AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Genia M. Bettencourt for the degree of Master of Science in College Student Services Administration presented on April 16, 2010.
Title: First Generation Students in Clubs and Organizations.

Abstract approved:

Janet Nishihara

Existing literature on first generation students focuses on the challenges these students encounter in arriving at and persisting within higher education. The area of first generation student involvement, particularly within clubs and organizations on campus, is relatively unknown. In this study, I conducted nine qualitative interviews with first generation students regarding their perceptions on joining clubs and organizations. Sub-questions asked how first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations to join and what factors influence their joining and persistence. From those interviews, three themes emerged: (a) the ability to make a difference through the organization, (b) the pursuit of social and cultural capital, and (c) the desire to maximize the college experience. This information may allow practitioners to help first generation students select meaningful avenues of involvement, leading to greater persistence and satisfaction within higher education.
First Generation Students in Clubs and Organizations

by
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A THESIS
submitted to
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science

Presented April 16, 2010
Commencement June 2010

APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Genia M. Bettencourt, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a tremendous thank you to the many individuals who made my graduate career successful, including:

- My major professor, Janet Nishihara, for her support, perspective, and edits.
- Dwaine Plaza, Tom Scheuermann, and Patricia Moran as members of my thesis committee for sharing their expertise and feedback.
- Clare Creighton and Giustina Pelosi, for their mentorship and guidance.
- Kate Normandin, Karen Clegg, and Heather Nicole Saladino, my thesis support group, for their help and encouragement throughout the process.
- Julie Schwartz and the staff of the OSU Alumni Association for a great learning experience and a wonderful work home these past two years.
- The staff and students at the Pratt Institute for an amazing summer experience.
- All of the students and mentors that inspire me to be a part of this field.
- The nine participants in this study who graciously shared their stories with me.
- My friends, especially the Fantastic Four, for their unending support, laughter, and sense of adventure along this crazy journey.
- To my amazing family: Pai, for his support, love, and funding of many cups of coffee. John, for always being my big brother. Marjory, for her encouragement. And to my nieces (and nephew?)-Madison, Evelyn, and Baby Bettencourt 2010 for motivating me to be a better person and seize every day.
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, João Matos Bettencourt and Laura Burroughs Bettencourt, for teaching me the value of education and sacrificing to help me achieve mine.
First Generation Students in Clubs and Organizations

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Institutions of higher education often overlook the considerable number of first generation students on their campuses. Choy (2001) found that during the 1995-1996 academic year, 34% of all incoming students at four-year institutions and 53% of those at two-year colleges were first generation. These numbers likely are higher today as individual institutions report increasing numbers of first generation students in recent years, particularly as the result of the growing Hispanic population in the United States (Horwedel, 2008; Lucas, 2008). While more first generation students are enrolling within higher education, these students consistently have a high rate of attrition. Ishitani (2006) found that first generation students were 1.3 times more likely to not return for a second year. Horn (1998) found that students who stayed out after leaving university were more likely to be first generation students, composing a total of 55% of students who stayed out. These departures are often explained through a deficit model that suggests first generation students lack the skills and abilities necessary to succeed, implying that they are less prepared to succeed than their peers with college educated parents (Green, 2006). A closer look reveals a different truth: somewhere on campus, students are not getting the support and resources they need to be successful. Clearly, there is a need for support towards first generation students that has yet to be fully explored.
The factors causing first generation students to drop out of higher education may be less about academics and more about the university environment and the out-of-class experience. Lehmann (2007) found that not fitting in, not being able to relate to peers, and not identifying with the university environment were the key reasons of first generation students for withdrawing from the university. In the 25 qualitative interviews Lehmann conducted, over two thirds of the students left voluntarily for non-academic reasons. Many first generation students feel out of place at their institution regardless of their academic performance. Others report that they are trapped in an imposter complex, where they “feel as if they are unqualified and simply posing as a member of the academic community; at any time, they will be ‘found out’ and exposed for who they really are” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 89). The literature suggests community and reassurance outside of the classroom is essential to the success of first generation students.

Finding ways to address these feelings may be a crucial step in improving the experience of first generation students. Pittman and Richmond (2007) found that students who felt a sense of belonging at their university consistently performed better academically, had more confidence, and reported higher self worth. In her interviews with first generation students, Cushman (2006) noted that these students emphasized finding a place or community on campus to discuss their experiences as significant benefits to their experiences. These students cited cultural, political, and interest based organizations that served this purpose and connected them with their peers and the university. There is potential for student clubs and organizations to fill a void for
these students by providing a sense of community, along with the added benefits of leadership skills, career tools, and life experience.

**Significance of the Study**

This study provides insight into the largely unexplored involvement experience of first generation students. In their article on promoting student success, Dalton and Crosby (2008) discuss Sanford’s idea of challenge and support. Students need to be challenged in order to develop, while simultaneously receiving sufficient support to address those challenges. For first generation students, ideas of challenge and support are often discussed in the context of these students’ experience within higher education. One set of literature focuses on the academic challenges and support strategies in place for first generation students (Ashburn, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Cushman, 2007). Other research focuses on social challenges and support, primarily changing family relationships and the potential lack of support from home communities (Orbe, 2008; Dennis, Philley, & Chuateco, 2005). However, there is a large gap in the literature when it comes to the co-curricular involvement of first generation students. Further research is needed to understand how co-curricular activities play a role in this challenge and support. How are first generation students engaging in co-curricular activities? What implications could these involvements play in the overall student experience for first generation students? To understand the comprehensive experience of first generation students, educators need to understand these students’ involvement experience. Such an understanding may inform educators in their endeavors to help students find communities on campus that will support their
transition, provide resources, and lead to better retention and achievement on campus. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities had significant effects on grades and persistence by empowering students to become more invested in college and their studies. Helping first generation students to find opportunities for involvement may be the key to empowering their success on campus.

One measurable and common form of student involvement takes place through participation in clubs and organizations. An understanding of first generation students’ involvement in registered clubs and organizations may create a means to understand what factors influence students’ involvement. For many students, clubs and organizations fill vital needs within their experience and provide support that leads to retention, leadership skills, and a sense of institutional pride. Understanding how first generation students view clubs and organizations may lead institutions in creating purposeful partnerships across campus, welcoming institutional environments, and new areas of exploration.

This study focuses on the involvement of first generation students in clubs and organization for the reasons that (a) there is gap in the literature regarding this issue, (b) there is a need for further research expressed by existing literature, and (c) I am personally interested in this topic as a researcher. To fill this gap, this study will explore the research question: What are first generation students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations? Sub-questions include (a) How do first generation
students identify and select clubs and organizations to join? and (b) What factors influence their joining or persistence within a club or organization?

**Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this research is to provide insight into how and why first generation students select certain clubs and organizations to join. This study takes the form of a qualitative study. Participants were recruited from over three hundred registered clubs and organizations at a large public university using an email invitation that allowed students to self identify as first generation. Nine interviews were conducted with students to solicit their explanations on why they identified and selected certain clubs and organizations to join. The data was then coded for common themes that emerged. Although I utilized maximum variation sampling in an attempt to secure a diverse range of participants, it is crucial to recognize that the limited number of participants and use of a qualitative methodology is not intended to generalize all first generation students.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, it is crucial to standardize a few key terms. Within the literature, these terms are defined in a variety of ways. To enable the reader to understand how these specific terms shape the context of this study, definitions must be provided. The following section provides definitions for several key terms used in this thesis including (a) first generation students, (b) involvement, and (c) clubs and organizations.
First generation students. For the purpose of this study, first generation students are defined as “students whose parents have no more than a high school education” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 275). For the purpose of this study, I adopt this definition over the slightly more broad definition of Lehmann (2007) that specifies students who are the first in their family to attend college or Ishitani (2003) that “neither of their parents has a college degree” (p. 3). The rationale behind choosing the first definition is to make the study more quantifiable for potential participants and to be able to acknowledge the effect of extended families in cases where non-parental relatives play a role. Prominent researchers such as Hand and Payne (2008) support this definition by qualifying first generation status as “neither parent has even enrolled in college” (p. 4).

Involvement. For the purposes of this study, I adopted Astin’s (1993) definition of involvement as the “physical and psychological time and energy the student invests in the educational process” (p. 6). This research specifically examines involvement in the context of student clubs and organizations.

Clubs and organizations. To define a student club or organization, I utilized the registration requirements put forth by the sample site, Anonymous University. For a club or organization to be recognized it must have (a) a clearly defined, lawful purpose, (b) a lawful and ethical manner of operation that is congruent with institutional, state, and federal policy, (c) non-discrimination, (d) a grade point average minimums for student leaders, (e) a faculty advisor, (f) an accounting system to manage funds, (g) an updated constitution, and (h) annual renewal to maintain
registration. In order to be included within this study, first generation students needed to be involved in clubs and organizations that met all of the eight aforementioned components. This definition grounds the study in campus culture and provides a basic context to view involvement in clubs and organization. Once these eight requirements were met, clubs and organizations were organized into eleven categories by the institution: service, academic, honorary, co-operative, professional, sports and recreation, religious/spiritual/philosophical, social awareness/political, ethnic/cultural, media/publications, and Greek.

**Organization of Thesis**

This research examines the factors and rationale behind how first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations to join. Until now, this area has been largely underrepresented in the literature. Understanding the factors behind involvement will allow student affairs practitioners, faculty, administrators, and students to foster and support involvement for a group of students in need of support. Subsequent chapters include (a) Chapter 2: Literature Review, (b) Chapter 3: Methodology, (c) Chapter 4: Results and Discussion, (d) Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

An understanding of the literature and related research is necessary to better understand first generation college students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations. This chapter explores the dominant research on first generation student involvement. To do this, the literature is organized into three broad categories of first generation students: (a) student characteristics, (b) higher education experience, and (c) student involvement. The student characteristics section explores the demographics of first generation students, their academic performance in high school, and the impact of home communities on their college choice and experience. In the higher education experience section, I discuss pre-college preparation programs, their first year experience, and strategies to provide support within higher education. Both of these sections provide a necessary foundation to understanding first generation students. The final section covers first generation student involvement, including the benefits of participating, impact on career planning, and affect on social support. As most existing literature within the field covers the experience of traditionally aged students, readers can assume that I am referring to those students who are entering college immediately out of high school in the 18 to 24 age range unless specifically noted otherwise. The information I discuss below provides a framework that informs the research design and data analysis of this study.

