular stations included the coloring and art station and the aromatherapy station. The presenters also answered individual student questions.

December Graduation Reception

At the end of the fall semester, CSP held a reception for students graduating in December, to congratulate them and allow them to say a word to the rest of the scholars still in the program. I had the opportunity to attend this event and listen to the senior speeches. The reception was held in the same room the large group meetings are usually in, but this time it was decorated nicely and catered by JMU Dining Services. After everyone was seated, Mrs.

Strawbridge spoke and congratulated those that were graduating as they each received a certificate and goody bag.

Next, the first of three senior men spoke to the group. In telling his story, he said he believes JMU invests in the Centennial Scholars Program students by providing them with full financial assistance and resources like Mrs. Strawbridge and the graduate assistants. As a business major, he said he views the success of CSP scholars as a return on investment for JMU. He credits Mrs. Strawbridge for never giving up on him, even when he did not care much for school. Before coming to JMU, he did not believe education was worth it. A lot of his friends had earned Associate's Degrees and entered the workforce. However, he said once he was accepted to JMU and CSP, his mindset completely changed. He said the ability to receive his Bachelor's degree at no cost to his family and with a great support system is something he will forever be grateful for.

The next senior was addressing not only the rest of CSP and staff, but also his grandparents who were in the audience. He talked about his experiences as a resident advisor, which provided him with extra pay since the CSP scholarship pays for room and board. His advice for his peers was to get involved and find something they are passionate about. He pointed to his small groups and GA as being great support and resources. At first, he said having to do 100 hours of community service seemed daunting, but he was lucky to have found Second Home. Second Home is an after-school care program for students from marginalized populations and volunteers can provide individual help with reading, math, homework, and creative activities. This student said he started as a general volunteer, but as the years went on, worked his way up to become a volunteer teacher. He said Second Home is easily his favorite place in all of Harrisonburg and he will miss it greatly. After he concluded his speech, Mrs. Strawbridge told

the audience about the great generosity of his grandparents. They are so grateful for CSP and for Mrs. Strawbridge that they have pledged to donate every year until the total amount equals a scholarship for another CSP scholar. This got a lot of applause and praise from the audience. However, as noted before, this type of financial support from families is not common in CSP.

The last student to speak also focused on the support network within CSP. He said many times when he did not know what to do regarding his academics or career, he relied on his GA, older scholars, and the program staff. He said CSP gave him an amazing opportunity and even allowed him to study abroad twice during his time at JMU. He said that, compared to his friends at the local community college, he had done much better. He credits the program's resources for helping him pick his academic and career path and reaching his goal.

To conclude the reception, Mrs. Strawbridge gave some more remarks to encourage current scholars to keep up with schoolwork and involvement, as they soon would be graduating and sharing their experiences to a new set of CSP cohorts.

Alumni Panel

Another large group meeting Mrs. Strawbridge encouraged me to attend was an alumni panel. There were six alumni of the program, three males and three females. To begin the panel discussion, they introduced themselves and share about their current occupations. Their graduation years varied from 2008 and 2009, to 2011 and 2014. Several of them were School of Media Arts and Design majors, one was a Computer Science major and another was a Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication major. The financial benefits of CSP are also available to graduate students, and the panel participants took full advantage of that opportunity. Most of them also stayed at JMU thanks to CSP and obtained their Masters in Adult Education and Human Resources. All but two of the alumni currently work for Booz Allen Hamilton, a

management consulting firm located in Northern Virginia. The other two work at Deloitte, another management consulting firm, and for James Madison University's study abroad office. After introductions, planned questions were asked by a staff moderator and each panelist took a turn to answer them.

The first question was "What was the transition from being a college student to a fulltime working professional like for you?" They each had different college experiences, but an emerging theme was the wisdom and mentorship they were able to find in CSP. A lot of the advice they gave to students was about getting involved on campus. They stressed that involvement in on-campus organizations brings many benefits, such as social relationships, leadership growth, and professional connections. During their time at JMU, the panelists were involved in a range of organizations, such as social fraternities and sororities, student government, service organizations and pre-professional organization.

One of the panelists said that because she did not have to get a job during her undergraduate career, she got involved in many different organizations and clubs. Later, this involvement and the connections she fostered rewarded her with a job offer at Booz Allen Hamilton. She said, "do good work and be kind to people and you will succeed". Others stressed the importance of being happy with your job and career, and feeling fulfilled in what you do.

Some of the panelists shared about their difficulties with the transition from college into the workforce. It was mostly regarding scheduling and finding work-and-life balance, which is common struggle for many students. It was clear that most of them had felt overwhelmed or anxious during their transition, but they knew to ask for help wherever they could find it. The same panelist that credited her job to her JMU involvement said she had a seamless transition to work life. She was proud to say she had not struggled, as she felt that CSP had been great

preparation. This was because, she said, she took full advantage of all the resources CSP provided her with. She spoke fondly about her small group leaders and peers, and of Mrs. Strawbridge's support and guidance.

Next, they were asked about college habits that translate to success in the future. They mostly said to listen to advisors, professors, mentors and most importantly, Mrs. Strawbridge. They advised students to find mentors at different levels; not just faculty and staff, but also their own peers. Some of the panelists touched on time management and finding an appropriate balance between work/school and life, especially in setting priorities and sticking to them. They discussed how CSP give scholars "structure" and noted that scholars may perceive it as criticism or "bossy-ness", but instead this is just additional support students not in CSP do not have. One panelist also brought up the requirement of community service hours, but reframed to translate service to mean serving your boss, clients, and coworkers. She encouraged students to foster in themselves a "servant heart and attitude," as she believes others look to these kinds of individuals for guidance and support.

The alumni panel also shared lessons they have learned, now that they are all professionals in the workforce. One thoughtful saying was that "bad times are temporary" as a couple of the panelists shared difficult experiences they have faced in their workplace. They made students aware of the importance of balance because work life is very different from college life. One of the alumni said her identity as an ambitious young and single black woman was often taken advantage of. She talked of instances when her co-workers, middle-aged white men with families, would "dump" their work on her desk knowing that she would get it done. She said at first, she did the work, because she wanted to show she was passionate about her job and could do it, but later realized it was not her work to begin with. While it is impossible to

determine the exact cause of her co-workers' behavior, this anecdote served as an example of the trials one experiences upon entering the workforce. The panelist said it was important to learn who they were, to discover their identity, and values and beliefs. Their advice was also to surround yourself with good people, especially people that will push you and help you grow.

The final question was "if they could go back and spend their time at JMU differently, what would they do differently?" The first panelist to answer this question said that she would have loved to study abroad. The rest of the panelists agreed, and noted that the fear of missing out stopped them for studying abroad when they were students. Perhaps like other recent college graduates, this left them with a great sense of regret. One panelist said she used CSP funds to study abroad during her undergraduate years and it was one of the best decisions she made. Other than study abroad, the other panelists wished they had gotten more involved and suggested that, although CSP is a great community at JMU, that current scholars ought to look for other communities in organizations and clubs on campus. One of them specifically noted that she would have liked to participate in more alternative breaks, as it is a fun way to give back to the community.

The panelists also focused on practicing self-care and developing a network while in CSP. They emphasized the great opportunity current scholars have in their CSP journey. A lot of the panelists work together and have been able to maintain close connections with each other. They credit this to CSP as it allowed them to connect while they were undergraduates. The panelists also encouraged scholars to take advantage of the diversity within CSP and of all it has to offer in terms of support.

At the end of the alumni panel discussion, the floor was opened to questions or comments from the audience. Final words of advice that emerged here included things such as "autograph

your work with excellence" and "value yourself and know what you have to offer". Another piece of advice was to step up to a leadership role, whether it be in an organization or club, or in more interpersonal settings such as mentorship. They said that there are CSP alumni in all fields and they are constantly seeking ways to give back to the program, so scholars ought to look out for opportunities such as internships or job offers. All in all, their final words to the whole group were to make the most of their JMU experience and not be afraid to reach out to them in the future for career opportunities. The meeting concluded and the alumni went to dinner with some scholars, while others were asking final questions and exchanging contact information.