Student Characteristics

**Demographic information.** There are many unique characteristics that distinguish first generation students from their peers with college-educated parents.
First generation college students are more likely to be Black or Hispanic and to come from low-income families (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Oldfield, 2007). The intersection of these multiple identities often increases the challenges facing first generation students. For example, first generation students of color can face the culture shock of dealing with a primarily white student body on campus when many of them have grown up in communities and families of color (Cushman, 2007). This culture shock can lead to feelings of additional isolation due to race or ethnicity (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Such discrepancies also play out in the students’ relationships with faculty and staff. First generation students, particularly as minorities, feel that less is expected of them (Zwerling, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). The fact that first generation status often corresponds with low income status and ethnic minorities means that first generation students often encounter multiple obstacles in their experience in higher education. They may be dealing with the challenges of being the first generation in their family to attend a higher education institution while also facing the difficulties of minimal financial resources or being a racial or ethnic minority on campus. For many first generation students, these multiple challenges make the transition to higher education exceedingly difficult.

First generation students are more likely to attend two-year colleges and major in vocational or technical fields (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Those that earn four-year degrees are more likely to choose degrees in business and social science than science, mathematics, engineering/architecture, journalism/communication, arts, and humanities. Many are driven to college by career and financial aspirations, viewing
higher education’s purpose as a means to secure a well paying and stable job (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007). Commonly, first generation students arrive on campus with less academic preparation. Chen and Carroll (2005) found that 55 percent of first generation students took remedial courses during college compared to 27 percent of students whose parents held a degree. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) found that regardless of first generations students’ belief in their own ability to succeed, they still under-perform academically when compared to their peers. These students are also more likely to experience financial need and to commute from home (Lundberg et al., 2007). Eitel and Martin (2009) highlighted the financial needs for first generation females, noting that many of their participants lacked the knowledge and skills to manage money and subsequently felt overwhelmed and constantly constrained due to limited resources.

First generation students face the momentous task of adjusting to their new environment while grappling with multiple factors that are typically foreign to their peers with college-educated parents. The lack of education within their family puts these students at a disadvantage, particularly in terms of obtaining the cultural and social capital necessary to succeed. Cultural capital consists of “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the education system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2). This leads to social capital, which creates “relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources” (Pascarella et al., 2004). First generation students who lack this foundation to
understand the system of higher education enter the college system at a deficit, creating further challenges on their ability to succeed and persist in colleges and universities.

**Academic characteristics.** Many first generation college students enter higher education at an academic deficit compared to their peers with college-educated parents. First generation students are likelier than others to be less prepared in math and English, causing them to struggle in their courses (Ashburn, 2007). Chen and Carroll (2005) found that first generation students were less academically prepared for higher education, graduating from high school with fewer high level math courses, lower senior achievement test scores, and lower college entrance exam scores. First generation students arrive on campus with less confidence about their ability to exceed, often reporting feelings of an “imposter complex” about their ability or belonging in a higher education environment (Cushman, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). This imposter complex causes them to feel unqualified about their participation within higher education, as if they do not deserve to be students and will eventually be found out and shunned for being undeserving or unqualified. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found that this was particularly true for traditional age students; for non-traditional first-generation students, life experience provided the opportunity to gain cultural and social capital that facilitated higher education success. Thus, it is clear that first generation students encounter a dual set of obstacles in academic concerns stemming from both genuine instructional needs and perceptions of
inferiority in the academic setting that create the context for their struggle to succeed in college.

**Home relationships.** Olive (2008) found that family impact on higher education begins with students’ choice to attend college or not. First generation students set their sights on a college degree to excel beyond the occupations within their household, to benefit their community one day, and to prevent the limitations they witnessed in their family’s mobility (Olive, 2008). Family can also exert direct and substantial pressure in support of education for students who may be less committed, pushing them to enroll. Dennis et al. (2005) disagreed about the nature of family motivation compared to personal motivation. They found that family expectations were unrelated to college commitment after other variables were controlled, with individual drive as the primary factor in adjustment and commitment.

Once in higher education, first generation students face changing relationships with families and home communities that may no longer be able to provide them with sufficient support. Family ties are often of exceeding importance to these students, yet the actual relationships can be equally as difficult as they are supportive. Orbe (2008) notes that students can derive support from their communities in the form of “emotional (pride and necessities), physical (money, toaster ovens, fridges, blankets, and other necessities), and logistical support (like taking them to and from campus)” (p. 90). Orbe highlights the idea that students rely on their home communities to maintain a sense of identity, refuge, and predictability. However, these home communities can also intensify the challenges first generation students face within
higher education. Many first generation students have the additional responsibility of playing key roles in their family by helping to raise siblings, managing household responsibilities, and providing financial assistance (Padron, 1992). These roles can divert students’ time and resources from their education, while costing them the emotional burden of confronting or managing relationships with those who may see higher education as frivolous. Regardless of the context of the relationship, these ties affect students and often evolve during the course of higher education as students re-evaluate their role in their home community. This most often happens when their success in enrolling in a college or university or higher education achievement runs against the values or priorities of family members (Orbe, 2008). For many students, going to college can be a point of departure that moves students into an “other” culture (London, 1992). As a result students have to renegotiate relationships with family, friends, and even their sense of self. These new relationships may or may not be able to provide encouragement, leaving many first generation students at the deficit when it comes to emotional support and approval.

**Experience in Higher Education**

The characteristics in the previous section shape the experience of these students, directly impacting their performance in college compared to peers with college-educated parents. As this experience can begin for some high school students involved in a pre-college program that promotes access, this section is organized into pre-college preparation programs, performance within the first year, and supporting first generation students in college.
**Pre-college preparation programs.** First generation students often become involved in pre-college programs through the recommendations and efforts of friends, teachers, and counselors (Engle et al., 2006). These programs help to provide students with the cultural capital to make higher education a viable option, navigate the application process, and transition more smoothly upon arrival. For dedicated students enrolled in successful programs, the effects can be profound. Yelamarthi and Mawasha (2008) found that graduates of the Science Technology and Engineering Preparation Program (STEPP) at Wright State University, a preparation program for first generation students in high school, had a higher retention rate than students in both the college and overall university. In addition to providing the necessary skills, these programs also provide students with a community to normalize and provide support during the process. Watt, Johnston, Huerta, Mendiola, and Alkan (2008) noted that for college-going seniors in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, personal bonds formed among students and between students and teachers were key. The proven nature of these programs suggest that through nurturing and creating a sense of belonging, pre-college programs can play a critical role in getting first generation students into higher education and empowering their transition.

**Performance within the first year.** Multiple researchers found that, compared to their peers, first generation students in their first year completed fewer credit hours, studied fewer hours, worked more hours, and were less likely to perceive faculty as supportive (Pascarella et al., 2004). Due to their challenges, first generation
students tend to perform at a lower level than their peers. Chen and Carroll (2005) found that first generation students have lower grade point averages than their peers, 2.5 compared to 2.8 during their first year. They are also more likely to withdraw or repeat courses they attempted.

While difficulties are apparent within the first year, it is not enough to focus support and resources merely on the initial transition and withdraw support for the subsequent duration of college. Ishitani (2006) found that first generation students face the highest risk period of departure during the second year of college, where they were 8.5 percent more likely to drop out. Clearly, services and resources need to be present beyond the initial transition to higher education. However, if provided, research suggests that first generation students may be more able to operate at a level similar to their college educated peers by the end of the second year. Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, and Terenzini (2003) suggest that by the end of the second year, students may be sufficiently resilient that deficits in their college experience do not necessarily translate into parallel disadvantages in outcomes.

**Supporting first generation students in college.** To bridge the gap that first generation students face, the research suggests creating support among family members, faculty role models and relationships, and opportunities for peer learning. Cushman (2007) recommends informing students about potential challenges, encouraging participation in advancement programs, and creating programs to keep family members informed. Ashburn (2007) elaborates on the idea of involving parents through his case study of the Dallas County community college pilot program,
designed to have students bring family members into the classroom as guest participants in order to provide a greater understanding and support around the higher education experience. Lundberg et al. (2007) encourage faculty and university personnel to form strong relationships with first generation students as a means of providing information, perspective, socialization, and mentorship. Students need a certain type of collaborative space to feel less alone, more confident in their ability to succeed in college, and more supported in their studies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Lundberg et al. noted the importance of creating collaborative learning environments in the classroom to validate these students’ experience and minimize the risk they might feel in asking questions or participating. In academics, the benefits of support from faculty, family, and peer networks are emphasized as key components to success.

Community may be particularly important for first generation students who are not part of the majority ethnicity on campus. In these cases, mentorship relationships are increasingly important (Fischer, 2007). Ishiyama (2007) found that African American low income, first generation students in a doctoral preparation program highly valued personal support by mentors, especially of those from similar backgrounds. Smith (2008) found that low-income, first generation black students benefited most from direct outreach with college knowledge, particularly about financial aid, with also upfront information about the barriers that may confront them. Regardless of race or ethnicity, students who fail to form sufficient formal and
informal social connections on campus are significantly more likely to leave than connected or involved students (Fischer, 2007).

In addition to this support, first generation students need resources and guidance to help them gain the cultural capital to navigate the new and often difficult processes of succeeding within higher education. Richardson and Skinner (1992) interviewed first generation students who emphasized the confusion behind bureaucratic and academic aspects of the institution like financial aid or the registrar’s office. First generation students often need more explicit help in navigating the new expectations and systems of college including office hours, how to format term papers, and even how to pick out key information from the syllabus (Francis & Miller, 2008). In regards to the latter, first generation students prefer detailed syllabi with information such as how to take notes for the class, descriptions of assignments, and specifics about the tests (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The combined impact of academic preparation with social support provides students with a solid foundation for their education.

**First Generation Student Involvement**

First generation students may be more focused academically, but typically have lower levels of involvement in the classroom and in co-curricular activities (Lundberg et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004). First generation students may have less involvement with acquaintances and the overall campus environment, in large part because they do not live on campus or close by. Pike and Kuh (2005) found that living on campus had a direct, positive effect on learning outcomes, the greatest total
effect of any of the student characteristics. Their argument focused on the idea that first generation students are not less engaged because of lower educational aspirations, but are simply less physically present in campus culture. Additionally, Collier and Morgan (2008) noted that first generation students tended to over-commit and have less of an understanding of time commitments in regards to academics. Their lack of cultural capital may mean that they take on unrealistic volumes of academic coursework or jobs, limiting their time for involvement.

**Benefits of involvement.** In spite of lower involvement levels, first generation students typically derive greater benefits from co-curricular involvement than their peers with college-educated parents. Dennis et al. (2005) found that first generation students achieved more significant gains from the emotional support of peers over family. Additional studies indicate that first generation students may obtain more benefits from co-curricular involvement than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Positive effects were also found in critical thinking, degree plans, sense of control for academic success, and preference for higher cognitive tasks. For Black and Hispanic first-generation students, Fischer (2007) found that involvement in formal activities contributed to greater satisfaction and greater academic success. Grayson (1997) found that social interaction for first-generation students had a positive effect on grade point average. For clubs that provide a social support network for students, this finding may suggest a benefit to involvement for first generation students. The low rates of involvement signify a discrepancy between the potential benefits and the reality of the first generation student experience.
**Career planning.** When specifically examining clubs and organizations as a form of involvement, there is a tie in to building enhanced career skills and possibilities that has strong implications for first generation students. First generation students may be more intent on pursuing education as a means to a better career path (Lundberg et al., 2007). Co-curricular activities often provide added benefits to career aspirations and individual marketability by serving as a testimony to the students’ interpersonal skills and leadership ability (Dunkel, Bray, & Wofford, 1989). Multiple studies suggest that particularly for career aspirations, leadership roles hone the interests of these students and provided them with direct, complementary skills (Dennis et al., 2005; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). As first generation students typically see career development as a primary goal of higher education, clubs and organizations may be a way of increasing their prospects.

**Social support.** Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) found that first generation students reported less disclosure of college experiences with family and friends, indicating less social support. Finding a way to navigate the stress of higher education and find support can be crucial for the success of first generation students. In her recommendations about higher education, Cushman (2006) notes the importance of finding a peer network on campus for social and emotional support. Several students in her research sought out clubs and organizations where they shared a similar culture, political orientation, or interests. These support networks can serve as a source of social and cultural capital for transitioning to the university (Pascarella et al., 2004). Moreover, they may provide a sense of stability and support in an
environment where first generation students may feel their identity shifting away from previously established roles at home (Orbe, 2008). Olive (2008) found that the negative impact of a lack of familial role models for higher education was countered by encouragement and support of at least one other individual or through organized programming. These students may experience a huge benefit in creating a support network on campus during a time when other support networks from families or home communities are operating to a lesser capacity due to changing relationships.

**Justification for the Study**

The literature review demonstrates a need for further research, including the specific areas explored within this study. There is a lack of research exploring the involvement of first generation students in clubs and organizations. Much of the literature covers the characteristics of first generation and their performance within the first year. Green (2006) emphasizes the need to understand first-generation students through “survey, interview, and observation data [that will] provide researchers and educators with a more complete picture of the academic culture, resources, attitudes, and behaviors that promote or hinder success” (p.26). In an area with little information, such data will illuminate the importance of involvement for a new demographic of students.

This research shares the stories of first-generation students and their perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations. By exploring the experiences of first generation students, this research will help universities better understand and support this group of students during their education.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This study examines first generation students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations. The primary purpose of this research is to expand upon the current literature surrounding first generation students and fill a need in understanding the experience of first generation students. As a secondary purpose, I sought to provide further insight in how to foster the success of first generation students by providing information and dialogue surrounding their involvement, specifically in clubs and organizations. This chapter describes the methodology used to gather information including (a) the research question, (b) the research perspective, (c) methodology, and (d) limitations of the study.

Research Question

This research explores the question “What are first generation students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations?” Sub-questions include (a) How do first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations to join? and (b) What factors influence their joining or persistence within a club or organization?

Research Perspective

In creating this research, I wanted to engage in a dialogue with first generation students to learn more about their selection of clubs and organizations. The factors that affect this process are complex and cannot be looked at from a superficial level. Rather, the decision to join a club or organization can be the compilation of many factors. In this study, I used an interpretive social science approach to view how
participants create and view the “ideas, relationships, symbols, and roles that they consider to be meaningful or important” (Neuman, 2004, p. 42). This approach allowed me to consider the broad spectrum of relationships, experiences, and values that can lead to joining a club or organization and how these various factors interacted with one another.

**Methodology**

This research takes the form of a qualitative study. A qualitative approach was selected for a variety of reasons. First, the goal of qualitative inquiry is “not to generalize a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2005, p. 203). Secondly, qualitative research fosters a holistic approach that involves “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). As the research question for this study was complex and multi-faceted, qualitative research allowed me to explore multiple factors and their relationship to the first generation student experience. Finally, a qualitative approach allowed me to take a more malleable approach to begin with working ideas that were ultimately solidified as data emerged during the study (Neuman, 2004).

This study incorporates both elements of phenomenological and ethnographic research. Ethnographically, the study attempts to understand a unique cultural group and the “shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time” (Creswell, 2005, p. 53). Within this study, first generation students are this cultural group. Utilizing phenomenological research, I also sought to understand the
experience around the phenomenon of selecting clubs and organizations and the lived experiences of first generation students (Creswell, 2005). By studying a smaller number of subjects more extensively, this research utilizes a deep and rich set of data to understand first generation students’ perceptions on joining clubs and organizations.

**Study site.** This study takes place at a public research institution in the Pacific Northwest, which will be hereby referred to as Anonymous University (AU). Several key factors led the researcher to select this specific site. AU offers a large and diverse database of registered student clubs and organizations, all of which provided the researcher with the ability to examine how first generation students identify and view specific categories and types in comparison to others. The proximity of the university to the researcher provided the opportunity for the study to analyze club context with a high degree of entry. Additionally, the substantial population of first generation students at AU enabled the researcher to seek participants that represented the widest possible range of the characteristics for the study.

**Sampling.** The study utilized purposeful sampling to acquire a data rich sample composed of participants “who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics for the study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 63). Participants met three criteria in order to qualify for inclusion in the study. First, all participants were first generation students, defined by Pascarella et al. (2004, p. 275) as “students whose parents had no more than a high school education.” Secondly, they served as a member of a student club or organization that fulfilled all requirements for recognition at AU during the fall of 2009. Finally, all participants had completed a minimum of 45 academic quarter
units at AU. The credit requirement allowed the researcher to examine the perspectives of students who had more exposure to opportunities for involvement regarding their choices of clubs or organizations.

Within these qualifications, I sought to find a wide range of individuals and characteristics utilizing maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2005). The degree of leadership that participants exhibited within the organization varied between new or passively involved members to highly committed leaders. Both graduate and undergraduate students were included in the sample. Participation from any one club or organization was capped at a maximum of two individuals, with every effort made to incorporate participants across the eleven categories of clubs and organizations identified by the institution: service, academic, honorary, co-operative, religious/spiritual/philosophical, social awareness/political, ethnic/cultural, sports and recreation, media/publications, professional, and Greek. By purposefully targeting a wide range of individuals, I sought to diversify the perspectives included within the study as well as to gain further insight into how various characteristics impacted the decision to join a club or organization.

**Participant recruitment.** This study used two recruitment methods to solicit participants. In the first, I utilized a gatekeeper to inform potential participants in an educational opportunities program about the study, as the department serves as an umbrella for many services dealing specifically with first generation students. The gatekeeper forwarded the recruitment email to students involved in services offered by an educational opportunities program in order to inform potential first generation
students that may be involved in a campus club or organization. Secondly, I emailed the primary contact for all registered clubs and organizations at the institution (over 300) and requested that the recruitment email be forwarded to members. The use of two strategies ensured that the study contained a significant sample size. Out of these two strategies, all participants responded as the result of the second recruitment method. Both recruitment methods allowed participants to self identify as first generation students to minimalize the discomfort of being identified (for recruitment emails, see appendix A).

Initially, a third recruitment method was included in the research design. Snowball sampling was a final safeguard to ensure that the researcher was able to secure the desired sample size of 6 to 20 participants in case other methods of recruitment proved unsuccessful. After a high response rate from emails sent to clubs and organizations, I found that snowball sampling was unnecessary and discarded it from my study. The total of nine study participants ensured the inclusion of in-depth information without the unwieldy nature and potentially superficial perspective of too large of a sample size (Creswell, 2005).

Data collection. After securing IRB approval (September 14, 2009), I sent recruitment emails to the gatekeeper with the educational opportunities program and to over 300 registered clubs and organizations. The nine interviews were scheduled on a first come, first serve basis with a maximum of two individuals from any one club or organization. Semi-structured, 30-to-60 minute interviews were conducted with individual participants to gather data about their identification and selection of clubs
and organizations. Participants received the Informed Consent Form (appendix B) prior to each interview and reviewed, clarified, and signed the information before each interview.

Interview protocol and questions (appendix C) were designed to encourage student reflection on their involvement. These questions were formulated as open-ended. They were guided by the literature to reflect common themes surrounding first generation students. To increase reliability, each interview followed the same structured protocol but clarifying questions were sometimes asked. I utilized open questions that allowed “the participants to create the options for responding” (Creswell, 2005, p. 181). Utilizing open-ended questions helped to limit the influence of the researcher on the participants and their answers. Questions were piloted with a first generation student prior to interviewing to make sure they were clear and elicited useful data (Merriam, 1998). Participants did not receive copies of the interview questions prior to the interview to prevent rehearsal of responses and to allow a natural flow of dialogue that fostered follow up questions during interviews.

Interviews took place in an agreed upon location on the AU campus. Each interview lasted 45 minutes on average. All interviews were recorded, and notes were taken during the interview as well. Following each interview, participants received an electronic copy of their signed consent form as well as a copy of the interview transcript to review as a form of member checking.

**Data analysis.** The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher for data analysis. Participants received the transcript for review to verify the authenticity
of all answers and elaborate as needed. This step allowed participants to clarify their thoughts and ensure that any findings are accurate (Creswell, 2005). Of the nine participants included in this study, only three responded and utilized the opportunity to review and modify their interview transcripts.

All of the transcripts were coded in their entirety. To preserve the anonymity of participants, all interviewees were assigned an alias and their specific clubs and organizations referred to by their category. To begin data analysis, the researcher read the interview transcription, took notes of themes and differences, and tried to obtain a sense for the data as a whole (Creswell, 2009). The researcher utilized hand analysis to identify shared patterns of thinking and behavior through thematic data analysis, as recommended by Creswell. Collected data was reviewed, segmented, and coded to find common themes or responses among participants. Lean coding was used to focus on a small number of broad themes rather than utilizing an unwieldy set of many codes (Creswell, 2005). Utilizing lean coding, the several themes emerged within the study as the perceptions’ on why first generation students join clubs and organizations.

Limitations of the Study

The constraints imposed by the abbreviated time period in which to conduct, collect, and analyze research was one of the greatest limitations of this study. Researchers may also argue that the results of this sample are not representative, as participants were not randomly selected. While maximum variation sampling provides some insight into a wide range of participants, demographic information is included in the following chapter to help prevent generalization of a whole population.
**Trustworthiness.** To increase the credibility of the data, transcripts of interviews were returned to participants for member checking (Creswell, 2005). Participants received two weeks to read and review the interview, as well as to add or correct any information that was not correct. Out of the nine students interviewed, only three choose to review and modify their transcripts. Another important limitation of this study is the lack of multiple raters for data analysis. No other researchers were trained in or performed data analysis, so no inter-rater reliability was possible.