CSP Scholars Involvement

The Centennial Scholars Program is providing its scholars with plenty of resources to get involved in their campus and local communities. Research shows that involvement and engagement allows students to make more of their undergraduate experiences. For this project, I conducted a brief, anonymous survey to explore what type of involvement scholars were engaging in. The survey questions were inspired by The Ohio State University's Student Life Survey (2015) regarding student involvement and belonging conducted by the Center for the Study of Student Life. Google Forms was used as the platform to administer the survey and the link was posted on the CSP Canvas site, accessible to all scholars. At a large group meeting, I asked for scholars to fill out the survey that would help my project about the Centennial Scholars Program.

The survey asked students what type of student organizations they were a part of and the reasons for their involvement (see Appendix). Other questions were regarding on campus involvement and events, such as Student Org Night, the University Recreation Center and sporting events. Students were also asked how connected they felt to the university community

and how satisfied they were with their experiences in the Centennial Scholars Program. At the end of the survey, demographic information was included. Thirty-eight students completed the survey; 25 of students identified themselves as first-generation college students while 13 did not. All class ranks were represented, with nine first-year students, 11 sophomores, 14 juniors, and four seniors. Twenty-eight students were females and 10 were males. In terms of race and ethnicity, the largest group identified as White/European American (14 students). There were nine African American students, six Latino/Hispanic Americans, six of multiple races or ethnicities, two Asian Americans and one Middle Eastern student.

Overall, the results show that CSP scholars are actively involved on campus, with 63% of the survey respondents selecting that they are part of a community service organization. Since CSP places a requirement on students to complete 100 hours of community service each year, it makes sense that students would join organization that would allow them to do service. The other types of student organizations scholars are involved in are academic and educational organizations (31%) and cultural organizations (29%). Students also reported being involved in special interest organizations (16%), religious or spiritual organizations (13%), and visual and performing arts organizations (11%). When asked why students chose to join a student organization, the overwhelming majority (84%) said it was due to personal interest in the organization. Other common reasons were to "have fun" (73%), to "make new friends" (71%), to "give back to the community" (55%) and to "build my resume" (53%). On the other hand, when asked why they chose not to join a student organization, 74% of students said the time commitment. Other reasons for not joining a student organization were the need to focus on their academics and finances.

JMU organizes Student Org Night in the fall and spring semesters to showcase all the clubs and organizations available to students. This is the primary way students join clubs and organizations and meet other like-minded students. The University Program Board (UPB) is an organization dedicated to providing fun on-campus events for students, such as movies, late night breakfasts, concerts, trivia nights, and comedy shows. The University Recreation Center is JMU's on-campus gym and sports facility.

The following is a summary of the results from questions regarding other involvement:

- 63% participated in on-campus events more than once a month

    o 29% participate less than once a month

- 77% of the students reported attending Student Org Night.

- 79% said they use the University Recreation Center

- 74% of the survey respondents reported attending UPB events.

There were some questions with a high response rate of "no", which I found surprising knowing how involved and engaged CSP scholars were. Only three out of the 38 students had participated in an alternative break program and six had completed undergraduate research. None of the survey respondents had been residential advisors or hall directors and only eight had participated in a living and learning community. As the research previously mentioned states, these are enriching activities that contribute to student satisfaction and retention.

Students were also asked about their sense of belonging and satisfaction. On a scale of one to seven, one being not at all connected and seven being very connected, they were asked how connected they felt to the JMU community. The mean answer was a 4.9 (SD = 1.3).

The next question, of satisfaction with experiences at JMU saw a unique pattern of responses. Again, a scale of one to seven was used, one corresponding with strongly disagree and

seven with strongly agree. The mean answer was a 5.3 (SD= 1.5) . Results for the question regarding experiences in the Centennial Scholars Program were encouraging, the mean was 6.4 (SD = 0.8). Out of all the questions, this and the ones about campus organization involvement seem to be the most telling. Even a small survey of 38 CSP scholars shows that they are indeed very involved on campus, especially community service organization and attending events, and they are also satisfied with their experiences in CSP.

To compare these results with a control group, a convenience sample of JMU students was asked to complete the same survey. Twenty-five students completed the survey, and results showed that they were just as involved as CSP scholars, but in different ways. Of these 25 students, seven reported being first-generation. There were five seniors, 18 juniors, and two sophomores. Seventeen students were female and eight were male. All were psychology majors.

Responses to what kind of student organizations they were a part of showed that 52% belong to community service organizations, 36% to academic educational organizations, and 32% to honors societies. The top common reasons for joining student organizations were the same as the CSP sample, 88% out of personal interest, 68% to both build resume and have fun, 64% to make more friends and give back to the community. In this sample, an overwhelming amount (92%) of students said they chose not to join a student organization because of the time commitment. The results to other involvement questions are as follows:

- 48% participated in on-campus events more than once a month
    - Another 48% less than once a month
- 84% attended Student Org Night
- 88% use the University Rec Center
- 84% reported having attended a sporting event on campus this school year

- 44% complete undergraduate research

Questions regarding their sense of belonging and satisfaction, using a seven-point scale to indicate their connectedness to the JMU community and satisfaction with JMU. An average response of 5.2 (SD = 1.08) was reported for connectedness, and an average of 5.96 (SD = 0.87) for satisfaction with JMU. While on the surface these survey results point to different groups of engaged JMU students, their methods of involvement are somewhat different as noted above. It would not be appropriate to conclude that one group is more involved than the other. Rather, they are both involved, but the CSP scholars reported more community involvement and the psychology majors were more involved in academic matters.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Other Similar Scholarship Programs for FGCS

James Madison's Centennial Scholars Program was modeled after the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program is a nationally recognized model in its efforts to increase diversity among future leaders in science, engineering and related fields. This program consists of a nomination-based application process open to prospective students interested in the sciences or engineering and who are interested in "the advancement of minorities in those fields" (Meyerhoff Scholars, n.d.).

The eligibility criteria are very competitive, with high cut-offs for SAT scores and GPAs. Students must also aspire to obtain a Ph.D. or M.D./Ph.D. in math, science, computer science, or engineering and display a commitment to community service. The program is highly structured and adheres to thirteen key components, thought to be a proven formula for success. Some of these components include: a mandatory six-week Summer Bridge program for all incoming students, study groups, personal advising and counseling, summer research internships, and mentors. Since 1993, over 1000 Meyerhoff Scholars have graduated from the program and continued to receive advanced degrees (Meyerhoff Scholars, n.d.). According to their website, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program is having a dramatically positive impact on their number of minority students succeeding in STEM fields.

Although JMU's Centennial Scholars Program was modeled after the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, all its components did not carry over to JMU. The greatest difference is that JMU's program is not exclusive to a specific area of study, as undergraduate students from any major can participate in CSP. Additionally, Centennial Scholars does not include a summer program for its incoming class like the Meyerhoff Program does. For the most part, however, the thirteen components of the Meyerhoff Program are loosely represented in the Centennial Scholars

Program. Both programs maintain an emphasis on program values such as striving for academic achievement, supporting each other, and participating in community service.

Virginia Tech, another large state institution in Virginia, also has a program for first-generation and low income students. Virginia Tech actually has four types of Presidential Campus Enrichment Awards, which seek to broaden multicultural experiences at their university. The purpose of all four are to "attract students of diverse backgrounds and provide opportunities to contribute to the Virginia Tech Community" (Office of University Scholarships and Financial Aid, n.d.). The one my sister is participating in is the Presidential Scholarship Initiative, one of the four awards. It is described as "a competitive scholarship program designed to offset the cost of college for in-state Virginia high school students with significant financial need" (Office of University Scholarships and Financial Aid, n.d.). According to the program website, a maximum of 50 Virginia residents will be awarded a four-year scholarship and welcomed into "a comprehensive academic and social support community" annually (Office of University Scholarships and Financial Aid, n.d.). According to their website, scholars are provided with social and community-building activities, faculty and student mentoring, academic support and enrichment, and a designated student orientation.