**Generalizability.** The sample used for this study also presents limitations for generalizability of the research findings. The sample size of nine participants is a small one; furthermore, all of the participants were students of the same university. The study sample was limited to volunteers, which may affect the results of the study. The goal of this study was to provide an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon, and not to generalize a population (Creswell, 2005).

**Personal disclosure.** As the researcher of this study, I bring my biases and perspective to the topic of this study. My interest in access in higher education was inspired first by an experience I had in 2007 teaching summer school at a low-income urban elementary school to help students make significant gains prior to starting high school. Additionally, my background with clubs and organizations was impacted both by my experience joining clubs as an undergraduate at UC Davis and in advising a student leadership organization at Oregon State University. These experiences were present throughout the research process as I created interview questions, read through literature, met with participants, and wrote this document. The interpretive social
science approach used in this study implies that I am making an interpretation of the results provided, so it is necessary to acknowledge that the results of the study are clearly shaped through my own perspective. As it is impossible to completely erase my background and biases, it must be acknowledged that this document was not created in a vacuum (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). However, as much as possible I have sought to confront my assumptions, values, and prejudices through out the process to minimalize their impact.
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

As noted previously, the primary question for this study is: “what are first generation students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations?” The two sub-questions for the study are (a) How do first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations to join? and (b) What factors influence their joining or persistence within a club or organization?

The qualitative interviews generated a breadth of information about these questions that I discuss within this chapter. The first section provides an overview of the nine participants in the study and their background information. Subsequent sections focus on themes that emerged regarding each of the research questions. Three themes emerged surrounding the primary question about first generation students’ perceptions on why they joined clubs and organization: (a) the ability to make a difference through the organization, (b) the pursuit of cultural and social capital, and (c) the desire to maximize the college experience. Similar themes emerged for each of the two sub-questions. In regards to how first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations, people and environments arose as themes. For the second sub-question, factors that influenced joining or persistence were benefits, communication, time, money, subject interest, and self-initiative.

Participants

Nine participants were interviewed for this study. In order to protect the anonymity of students involved, specific involvements are referred to by their larger categories. Specific academic majors are referred to by the general discipline in which
they fall. Clubs and organizations are referred to by the category in which Anonymous University (AU) places them in order to explore in further depth the factors affecting identification and selection without compromising the confidentiality of the research. Participants are organized by (a) name assigned in this study, (b) their status as a traditional (18-24 year old) or non-traditional student (25 years or older), (c) academic major (as it fits within broad academic categories), (d) year in school, (e) gender, (f) ethnicity, (g) type of hometown, whether urban, suburban, rural, or military, (h) types of clubs and organizations the participant is involved with at AU, and (i) types of clubs and organizations that the participant considered but is not involved with at AU.

Table 1: Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Traditional/ non-traditional</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Types of clubs and organizations involved with at AU</th>
<th>Types of clubs and organizations considered, but not involved with at AU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Honorary Service</td>
<td>Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Academic Co-operative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Ethnic/cultural Sports and recreation Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Greek Professional</td>
<td>Sports Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Fifth</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Academic (3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>General science</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Ethnic/Cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
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<td>Health science, social science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Recreation Greek</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
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<td>Honorary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Professional Academic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Ethnic/Cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Honorary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General Science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Ethnic/Cultural Social Awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Professional Political</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**First Generation Students’ Perspectives**
The research question of this study focused on first generation students’ perceptions on why they join clubs and organizations. Three dominant themes arose during the coding of interview transcripts. The first regarded students’ perception of clubs and organizations as an opportunity to make a difference on campus. Several participants selected clubs or organizations that offered them the opportunity to have a strong impact on the organization or on fellow students. The second theme dealt with cultural and social capital. First generation students believed that involvement in clubs and organizations was a forum for them to acquire the skills and social networks that they otherwise lacked. The final theme centered on the fact that participants wanted to make the most out of their time in college. These students chose to be involved in clubs and organizations because they saw this participation as a way to embrace the experience to its fullest and to make the most of their time on campus. These three themes provide a strong insight into the first generation student experience and the phenomenon of their involvement.

**Making a difference.** As a whole, participants were more inclined to participate in a club or organization that allowed them to have a tangible impact on campus. This took a variety of forms across involvements. Two participants, Maria and Zach, joined Greek organizations that were in the process of forming on campus and acquiring a charter. In both cases, the participants chose not to be involved in existing Greek organizations that were not a good fit, but opted for organizations in which they could play an instrumental role in shaping the precedent and culture for
future generations. Zach described his choice to join a fraternity in the following way:

It was the attraction of doing something different and just not being the face in the crowd or a link in the chain, is how I put it often to new guys. I wanted to be the chain that holds to the top rung, to be the first. That was what attracted me.

Maria echoed many similar sentiments. She noted the opportunity to build a legacy on campus through her involvement in her multicultural sorority: “if the time ever did come where we would become an established chapter, then I’d be the first line of the first chapter.”

Although not in a founding role or Greek organization, Linda echoed this theme of joining an organization in which she could have an impact. She joined a professional organization in part to help reshape the culture and focus to one that was more socially aware: “I want to change the [organization]. I want to make them more globally conscious and think outside themselves.” Linda had a lot of passion for community outreach, shaped by many years of community volunteer work, and viewed the student organization as a way for her to synthesize her passions with her professional aspirations to create change. For these first generation students, the opportunity to create a legacy was a big factor in selecting clubs and organizations to join. For all three participants, not only did this impact their initial selection of their organization, but it also encouraged their persistence and leadership as they assumed officer roles as well.

The theme of making a difference also applied to how students viewed the opportunity to impact their peers through an organization. For Sarah, a social
awareness club offered her a means to encourage fellow students to make positive health choices. Her desire to leave a legacy among individuals of making healthier choices was a primary factor in her decision to become involved:

I actually heard of them because they were out on campus doing an event, a no smoking event, and I’m very much supportive of no smoking. I went up to them and talked to them and I thought that would be really cool to get involved with something like that because every single one of my family members has some kind of smoking, drinking, something like that and I’m the only person in my family that doesn’t. So I’d like to help other people not fall into the same patterns as their influences.

In determining where they would be able make a difference, these first generation students gravitated towards clubs and organizations that sought their immediate involvement. Several participants noted that their chosen organizations recruited them to help with a specific event or task within the first meeting. Such delegation indicated to students that the organization was highly functioning and reassured them that their contributions would be useful and valuable. Maria signed up to give tours to local high school students during the first meeting of her sorority. The task ignited her interest in the organization as a way to give back to others:

It was very impactful for me because I am the first one of my family and I am a first generation Mexican American [and] to come to college. I’m like “oh that’s really cool, I’ll talk to them about college, even though I’ve only been here for two months.”

The activity set a precedent for Maria’s involvement within the sorority and encouraged her to get increasingly involved. George honed in on one of his earliest experiences within an academic organization as hosting their annual conference at Anonymous University “for the first time in something like 15 or 20 years. That was
definitely a big thing because I got to help out with that and that was a lot of fun.”

Grace brought her experience planning pow wows to a cultural organization on campus. The opportunity to help with the event and “lend an ear or advice if needed to the younger generations” encouraged her to join the organization. For Kim specifically, the opportunity to make a difference and individually impact the organization relied on a sense of collective leadership in the group that was not hierarchical. She sought out organizations that “want everyone to be a leader. That’s why I like their style. It’s really not official at all. They want everyone to step up.”

For these first generation students, early involvement and leadership encouraged them to continue and deepen their commitment to the club or organization.

Inversely, participants were less likely to join clubs and organizations where they perceived their involvement to have little impact. For Maria, the goals and drive of an organization indicated how much she might be able to contribute to a club.

I guess productive would be the word. Whether that be if you’re in Ultimate Frisbee winning competitions or whatever, if there’s nothing to achieve for, there’s nothing that you’re really doing or outcome that you see out of it, there’s really no point for it, in my opinion.

Clubs that lacked cohesion discouraged involvement. Sarah also noted this in the group dynamics of a professional organization where cliquishness discouraged new ideas or positive change within the organization. She elaborates:

Yeah, just the established friendships. I don’t know how to explain it. I went to a meeting where there were elections for the leadership roles or whatever they call them. I thought it would be cool to run for one of them, which was outreach, I think it was volunteer outreach, like getting more volunteers. I thought that would be cool because it took me a while to figure out that there even was a [club], so I thought ‘oh, I could work on that.”’ Make other people know about it. I was running
against one other person and he told me, he goes “yeah, I don’t even really care about this position, it’ll just look good on my transcript or resume.” Because he was a brother of another person in there and everyone was friends already, it was just totally. Even though he didn’t even care really. I stood up and I told them why I wanted to do it and he stood up and said “I don’t know. It just sounds good.” And he got it. It kind of felt like this club isn’t really here to do what they’re here for.

In this study, participants often chose clubs or organizations because of their perceptions that the club or organization would allow them to create some sort of legacy on campus. The idea of legacy depended on having the organization and culture to accomplish something, and was often demonstrated to prospective members early on through their participation in smaller projects and events.

**Social and cultural capital.** First generation students arrive on campus with a deficit of cultural and social capital that hinders their knowledge, skills, education, and social relationships in higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004; Oldfield, 2007). Cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages that act as a sort of currency for facilitating students’ ease and maneuverability within higher education (Oldfield, 2007). Cultural capital fosters social capital, or the relationships that provide opportunities and resources to students (Pascarella et al, 2004). For students in this study, the theme of cultural and social capital came up as something that first generation students sought through clubs and organizations. By selecting clubs and organizations that might allow them to gain skills and knowledge while networking amongst peers, faculty, and prospective colleagues, participants attempted to overcome the challenges of being first generation and create opportunities for the future.
Clubs and organizations offered practical skills and training that gave students cultural capital. One such benefit included career skills that allowed the students to build their future employment options and aspirations. Brittany joined a Greek organization in order to enhance her knowledge of the business world. As she noted:

I knew it was a professional group and I really wanted to be a part of the group so that I could increase my knowledge of professional skills, attire, and things like that. I come from a farm, so those things aren’t necessarily high on the list.

Several participants within this study mentioned specifically looking for organizations where they could serve as a leader, which also served as a means to acquire cultural capital. George was “looking for the opportunity to be an officer because I’d never really had the opportunity to do that, to quote lead. Do speeches and all that stuff. I thought that would be a good skill to acquire.” These skills also included more specific opportunities to advance within their field of study. Sarah looked at organizations that would help her in health care aspirations. In regards to one specific academic organization, she noted that “I thought it would be a good resource and I thought it would give helpful hints and whatnot.” Cultural capital was a big lure for the participants in this study and correlated with many studies suggesting the value of these direct, complementary skills for first generation students (Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Dennis et al., 2005).

Along with practical skills, students also saw their involvement in clubs and organizations as a way to network in their career field for the future and thus earn social capital. This was particular true for students involved in academic organizations. Grace combined her passion for the sciences and Native American
culture by pursuing an organization that combined elements of both in order “to make the contacts that I wanted to make within that type of focus.” She later elaborated that involvement in the club helped her to create valuable relationships:

It helps me to keep what I’m focusing on real and to know that there are like-minded people so that I can network with them better and make contacts that hopefully will last a lifetime. And it’s supportive. It’s supportive of what my focus is.

David noted that clubs and organizations could fit into his long-term goals “in the case that I am making a connection with other professors who may be able to write letters of recommendation.” For first generation students, clubs and organizations provided a way to network with individuals with similar interests and find colleagues ranging from study buddies to job references. Thus, involvement was particularly important in acquiring cultural and social capital in a way that fostered the long-term success of first generation students.

**Maximizing the college experience.** Among many of the participants, there was a sense that joining clubs and organizations constituted embracing college and enjoying the experience to its fullest advantages. For first generation students who already face many obstacles to attending college, the experience of becoming involved on campus in a club or organization was the pinnacle of full engagement in higher education. David emphasized this connection when he explained how his background as a first-generation student played a role in joining clubs and organizations:

In my college experience I’ve wanted to excel simply because I am a first generation college student. I think it possibly could be a motivating factor, that I wanted to excel and branch out, to get as much experience as I can.
George expressed a similar sentiment that clubs and organizations were a key element in the collegiate experience. His experience as a first generation student motivated him to seek out every opportunity, making clubs and organizations crucial to his perceptions of a successful college experience. He noted that:

> Just the fact that I was going to college was a big deal because no one else in my family had done that. I felt a certain obligation to explore the facets of the school and of college as much as possible.

Maria echoed George and David. She noted that joining clubs and organizations was part of the educational experience of college, motivating her to join and lead a multicultural sorority:

> I figured why would I come here and spend all this money, and everything that I’ve done and my parents have done and not even get involved? And just course, not course, but just mozy through without even being involved?

Olive (2008) noted that first generation students set their sights on a college degree to surpass the limitations of their family in terms of occupation and mobility. For several students in this study, this was the case for their involvement. Making the most out of college meant pursuing clubs and organizations that might further their prospects and opportunities in life, allowing them a wider array of options than they witnessed in their home community. Sarah noted:

> I feel almost challenged in a way, knowing that no one in my family has gone to school. I kind of feel like its like my mission or something, and it makes me proud of myself just for jumping over those hurdles because my family. Like, my mom is a homemaker, we live on a farm, and my dad is a sign painter. My brother lives at home and he’s 28 years old, and my other brother is 30 and he also lives at home. I just want to break out of that shell, so I think joining clubs is a big part of that.
Although less direct, Kim discussed the same theme in her own motivation to get involved and succeed in new ways. When asked what role being a first generation student played in Kim’s decision to join clubs and organizations, Kim answered:

My parents are always talking about how they want me to go to college and do so much better. So I feel like coming to college is not enough. I have to excel in college and get more involved in things. I think it played a really big role. Feeling that I needed to be more involved in things, I guess, comes from that background of trying to do better. Or do better for myself.

In this theme, it is crucial to note that participants viewed involvement as a positive endeavor within their education. Clubs and organizations were a complement to the academic experience that enhanced first generation students’ experience beyond the basic college coursework to create a well rounded and fulfilling endeavor. These findings correlate in part with existing research that involvement in formal activities contributed to greater satisfaction for some first generation students (Fischer, 2007).

Identifying and Selecting Clubs and Organizations

In answering the first sub-question regarding how first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations to join, a dominant theme that emerged was the conflicting role of people and environment. In many ways, first generation students utilized individual relationships or connections to help navigate the process of involvement. Students joined clubs based on recommendations from others, the chance to work with certain individuals, or a positive and welcoming group dynamic. At the same time, individuals discouraged participants when they created environments that were unwelcoming or stereotypical. The dominant influences that
came up within this study were peers, parents, professors and staff, sense of community, and wariness of stereotypes.

**Peers.** Peers played a large role in determining which clubs and organizations first generation students considered. Peers provided information about opportunities available, invited participants to meetings, and even attended meetings as well. Many of these direct, individual interactions served as positive influences on involvement. In one instance, Linda sought the opportunity to work with a specific student leader. She explained:

I was in a class with a student and last year she was voted in as Vice President. We lost our President over the summer so our VP turned into our President last year. She was in a lot of my classes. She’s vocal, she’s the Energizer Bunny, she got the information out there rather than possibly being on the right listserv and getting an email that you had to weed through. She was there, in your face, saying “we should try this, we should do this.” Then when she was elected as an officer it was like “we’re going to change this.” And she did. She was quite dynamic. If she wasn’t there, I might have gone to the first meeting to the next set officers to see and if it wasn’t a good meeting then I might not have chosen to do that. But there she was up on the board of officers and I was like ‘okay, she’s not going let it slide too much.’

Brittany joined a recreational dance club in order to provide support to a friend: “One of my good friends, she’s the President. I felt like part of the reason that I should join was so that she’d have support behind her.”

**Parents.** Since first generation students do not have parents with college experience, there were few direct recommendations or little advice given about joining clubs and organizations. The impact that did trickle down was both positive and
challenging. When Zach shared his decision to join a Greek organization, his family was slightly opposed at first:

My dad was against it at first, for the first couple of years. I guess I didn’t really tell him what we did or why I joined, anything like that. It was just kind like, I’m in a fraternity, here it is. All he had to go off was Animal House and Van Wilder. So, I think that is why he was kind of against it.

George had the opposite experience. His parents encouraged involvement, and paid his dues to join an honorary organization on campus. Although they did not make specific recommendations on what to join, they were very supportive in general of clubs and organizations:

They’re really gung-ho about that sort of collegiate stuff and they always promoted being in the honor society in high school. This is pretty much the honor society for college. That and the scholarships, they wanted me to get as much money as possible.

**Professors and staff.** As with peers, first generation students heard about clubs and organizations through professors and staff on campus. In fact, the rationale behind joining a club or organization often paralleled that seen in regards to peers. Students sought to join an organization based on a personal recommendation from a trusted mentor or for the opportunity to gain further exposure to a faculty or staff member. Grace embodied the first. She considered an academic club after a personal communication from an advisor: “I guess she had heard about me somewhere on campus and so it was more of a personal email, it wasn’t like a blanket email.” The advisor later went on to recommend her involvement in another organization. David was recommended to join an academic organization by a professor: “he’s the
professor in charge of the club. I think every club has to have a faculty advisor, so he’s the faculty advisor for that. And he’s just my favorite professor.”

Linda’s involvement emphasized the second idea. She jumped at an academic organization sponsored by her college in part for the opportunity to work with faculty members. The individual contact was more than she received through other forums. She clarified:

Our dean is our advisor. While I won’t spend a lot of time with her, it’s nice to hear advice and approaches. And have her know who I am, if need be. Even if we didn’t have an advisor who could help with other things, I’d still be there. But it’s just a nice little thing. She knows who I am, or may know who I am.

**Sense of community.** Students identified organizations where they felt that they could form a community to help them succeed on campus. First generation students often experience a change in relationships with home communities and support structures as they adapt to college, particularly as the culture of an institution may be markedly different than their upbringing (Landon, 1992; Orbe, 2008). It is not surprising that students within this study identified and selected clubs that they believed would provide them with a community and support network at AU. Brittany looked for a social community after moving out of a cooperative house:

I was moving out of the cooperative and I knew I’d be losing that group, that social group, for the most part because I wouldn’t be around them as much. [The sorority], I saw as an opportunity to have another group of friends and be very close with all of them.

David echoed his summary of why first generation students join clubs and organizations:
I suppose if you don’t have a lot of support because nobody’s been there, done that in your family it’s a good way to make connections with people and find support. Of course, there are plenty of ways to do that on campus, but an organization is just simply one of those ways to connect with people, get a group of friends who have your same interests, and find some support that maybe you wouldn’t find at home.

Zach looked for organizations as a way to create navigable relationships and connections within the larger context of AU. His comments paralleled with the size of the university, emphasizing his need for a smaller and more intimate community in the midst of a larger and somewhat overwhelming institution.

Freshman year you go to like a 20,000 person school and you know a dozen people and you’re only really good friends with five of them. That was kind of a big factor, just knowing everybody [in high school] and then knowing hardly anybody. That was one thing that kind of freaked me out.

Richardson and Skinner (1992) noted that this need for community was particularly present in first generation students of color who experienced additional isolation on predominantly white campus due to the dual culture shock. Grace emphasized her personal connection with this idea an American Indian student who researched cultural organizations prior to arriving at AU and sought opportunities that would provide her with a campus community:

I wanted to be able to associate on this huge campus with people with like interests. Not only in our academic fields, but also in culture, religion, viewpoint, those kinds things. Give myself a home away from home, basically.

As first generation students were often looking for a community, groups that were perceived as unwelcoming or unfriendly were dismissed early within the group
selection process. Thus, group dynamics and environment were important elements in the selection process.

**Wariness of stereotypes.** Students within the study hesitated to join groups whose membership they perceived as very extreme or stereotypical. If a group embodied negative stereotypes or seemed too extreme in their pursuit of their goals, students were less likely to become involved. Sarah considered joining a political group about feminism, but was turned off from the extreme nature of the group members:

People think feminists are lesbians, don’t shave their legs, wild crazy women that burn their bras and stuff. Instead of doing more educational and saying like “yeah, feminists are just normal people that just want people to be equal,” it was more of the stuff that people would imagine a feminist to be. I felt like they kind of put themselves in a corner. Like if you’re fighting against racism yet you are racist. I just didn’t like that whole vibe that they put out there because I want people to know a feminist isn’t a crazy, wild, hippie lady. It’s just someone who wants people to be equal.

In an environmental organization, Kim was originally cautious about getting involved due to the negative stereotypes associated with the groups’ activities. She explained her hesitation:

Some of the people were a little extreme, like super tree huggers, I guess you would call them. They’re cool people, but at first it threw me off a little bit. Some of them kind of scared me a little bit, but once I got to know them it was fine.