To be eligible for the scholarship, students must be Virginia residents, graduate from a Virginia high school, be Pell grant eligible with significant financial need, demonstrate potential for academic excellence, and show evidence of leadership potential. The website notes that preference will be given to students of first-generation families. Students do not need to apply to this scholarship separately because they will be considered using their admissions application and Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The selection committee has developed a formula that considers Federal Pell Grant eligibility, strength of academic record and test scores, first-

generation status, and family size. The candidates with the highest ranking will be selected for the scholarship each year.

Table 1 is a chart depicting the different features of three programs, to illustrate their commonalities and differences. It is important to note that the Meyerhoff Scholars program is recognized as a national model. Different institutions have different ways of providing for their FGCS, and it is up to each individual institution to decide what approach to take. While not all institutions have specialized programs for first-generation college students, this is definitely not an exhaustive list of the programs. Other scholarship programs geared towards first-generation college students with similar features as the three discussed in this project include Carolina Firsts at the University of North Carolina, the FIRST Program at Clemson University, and the First Generation Program at the University of Central Florida.

Features	Centennial Scholars Program (JMU)	Presidential Scholarship Initiative (Virginia Tech)	Meyerhoff Scholars (UMBC)
Recruitment efforts			✓
Financial aid (full-ride scholarships)	✓	✓	✓
Summer program		✓	✓
Program values	✓	✓	✓
Study groups			✓
Program community	✓		✓
Personal advising	✓	✓	✓
Tutoring			✓
Summer internships			✓
Mentors	✓		✓
Faculty involvement			✓
Administrative involvement and public support	✓	✓	✓
Family involvement	✓		✓
Commitment to service	✓		✓
Professional development	✓	✓	✓

Table 1

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

My experiences as a first-generation college student navigating the college application process and subsequent college life have been incredibly fulfilling. I can proudly say, "I did it!" when I receive my diploma this coming May, and I'll be the first in my family to do so. However, I am always curious about the what-ifs and could-have-beens. I am not in the Centennial Scholars Program at James Madison and could not take advantage of all the benefits provided to the scholars. However, as part of the Honors College at JMU I did benefit from small, specialized courses, mentorship and advising, and exclusive opportunities such as being a teaching assistant and attending professional conferences. My sister, on the other hand, is fortunate enough to be in the Presidential Scholarship Initiative at Virginia Tech. I wondered how different our experiences would be during our four years of college. This curiosity about first-generation college students and scholarship programs led me to develop the idea for this project.

As the demographic make-up of American universities shift, more attention is being directed towards students from underrepresented groups. Research has focused on the experiences of first-generation and low-income students. As defined by the Office of Postsecondary Education, first-generation college students are those whose parents did not receive a college degree. The Pell Institute (2004) published a report that explored the status and experiences of FGCS in higher education. FGCS seemed to experience less success than their non-FGCS right from the beginning. As found in this study and many others, characteristics of FGCS are that they:

- Tend to come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds
- Are less likely to receive financial support from parents

- Have other responsibilities outside of being a college student

- Earn fewer credit hours

- Work more hours on non-classwork

- Participate less in out-of-class activities

- Have fewer non-academic peer interactions

- Are more likely to drop out after their first year than non-FGCS peers

But there is a reason for optimism. Thanks to scholarship programs established at several universities, some FGCS no longer have to worry about finances, or at least not about paying for school. This means they do not have to find part time jobs to cover the costs and can devote more time to their academics. In the case of JMU's Centennial Scholars, students are not to hold any job unless approved of by Mrs. Strawbridge, the program's executive director. The scholarship seems to buy students more time, time they can devote to their academics and career. Just as important is involvement and engagement in their campus community. Involvement was defined by Astin (1984) as any amount of time and energy a student spends on their academic experience. Pascarella et al. (2004) found evidence that FGCS who participated in extracurricular activities had more positive outcomes, compared to non-FGCS peers.

Furthermore, when universities devote time and energy into a scholarship program for FGCS, they are creating a "codebook" for students. Jehangir (2010) states that these students "must discover the modus operandi in a learning environment that often undermines or ignores their lived experiences, both in and outside the classroom" (p. 6). While not an actual codebook, providing students with the cultural capital of the college environment helps them find ways to make their experiences meaningful.

To gain a deeper understanding of the specific benefits offered by these types of programs, I explored the Centennial Scholars Program at James Madison University and Presidential Scholarship Initiative at Virginia Tech, as well as a national model, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at University of Maryland Baltimore College. These programs are providing students with full financial support, as well as with the "codebook" to navigate college life.

The requirements set forth for Centennial scholars are just more ways to encourage them to get involved and be active students. They must complete 100 hours of community service, perhaps a reason for why many of them have joined community service organizations. The reasons for joining student organizations were personal interest, to have fun and to give back to the community. CSP places a great emphasis on relationship and community building and most students reported high satisfaction with their experiences in the program. Student speeches and alumni panels demonstrated that CSP scholars value the mentorship and community embedded within CSP. Overall, scholars in CSP are not only attending college free of cost, but they are also active students, in both the CSP and the broader JMU communities.

While I attended CSP events and as I talked to scholars, I wonder if my experiences would have been dramatically different if I were in CSP. I have been very involved both in my academics and in service-oriented activities and organizations. I did not have the "codebook" or a mentor helping me through college life. But, what I do have is a supportive and encouraging family, especially a hard-working mother who always wants the best for me. Although they did not know the process or what I was experiencing while I was at school, they always supported me. They encouraged me to apply for different programs and opportunities, they cheered for me when I received scholarships and never stop telling me how proud they are of me. I am thankful for the circumstances that shaped me into an independent young woman and for the endless

support of my family. Not all students can count on this support, it can be challenging for FGCS'

families to understand the value of an education. My sister and I, while we had very different

levels of institutional support while in college, can both count on the support and encouragement

of our family.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are clear limitations to this project; the biggest is that it was not an empirical

research study. An alternative approach to exploring FGCS and their involvement could have

been executed. I would have liked to follow a group of Centennial scholars, FGCS not in CSP,

and non-FGCS through the course of the year, noting their involvement on campus. However,

this would be a correlational study, where I would be examining two fundamentally different sets

of students. In other words, an issue with this would be lack of random assignment, as

acceptance to CSP consists of an application and interview process. It would be ideal to

randomly assign students to either participate and reap the benefits of CSP and another group to

experience JMU without CSP and follow them during their undergraduate years. However, this

method would be both practically and ethically questionable and impossible, since it involves a

paid college education. Also, knowing that being a part of such a program can result in positive

effects for students, it would not be correct to deprive students of it.

On the other hand, the comparisons available between my sister and myself are important

to consider. We had a lot of natural controls as we grew up in the same family, attended the same

high school, and are of the same socioeconomic status. However, she has the opportunity to have

her college paid for and participate in exclusive events only for PSI students, as well as receive

mentorship and attend multicultural events on campus. I was not awarded a full-ride scholarship

and did not have the privilege to take advantage of the benefits provided to Centennial cholars. It

was through the Honors College that I was able to explore my passion for service, enhance my academic experience, and be part of a community that allowed to experience JMU through a different lens. It is interesting, we both were successful for a variety of reasons. As a graduating senior reflecting on my four years on JMU, I am grateful that I was an involved and active student. It is my hope that my sister will be able to look back and think the same of her experiences at Virginia Tech.

Another limitation to the current project is the small sample size for the involvement survey. CSP has over 100 scholars, yet only 38 filled out the survey. This may have skewed the results, as I am not sure if those 38 scholars were representative of the entire group. As mentioned earlier, there are many different scholarship programs set in place for FGCS all around the country. Further research can explore the efforts of other public institutions as well as private institutions in regards to the level of student involvement and engagement.