Maria was on the fence about a cultural organization. She felt cautious due to “the stereotype that is against them…people are always seeing [the organization] as extreme, extremist.” George echoed her concern. He didn’t join a Hispanic cultural group because he could not relate to the strong cultural pride within the organization:
They were really, actually Hispanic. I’m not actually Hispanic. I’m kind of a coconut-brown on the outside and white on the inside. I realized that even though I took six year of it and my grammar in Spanish is pretty impeccable, I couldn’t really speak it worth a damn. So I just didn’t really fit in, I guess. Just the fact that these were actually Hispanic people who didn’t grow up in middle class suburbia. They were just a lot more ethnic about it and a lot more proud about it. I really just couldn’t relate to it, I guess.

This was a concern for the students who joined Greek organizations. Brittany noted her concern to join a sorority because of the “stigmas behind the whole Greek life thing.” In some cases, the members of the organizations perpetuated these stigmas. When Zach originally considered joining a fraternity, the selling points of the established organizations dissuaded him. It was not until finding the new fraternity that he decided to join:

I walked around the fraternities my freshman year, fall term, and I met with a couple of guys. They all said the same thing, pretty much. Just, we can get you drunk every weekend, you can meet a bunch of girls here with us. I can go to parties on my own, I have a friend who can buy me alcohol. I know girls. That’s not why I want to join a fraternity and they all just seemed really stereotypical, so I didn’t join them.

Even after he joined, he “never wore my letters because I was afraid that people would look at me and call me a frat boy and just automatically judge me.”

While the participants of this study often overcame these stereotypes to be involved in an organization anyway, such as Zach in his fraternity, Kim in her academic organization, and Brittany in her sorority, there were also cases were the stereotypes were too strong and discouraged students. If the first generation students could see beyond the stereotypes to the goals and benefits of the organization, they were more likely to join. However, if the stereotype was already a hesitation and there
was no further education to provide other perspectives, then students were likely to not become involved.

**Influencing Factors**

A variety of factors influenced first generation students in their decision to join or persist within a club or organization. For some participants, these factors were decisive in their choice to become involved or not. More often, these factors were regarded in relation to one another and the overall perceived benefits of the organizations. Some challenges or discouraging factors proved surmountable while others did not. Additionally, some factors encouraged lasting and deepening involvement. Within this study, participants mentioned six factors more frequently than others. These themes include (a) benefits, (b) communication, (c) time, (d) money, (e) subject interest, and (f) self-initiative.

**Personal benefits.** The perceived benefits to involvement in a specific club or organization served to motivate or discourage first generation student involvement. Maria noted benefits as one of the key factors that she evaluated in what she selected to join: “first of all would be what they do. Not just within the community and to [the university] in general, but what they would do to me, what direct benefit or assistance they would help me out with.” Some organizations stood out in their ability to help students gain a foothold in the academic world. Other involvement was broader was valuable simply to put a resume. Kim echoed this when she joined a leadership group in her residence hall: “I think for my resume, honestly. Because that also seemed like
a simple thing to do, a nice thing to put on your resume that didn’t require too much work your first year.”

Hand and Payne (2008) noted that many first generation students attend college to secure a better job. For many students, a reason to join an organization was contingent on the potential of that organization to impact their career search. This took two forms. In the first, students were specifically encouraged or believed that involvement in a certain organization would open doors for them in their career search. Grace notes:

I have to admit I know that [involvement in multi-cultural academic organizations] will look good on my resume. Most of my work in the future will probably involve tribal people, and so it will give them that connection that I just didn’t step out of the universe from academia somewhere. I’ve been involved in my culture this whole entire time and this is important to me. By having that background it shows the tribes too who are working on now governance of natural resources and things like that that this person who is before them is informed and worked hard too to make sure they were on the same level as the tribes.

George echoed this when he joined an academic organization within his department:

“Frankly, we were told by several professors that in order to work within this industry you really needed to be a member.” Brittany heard similar feedback with her academic organization. She joined “to fill my resume. There was that potential that it might help me look better for applying for an internship, which are really competitive.”

**Communication.** The factor of communication was consistent at all points throughout the trajectory of how first generation students identified, selected, and persisted in clubs and organizations. A lack of communication often helped
participants to weed out clubs and organizations early on. Kim was interested in a service organization but “I didn’t really see anything advertised for them, so I kind of forgot about it.” Clubs with strong communication and information often had stronger appeal to prospective members. George noted that part of his decision to join an academic club was based in part on the fact that “they do send out regular emails that have fun math quirky things that people find.” When Sarah first considered an honorary organization, she “looked a lot at their website and I thought it would be kind of cool to be involved in something more national.” While communication took a variety of forms ranging from physical presence at tabling events to fliers, electronic communication proved to be the most salient and consistent across interviews. One of the first sources that students would utilize to find information on clubs and organizations was the internet. Websites that had relevant information, including meeting times, were much more likely to spur further involvement than those that were vague or non-existent.

**Time.** A big factor that deterred students from joining clubs and organizations was the time commitment. Almost all of the participants mentioned it as a deterrent or restriction on their ability to get involved. Zach didn’t join a sports club because of the “the requirements, the traveling to and from games and stuff like that. That’s really the only reason that I couldn’t do it was the traveling time.” Maria noted that time was one of her primary considerations:

What the commitment is that you have to have in order to be a part of that group. If it’s like 20 hours a month or 1 hour a month, then what’s monthly or weekly and so forth. Because time is really important.
Sarah, who mentioned her hesitation to join a social awareness group because of the time commitment, echoed this: “it is two hours a week. I know that doesn’t sound like a lot, but I work to pay my own tuition and go to school, so that was kind of an issue.” The time commitment was a large factor in the decision making process, and often weighed against other factors. Although David enjoyed the academic organization based around speech and debate, he left in less than a year due to time commitments. The amount of time needed proved to be too much for his ability to participate:

Eventually they started asking me to come to tournaments and speak, which I wanted to do, but it was kind of hard with the time constraints. And then, they got kind of pushy. And then I stopped going. Plus, I didn’t have the time. It just, it took a lot of time and I just had other commitments that I needed to fulfill.

Collier and Morgan (2008) found that first generation students tended to have less of an understanding of time commitments in regards to academics and thus over commit themselves. It is possible that this created additional strain on time to devote to involvement, pushing first generation students to be additionally purposeful in selecting which organizations to commit to with their time.

Money. Time often tied into money. Two thirds of the participants worked part time jobs in addition to attending classes, which is not surprising considering that first generation students are more likely to experience financial need than their peers with college educated parents (Lundberg et al., 2007). When considering clubs and organizations, first generation students considered both the financial costs in taking away from their time to potentially work or earn money as well as the actual expenses
of membership dues, events, and activity fees. When considering joining an honorary club and organization, the membership fee initially discouraged Sarah:

There was a $75 joining fee. That made me cautious. Because I’ve always worked for all the money I have so, at that time I was 17. So that was coming out of my pocket, not anything to do with parents or financial aid or anything like that. So that made me cautious.

In soliciting Zach’s perceptions of the most important factors to consider joining a club or organization, he noted that it was “financial, number one.” He elaborated within the context of his Greek involvement:

It costs about $6,000 a year to live in the house and for dues and food and everything. That’s a lot. But we’re also one of the cheaper ones. I know a couple other houses that cost about $2,500 a term, so there’s $7,500 right there. Plus a $1,000 or $2,000 in dues. It’s up to $10,000 extra a year. Which is a lot of money when you can just live [in an apartment] for $300 a month and pay only like $3,000 extra for rent versus $10,000.

Not all of the financial factors were negative. Some participants sought involvement opportunities because of the potential to gain money. Several clubs and organizations at Anonymous University offer scholarship components. George reflected on scholarships as one of his initial reasons for joining an honorary club on campus: “what characteristics does a club or organization need to have [to consider joining]? Scholarship opportunities-money, pretty much. If they can offer me money, then I will be outrageously for participating.” Kim noted a similar impact in her decision to join a service organization that did international volunteer trips. Although the trip costs were high, approximately “$2,100 to $2,800,” the impact of these costs lessened because the organization had “scholarship funds and stuff too.”
Interestingly, clubs and organizations led to employment opportunities for two of the students interviewed for this study. Both Kim and Sarah eventually became employed in the departments that sponsored a club or organization they had joined. The added element of being paid contributed to their persistence within the organization, encouraging them to serve in a different leadership capacity as well. Sarah clarified: “last year I was just purely a volunteer, and now I work there twenty hours a week and participate in all of the volunteer meetings. I have my own group of volunteers, so it’s very cool.”

**Subject interest.** The interest that individuals had in the subject matter of a club or organization impacted their willingness to further their involvement. In this study, interest manifested itself in primarily two ways. One was academic interest, which utilized organizational involvement as a means for expanding the students’ knowledge and directly complementing their academic courses. David was a great example for this as he sought out intellectual opportunities within clubs instead of leisure pursuits. As he stated about his involvement in an academic organization:

> The debates are pretty intellectual, and I wanted to be a part of a more intellectual group, which would allow me to absorb more of that. We talk about philosophers and not last Sunday’s sports games. It’s more intellectual and so I try to, I want to absorb some of that just to kind of exercise my brains.

For Maria, the opportunity to acquire knowledge was a part of personal discovery. Although not tied to coursework, her interests in informing her own identity motivated as a Hispanic woman motivated her consideration of a cultural club. She noted that the organization was
Very education based and whether that is within yourself or about your group or backgrounds or whatever. I really like that because I feel like not a lot is taught about during high, during public school when you are growing up until you come to college. I feel like if I didn’t have, if I wouldn’t have come to college, I wouldn’t know all of these things that I know now.

The second primary theme for subject interest revolved around the opportunity to find an outlet for personal passion. For Kim and Sarah, who both choose organizations with an awareness and advocacy emphasis, the opportunity to become involved allowed them to work with like-minded individuals in ways that could positively impact society. As Kim notes as a benefit to getting involved in an academic, environmental organization:

I guess that I just felt strongly about it, that was a benefit I see. I feel if you care about something you should at least try to be involved or at least educated about it. I guess I cared about it, but I’m also, I’m not an expert on it. So I was learning at the same time that I was helping out, which is nice that that was the benefit.

For Sarah, the idea of participating in a cultural group for international students arose from her own experience studying abroad and learning another culture. She noted:

I know how it feels to be an international student. I thought ‘I want to be able to offer someone a ride to go get blankets when they first get here or pick someone up from the airport or give people advice where you can buy groceries.’ You know, just stuff like that. Just be there for people in a way because I never had that when I was abroad and it was very scary.

Organizations that tapped into these interests and passions were more likely to be resonant with students than those that sparked minimal interest.