While it had its limitations, my investigation provided insight into the Centennial Scholars Program at JMU and the Presidential Scholarship Initiative at Virginia Tech. These two were discussed in detail, with regards to their application process (or lack thereof), requirements of students, and specific student benefits. From my experiences observing different CSP events and in my interview with Mrs. Strawbridge, it is clear that CSP wants to cultivate a community within JMU and create strong relationships. Survey results from scholars show that they are actively involved, and highly satisfied with their experiences at JMU and with Centennial Scholars. Virginia Tech's PSI is lacking some of this community and relationship building, as my sister noted that she does not know other students that are part of the program. And while I was able to navigate my undergraduate life without CSP, I believe that is more telling of my personality, supportive family, and excellent high school, not the program itself.

In conclusion, scholarship programs that provide students with a "codebook" for their college experience are also buying students time, which can be used to get more involved. Involvement in college life greatly enhances students' experiences and can major advantages in the career and professional goals of students. Institutions should create targeted scholarship programs complete with mentorship, professional development and a commitment to service in order to provide for its FGCS.

Appendix

1. What type of student organizations are you involved in? Select all that apply.
    - ☐ Academic/Educational
    - ☐ Community Service
    - ☐ Cultural
    - ☐ Honors Societies
    - ☐ Media/Publications
    - ☐ Political
    - ☐ Religious/Spiritual
    - ☐ Social Sorority/Fraternity
    - ☐ Student Government
    - ☐ Social Justice
    - ☐ Special Interest
    - ☐ Sports
    - ☐ Visual/Performing Arts

2. Why have you chosen to join a student organization or club? Select all that apply.
    - ☐ Personal interests
    - ☐ Make new friends
    - ☐ Build my resume
    - ☐ Gain leadership skills
    - ☐ Professional networking
    - ☐ Give back to the community
    - ☐ Have fun
    - ☐ Other: _____

3. Why have you chosen not to join a student organization? Select all that apply.
    - ☐ Time commitment
    - ☐ Need to focus on academics
    - ☐ Finances
    - ☐ Work conflict
    - ☐ Family commitments
    - ☐ Other: _____

4. How often do you participate in on-campus events?
    a. Never
    b. Less than once a month
    c. More than once a month

5. Do you participate in intramural sports?
    (Yes) or (No)

6. Have you been to Student Org Night?
    (Yes) or (No)

7. Do you use the University Recreation Center (UREC)?
    (Yes) or (No)

8. Do you attend University Program Board events? (Ex: movies, late night breakfasts, concerts, trivia nights, comedians, etc.)
    (Yes) or (No)

9. Have you attended a sporting event on campus this year?
    (Yes) or (No)

10. Did you participate in 1787 August Orientation as a first-year or transfer student?
    (Yes) or (No)

11. Have you participated in an alternative break program? (Ex: weekend breaks, spring breaks, January breaks)
    (Yes) or (No)

12. Have you completed undergraduate research?
    (Yes) or (No)

13. Have you been a Residential Advisor or Hall Director?
    (Yes) or (No)

14. Have you participated in a living and learning community?
    (Yes) or (No)

15. How connected do you feel to the JMU community?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all connected						Very connected

16. Overall, I am satisfied with my experiences at James Madison University.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree			Neither agree or disagree			Strongly Agree

17. Overall, I am satisfied with my experiences in the Centennial Scholars Program.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree			Neither agree or disagree			Strongly Agree

18. Are you a first-generation student?
(Yes) or (No)

19. What is your class rank?
- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

20. What is your gender?
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Transgender male
- ☐ Transgender female
- ☐ Genderqueer/gender conforming
- ☐ Prefer not to state

21. What is your race/ethnicity?
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Asian American
- ☐ Latino(a)/Hispanic American
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ White/European American
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Multiple races/ethnicities

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