**Self-initiative.** In several interviews, students identified the rationale behind not becoming involved as their lack of initiative to seek out more information or
attend meetings. In regards to an academic club that David did not join, he stated that “perhaps I’ve been timid or I haven’t reached out and pursued them.” Kim did not get involved in a service organization because the organization was not immediately visible and she did not invest energy in tracking them down on campus. She noted “I didn’t really seek them out, I guess. So I didn’t really join them.” Very few of the students interviewed noted a few specific challenges to becoming involved as first generation students that automatically quelled their interest. More often, it was the salience of any given factor combined with their individual ability and willingness to commit energy towards becoming involved.

**Summary Statement**

In joining a campus organization, students were most dominantly influenced by their ability to make a difference within the organization, to gain cultural and social capital, and to make the most of college. These three perceptions shaped the initial selection, choice, and involvement within organizations. Secondary factors that influenced this involvement were interactions with people and environments, with other important factors including benefits, communication, time, money, subject interest, and self-initiative. My interviews with first generation students provided a dialogue for how these elements impacted involvement. There was no one strategy that worked for all nine participants—each student based their decision on what factors were most salient in their experience. However, by understanding the rationale behind these choices, higher education may be able to better understand and support first generation students in their persistence.
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications

Understanding the perceptions of first generation students involved with clubs and organizations may open new doors to support these students’ persistence and success within higher education. Multiple studies link involvement in co-curricular activities as a positive contribution to satisfaction with an institution and degree completion (Huang & Chang, 2004; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). This is particularly important because first generation students are more likely to drop out compared to their peers with college-educated parents (Ishitani, 2006; Horn, 1998). By increasing student affairs practitioners’ understanding of the experience of first generation students, this study provides higher education institutions with the insight and information to help proactively address these issues.

This qualitative study explores the perceptions and experience of nine students involved in clubs and organizations. The results are not generalizable to all first generation students. Instead, the goal was to acquire a rich set of data that explored several perspectives in-depth. The factors that impacted involvement varied per student, variations that would likely be amplified if the study was recreated across institutional types, student backgrounds, and university cultures. Additionally, the small sample size and methodology were designed to provide insight rather than suggest a prescribed mindset for all students. However, this study is still valuable for student affairs practitioners and university administrators as a means to gain information to understand and support first generation students.

General Conclusions
Through my nine interviews with first generation students, I identified three themes prevalent in how first generation students perceive clubs and organizations on campus. The first theme was that participants joined clubs and organizations where they felt like they could make a difference, whether within the organization or amongst other students. As these students were likely to arrive in college with less information and networks, a second theme emphasized that first generation students utilized clubs and organizations as a means through which to acquire the cultural and social capital to compensate for this discrepancy. The third theme was the desire to maximize the college experience. In regards to the first sub-question of this study, I found that people and environments impacted how first generation students identified and selected clubs and organizations. For the second sub-question on the factors that encourage first generation students to join and persist within an organization, the themes of benefits, communication, time, money, subject interest, and self-initiative emerged. These themes indicate the perceptions of first generation students around involvement, providing a narrative for how they navigate the multiple opportunities to join clubs and organizations on campus.

**Anticipated findings.** Several of the themes that emerged within this study were suggested by the existing literature on first generation students. Multiple researchers noted that first generation students view college as a means to secure a better career (Lundberg et al., 2007). Within this study, several participants cited the direct correlation between career preparation and clubs and organization. In some cases, clubs and organizations that were tied to academics or professional associations
provided direct hands-on skills within certain career fields. In other cases, the motivation to join a club or organization included the opportunity to build networks within certain professions or gain valuable resume experience. The idea of benefits towards future careers also tied into the theme of cultural and social capital. By acquiring skills and relationships to foster success, first generation students created opportunities to build their careers and networks amongst individuals.

The theme of environment that came up in the second sub-question tied back to the idea of changing home communities and support that many researchers explored in earlier studies (Orbe, 2008; London, 1992). As first generation students grapple with the evolving nature of previous relationships or adjusted to campus life, clubs and organizations provide a forum through which to secure support and resources for their transition and success. Clubs and organizations offered opportunities to build new communities both by connecting first generation students with key professors and support staff, but also by uniting a peer group in a common purpose. For many students, these new communities made the large population of the sample university more navigable and fostered a new home on campus.

Finally, there was an interplay of time and money that was suggested by the multiple obligations and prevalence of low-income status among many first generation students. First generation students are subject to various time limitations created by family commitments, part time jobs, and academic challenges. The participants in this study echoed these themes as they grappled with multiple priorities. If a student chose and persisted within a club or organization, then that involvement contained
substantial merit to warrant the expenditure of resources. Additionally, the students were cautious about the financial responsibilities associated with certain clubs and organizations, particularly magnified for students involved with Greek communities where annual dues and membership fees are high. Time and money were usually weighted along with other factors and contributed, but rarely fully impacted which involvements a student pursued.

Unanticipated findings. There were several findings that were not foreshadowed directly by existing research. One was the theme of making a difference within the organization. Participants in this study wanted the opportunity to utilize their potential and sought opportunities where they could make a lasting impact on the organizations or their peers. Organizations that provided these opportunities and demonstrated a need for members to be involved assured first generation students that their contributions could be utilized. Rather than seeking only opportunities to gain, these students found fulfillment through what they were able to create or contribute. Research has found that first generation students feel that less is expected of them (Zwerling, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). It is possible that the desire to overcome these lower expectations may extend to clubs and organizations where students view their involvement as an opportunity to prove themselves. Knowing that first generation students view involvement as a part of their legacy on campus is crucial in helping them to select clubs and organizations in a purposeful way. Moreover, it may indicate that institutions should support clubs and organizations that
provide these experiences knowing that first generation students may benefit in profound ways on campus.

The participants of this study were very aware of the negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding certain groups on campus. Social justice, environmental, or cultural organizations were at times perceived as too extreme or forceful in their message, while Greek organizations made students wary due to their reputations of aloof behavior or excessive partying. There was a heightened caution in becoming associated with these stereotypes, some of which proved insurmountable as challenges to in becoming involved. Although hostile environments were predictable as deterrents, the role of stereotypes and ways in which clubs and organizations affirmed or combated common perceptions were salient in an unanticipated way. While there is no formula that indicated how much of a barrier stereotypes provided, clearly their impact was widely felt.

**Implications for Practice**

The results of this study indicate that first generation students are looking for clubs and organizations in which they can make a sizeable impact with their contributions while gaining resources and satisfaction. However, this varied per student in what contributions and benefits they sought. Practitioners can work with first generation students to identify areas that the students are passionate about, and help them to find activities that will enable them to create a substantial difference. This may challenge student affairs professionals to further engage with both the campus community and individual students. By understanding what skills a first
generation student possesses and seeks, practitioners may be able to utilize effective referrals to encourage involvement where the student may gain the most or have the most valuable experience. Several participants of this study noted that recommendations by faculty or staff carried additional influence in their decision making process. By fostering these connections, practitioners may help first generation students find resources and support on campus, leading to greater satisfaction and persistence.

Student affairs practitioners may be able to enhance involvement by educating student leaders about what their peers are looking for when joining clubs and organizations. If first generation students perceive the ability to make a difference, to gain social and cultural capital, and to maximize the college experience as the primary motivation for their involvement in clubs and organizations, then it may be worthwhile to examine how these factors currently play out in universities. If clubs and organizations are not providing these opportunities, then they may be hindering the involvement and investment of first generation students. Clubs may be more successful with members if they have a specific piece that members can contribute to immediately. Organizations that are aware of stereotypes should actively acknowledge and combat those stereotypes to prospective members. Discussing the results of this study with student leaders may help them to be proactive in making their organizations inclusive for a variety of students.

Many students discussed looking up information online after initially hearing about a club or organization. This was a crucial step as students gathered more
information and decided whether or not to pursue involvement. This should be included in organization and leadership training. If organizations do not have clear information published in a way that is easily accessible, potential members may be more easily discouraged or deterred. In colleges and universities where multiple opportunities for involvement exist, a disconnect in information may cause valuable clubs and organizations to lose their credibility with potential members. It may be useful to also consider the factors which were salient for first generation students and make sure that the information is clearly given to allow for individuals to make their decision. This may include listing the time commitment, costs, opportunities to get involved, functions of the organization, and student leaders and advisors. By providing such information not only would clubs and organizations be more accessible to prospective members, but they would encourage those individuals to make purposeful choices on whether or not to get involved.

In my current position, I advise a student leadership group of 11 and a general student membership of 160 in the Student Alumni Association. This study significantly impacted my work as a practitioner. I understand that it is crucial to work with my student leadership to structure the organization in such a way that our members feel that they have opportunities and means to leave an impact on the organization and their peers. By consistently involving members in smaller tasks, we may demonstrate this opportunity by immediately investing and utilizing their potential. As an organization devoted to networking students with alumni with multiple developmental workshops, the Student Alumni Association addresses both
social and cultural capital. Thus, we may be most successful when we ensure that we are directly providing these services and helping our membership to make clear connections between their goals and these opportunities. As I grow within my career in student affairs, I will utilize this information both in my individual student interactions and in advising student leaders working with communities of students.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited by the small number of participants and the single interview with each participant. One of the largest limitations of this study is the abbreviated time frame in which it needed to be completed. Time limitations made it difficult to conduct a large number of interviews as well as restricted the opportunity to conduct follow up interviews.

In order to avoid the potential discomfort of being identified as a first generation student, which may be a more sensitive identity for certain students, participants in the study self-identified and self-selected for participation. It is important to recognize that the students who replied to the recruitment email to be interviewed tend to be more motivated and successful students (Hand & Payne, 2008). The results from this study may be skewed towards this group that already demonstrated substantial initiative.

Hand and Payne (2008) noted that out of the nine students they interviewed, all but one had to work in order to pay bills, creating negative effects on their campus involvement and GPA. This study did not examine the socio-economic background of participants, a fact that may have significant impact on the time that students are able
to devote to clubs and organizations. Current research indicates that first generation students are often at the intersection of multiple minority identities that include low socio-economic status and ethnicity (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Oldfield, 2007). Future studies may further examine how the intersection of these identities impact first generation students, particularly in how campus environment and money play a role in involvement.

Additionally, the participant range was quite broad here as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and level of involvement were not criteria for participation. Therefore, the range of perspectives included within this study is very diverse and varied. The choices and perceptions of the participants in this study do not take into consideration these intersecting identities. Individuals decided to join clubs and organizations based on their individual background, which meant that it is difficult to identify one shared experience across identities and situations.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Future research would greatly benefit from a longitudinal study that could examine not only how first generation students identify and select clubs and organizations, but follow their involvement to see which clubs and organizations remain salient and relevant after several years. An ideal study might capture a group of first generation students and their initial involvement on campus during their first year, and then follow up with yearly subsequent interviews to examine persistence, departure, and new involvement throughout the duration of the collegiate experience. There may be factors that emerge at different point during student development, which
may paint a much clearer picture of the involvement process and experience as a whole.

Another gap within the literature discusses the experience of nontraditional first generation students. It may be that their life experience compensates for their first generation status, providing them with social and cultural capital that is not present for traditional age students. Both of the nontraditional students interviewed in this study arrived at Anonymous University with considerable experience volunteering in clubs and organizations as adults. Their experience utilized variables not present in traditionally aged students and deserves further exploration.

While this study covered the broad range of involvement, it may be beneficial to explore the culture within specific types of organizations. There were several similarities between Zach and Maria as founding officers within Greek organizations, but also with Brittany as a general member. Exploring first generation student involvement specifically in Greek organizations or any of the eleven categories might provide more depth and insight into these factors rather than trying to encompass multiple types.

Overall, it is important to note that little research on the involvement of first generation student involvement currently exists. Most current literature hones in on the academic experience, relationship to home communities, first year performance, or development within higher education. This study is intended to provide some insight into the area of involvement. However, I hope that this is an area that continues to
receive attention and research to gather more information that may empower practitioners.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Working with first generation students to identify and select clubs and organizations that will complement their classroom learning and provide them with skills and resources may lead to greater success and persistence. As educators, this is a population that deserves the best that we can provide. It is likely that as the full impact of the current financial recession becomes more evident within higher education, the strains on first generation students will increase. Therefore, helping first generation students to maximize their involvement in areas that will fully address their goals and provide resources may become increasingly important. First generation students already face substantial challenges within higher education, and colleges and universities must continually develop ways to make those challenges manageable by providing substantial support. This study is in no way intended to be an end to this conversation. Rather, I hope that it will serve as a beginning for student affairs practitioners and educational administrators to learn more about first generation students and how to foster their success.
References


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: Recruitment Emails

First Email: Participate in First Generation Student Research
To:  
Subject: Participate in First Generation Student Research

Dear Student,

My name is Genia Bettencourt and I am a graduate student at Oregon State University. As part of my Master’s degree program, I am beginning a research study (my thesis) which examines how first generation students become involved with clubs and organizations. By gaining a better understanding of the involvement process, faculty, institutions, and administrators can better serve the needs of first generation students and promote their success.

I am looking for candidates who meet the following qualifications:

- Are first generation college students. For this study, first generation is defined as a student whose parents have no more than a high school education.
- Are members of a registered club(s) or organization(s) at Oregon State University.
- Completed a minimum of 45 units at Oregon State University.
- Are eighteen years of age or older

Candidates who meet the criteria above and would like to participate in the study will be invited to participate in one 30-60 minute interview. The interview will take place with myself in a pre-arranged location on campus (a coffee shop, the library, a classroom, etc.) The interview will be recorded. You will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts approximately one month after the interview to add anything that was missed.

If you think you may be interested in participating in my study, please contact me via email at bettenccg@onid.orst.edu or phone at (541)-737-9678 to set up a time for the interview.

Sincerely,

Genia Bettencourt
OSU Graduate Student
College Student Services Administration (CSSA)
Email: bettenccg@onid.orst.edu
Phone: (541) 737-9678
Second Email: Registered clubs and organizations
To: Registered Club or Organization Contact
Subject: OSU Researcher Requesting Your Help

Dear [insert name of club or organization contact],

My name is Genia Bettencourt, and I am recruiting first generation students involved in registered clubs and organizations to participate in a research study. I have not yet obtained the desired number of participants and am hoping that you could forward the attached email to the students involved in [insert name of club or organization]. In order to participate, students must be first generation students involved in a registered club or organization and who have completed a minimum of 45 units here at Oregon State University. For the full requirements, please read the attached email below.

Thank you very much for your time and please do not hesitate to contact me with any further questions you may have regarding my research.

Sincerely,

Genia Bettencourt
OSU Graduate Student
College Student Services Administration (CSSA)
Email: bettencg@onid.orst.edu
Phone: (541) 737-9678

[FIRST EMAIL INSERTED HERE]

Third Email: Gatekeeper Email
To:
Subject: Recruiting Participants

Hi [insert name of gatekeeper],

Attached is my recruitment email for my thesis titled First Generation Students in Clubs and Organizations. Can you please forward this email to students who you believe meet the criteria of the study and might be interested in participating?

Thanks,
Genia Bettencourt

[FIRST EMAIL INSERTED HERE]
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

Project Title: First Generation Students in Clubs and Organizations
Principal Investigator: Janet Nishihara, College Student Services Administration
Student Investigator: Genia Bettencourt, College Student Services Administration

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to compile information about first generation students’ perceptions and involvement in student clubs and organizations. This research aims to explore why first generation students select membership in certain clubs and organizations and what factors encourage that decision. By gaining a better understanding of the involvement process, faculty, institutions, and administrators can better serve the needs of first generation students and promote their success. The results will be used in writing a thesis in completion of a Master of Science in Education, and may also be used in conference presentations and articles for submission to journal.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you identified as a first generation college student at [Redacted] involved in a registered student club or organization. You also indicated that you have completed at least 45 units at [Redacted].

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

If you agree to participate, your involvement will be approximately two hours, which includes the time it takes to read and sign this document, set an appointment for the interview, participate in an interview and meet to review your interview transcription. If you decide to participate, we will set up an interview via email. The interview will take place at
an agreed upon location such as a library study room, coffee shop, or a classroom on campus.

The interview will be a semi-structured interview that will last 30 – 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded. A hard copy of the transcription from the interview will be returned to you in person for review.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?**

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include possible discomfort with discussing the sensitive issues surrounding first generation status. There is also the potential that a breach of confidentiality may occur during the study that would reveal your information as a participant in the study.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You will not benefit from being in this study. However, we believe that administrators, faculty, and institutions may benefit from this study because they will learn more about first generation students’ involvement in clubs and organizations.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?**

We will protect your identity throughout the data collection process. Participants’ identities (including name and address) will not be identified on the audio recordings. During the interview process, participants will be referred to by an identification code number that correlates to the registered student club(s) or organization(s) in which they are a member. Any mention of specific clubs and organizations or leadership roles that may imply the student’s identity will not be directly referenced in the results and discussion of the thesis. All documents and recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at a confidential location for the duration of the study. Transcripts, recordings, and documents will be destroyed upon the completion of the research study or after a period of no more than one year from the date of the interview. If the results of this project are published your identity will not be made public.

**AUDIO RECORDING**

The audio recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcription service and the researchers will be the only people with access to these recordings and transcripts. Electronic documents will be stored on an external hard drive and will be stored with any hard copies in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the primary investigator (Janet Nishihara) with a second copy of electronic documents stored in a password protected file on the student researcher’s
Genia Bettencourt’s laptop. Transcripts and recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the research study or after a period of no more than one year from the date of the interview.

**DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?**

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. You are not required to respond to all or any of the questions of discussions posted during the interview or survey.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. You are not required to respond to all of any of the questions or discussions posed by the survey or interview. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and that information may be included in study reports.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Janet Nishihara, Ph.D., Adult Education and Higher Education Leadership Department, (541) 737-3928, [Janet.nishihara@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Janet.nishihara@oregonstate.edu) or Genia Bettencourt, (541)-737-9678, [bettencg@onid.orst.edu](mailto:bettencg@onid.orst.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at [IRB@oregonstate.edu](mailto:IRB@oregonstate.edu).

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form when the interview transcripts are returned to you for review.

Participant's Name (printed):

__________________________

(Signature of Participant) 

__________________________

(Date)
APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction: discussion of purpose of research, background of the researcher and why she is interested in learning more about this topic

1. Interview Information
   a. Date and time:
   b. Interviewee identification number:
   c. Student club(s) or organization(s):

2. Informed Consent Form
   a. Review of Form
   b. Signature Obtained
   c. Blank Copy Distributed

3. Begin Audio Recording

4. Interview Questions
   a. Part I: Involvement in Student Clubs and Organizations
   b. What criteria do you use when looking for clubs and organizations to become involved with?
      i. Do you look for any specific type of organization to become involved with? (Greek, community service, career, leadership, social)
      ii. Do clubs and organizations tie in to your long-term goals?
      iii. If so, how?
   c. What clubs and organizations are you involved with at Oregon State University?
      i. How did you learn about these clubs and organizations?
      ii. Were you looking for any specific opportunities in a club or organization? Why?
   d. For [name of club or organization], why did you initially consider becoming involved?
      i. Why did you decide to join?
      ii. Were there any particular benefits you were seeking that persuaded you to join?
      iii. Where there any aspects that made you cautious of joining?
      iv. How long have you been involved in the organization?
      v. Do you hold any leadership roles? If so, which ones?
      vi. On a scale of 1-10, how involved are you in [name of club or organization]?
      vii. Did anyone play a role in your decision to join [name of club or organization]? How?
[Repeat question series for all clubs and organizations]
e. Were there clubs and organizations that you considered, but did not actually join?
   i. For [name of club or organization], why did you consider becoming involved?
   ii. Why did you decide not to become involved?
   iii. Did anyone play a role in this decision?
   iv. Were there factors that made [name of club or organization] feel unwelcoming? If so, then what?
[Repeat question series for all clubs and organizations]
f. Were you a part of any clubs or organizations in high school?
   i. If so, which club(s) or organization(s)?
   ii. On a scale of 1-10, how involved were you?
   iii. Did you hold any leadership roles?
g. What role did being a first generation student play in your participation in clubs and organizations?
   i. As a first generation student, have you faced any challenges to becoming involved on campus?
   ii. What are important factors for first generation students to consider when joining clubs and organizations?
h. How did the people in your life play a role in what clubs and organizations you joined?
   i. Did your family recommend clubs or organizations to become involved in?
   ii. Did any teachers or mentors recommend clubs and organizations to become involved in?
i. What recommendations or advice would you give to first generation students looking to join a club or organization?
j. Are you involved in other things on campus outside of clubs and organizations? If so, what?
k. Is there anything else that we did not cover that you would like to add?

l. Part II: Demographic Information
   i. What is your major?
   ii. What is your year in school (i.e. first year, sophomore, junior, senior, fifth year, graduate student)?
   iii. What is your current age?
   iv. What is your sex?
   v. Do you work? If so, part time or full time?
   vi. Did you grow up in a rural, suburban, or urban environment?
   vii. What is your ethnic identity? [Participants are allowed to self identify]
   viii. Have you or are you participating in an academic support service?
5. End recording.

6. Thank You

Your name and any identifying aspects of your identity will not be released at any point during this research, including divulging this information to the recruited participants by referencing you in the writing of this thesis or any subsequent materials.