Roles of Gender, Race, and SES in the College Choice Process
Among First-Generation and Nonfirst-Generation Students

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The authors examined students’ reports of their college choice process to understand the influence of a set of psychological, personal, and institutional factors. The authors also examined potential moderating influences of generational status, gender, race, and SES on our variables of interest. A diverse sample of college freshmen (N = 1,339), including 42% who were the first in their families to attend college, responded to a self-reporting, Web-based survey. Findings indicate that psychosocial factors and academic quality of the college were most influential for first-generation students as compared to their nonfirst-generation peers in the college choice process. However, gender, race, and SES moderated these influences in complex ways. For example, females rated the psychological variables higher than males; Asian American and African American first-generation students rated higher than their parents’ preferences for which college to attend as compared to nonfirst-generation peers. First-generation females, African American in particular, considered academic quality more important than other groups. Our findings should be of value to counselors and other personnel who facilitate students’ college choice process as well as college recruitment, retention, and diversity enhancement programs.

Keywords: college choice, psychological factors, academic factors, personal factors, diversity

Knowledge about the college choice process among high school students has grown substantially over the past decade, but knowledge about college choice among students who are the first in their families to attend college continues to lag. We examine a number of institutional and psychosocial factors that the literature suggests are important for students’ satisfaction with campus “fit” to determine if they are equally significant for first-generation students and across other relatively understudied groups. Unlike much of the earlier literature on first-generation students that focuses on specific ethnic minority student groups (e.g., Latinos, African Americans) or on underrepresented students as a group, our research is broadly focused on students of all ethnicities who are now college freshmen. Understanding the choice process has substantial personal implications, because a student’s satisfaction with his or her choice of college plays a role in any decision to leave that school or remain and complete a college degree (Tinto, 1993). This finding seems especially important for understanding the persistence of first-generation students, as college dropout rates among first-generation students are considerably higher than among their nonfirst-generation peers. Approximately 25% of students drop out of college.
by the end of their first year, but the attrition rate approaches 50% for first-generation students (Ishitani, 2003; NCES, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics).

The college choice process has far-reaching institutional consequences as well. The impact of students’ college choice and college attrition rates has become increasingly important for institutional planning in this era of scarce resources. Enrollment growth generally is not uniform for colleges and universities across the nation (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004). Although colleges in some states (e.g., Arizona and Florida) can look forward to ample in-state enrollments for the foreseeable future, institutions in other states (e.g., West Virginia and Louisiana) will struggle to find state students to meet their enrollment goals over the next decade (Kinzie et al., 2004). Consequently, schools in some areas may have to more aggressively reach out to recruit underrepresented students, including those who are the first in their families to attend college, as well as students who may attend from out of state. However, aggressive recruitment efforts must be complemented by active retention programs that maximize the “fit,” satisfaction, and ultimately the achievement of students, if colleges are to appropriately serve the students that they have successfully recruited. In developing such programs, staff and faculty may have to develop knowledge and expertise about student groups with whom they have had limited prior contact and relationships. Thus, as a starting point, a better understanding of the college choice process among first-generation students, and indeed among all students, has important implications for campus recruitment and retention programs, programs tailored toward enhancing and maintaining campus diversity, and policy decisions governing postsecondary institutions.

First in the Family

Although the literature presents a variety of definitions, in our research we have relatively restrictively defined first-generation students as those who are the first in their immediate family (i.e., parents, grandparents, and siblings) to attend a 4-yr college or university. Recent research on first-generation students has investigated minority high school students who are planning for the transition to college (e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 2001), first-generation students who are now successful adults (e.g., Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001), and comparisons of first-generation students and their nonfirst-generation peers who are enrolled in college (e.g., Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This body of research consistently points out that first-generation college students are more likely to be from a low SES family, ethnic minority, and to speak a language other than English at home (Bui, 2002; Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995), relative to their nonfirst-generation peers. Students who are the first in their families to attend college are also less knowledgeable about college costs and application processes (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1992), and they tend to have a less rigorous academic preparation in high school (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). This lack of knowledge and preparation may influence students’ decision making when they are trying to determine which college will be appropriate for their needs.

Variables that Influence College Choice

In early work, Holland and Richards (1965) found that high school students’ college choices were heavily influenced by four major factors: (1) intellectual emphasis of the prospective campus, (2) practical concerns (e.g., closeness to home, low cost), (3) advice of others (e.g., high school counselors, parental input), and (4) perceived social climate of the campus. Although these variables continue to be significant influences on the college choice process of high school students today (Kinzie et al., 2004), more recent research has revealed that these variables predict differentially for students of varying characteristics. For example, students of high academic ability are more likely to attend selective institutions or out-of-state institutions than students of lower ability (Braxton, 1990), but this is less consistently true for low-income, rural, and female students. These students, regardless of their academic ability, achievement, and expectations, are more likely to choose less selective institutions and demonstrate greater sensitivity to institutional factors such as size and location (Kim, 2004) as well as individual perceptions such as perceived comfort on campus (Nora, 2004). Although aca-
demic achievement in high school remains the most important determinant of whether and where students go to college, institutional characteristics and psychosocial factors are also significant influences in the college choice process.

Financial aid availability is the institutional characteristic that has arguably been the most extensively examined in the literature as a determinant of college choice. Yet, extant findings remain inconclusive. A number of studies (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996) suggest that financial aid is a critical factor for all students. Other work points specifically to the importance of financial aid in the college choice process for ethnic minority students, many of whom are first-generation college students (Kern, 2000). Conversely, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that financial aid had no bearing on students’ college choice. Kim (2004) reported that African American and Latino students, including first-generation students, are less influenced by the availability of financial aid during their college choice process. Rather, location of the college and the size of the student population appear to be factors that heavily influence their college choices.

These inconsistencies suggest that although the availability of financial aid may have bearing on college choice, the process involves a complex weighting and ranking of multiple individual preferences and institutional characteristics. However, the specific influence of psychosocial factors (e.g., perceived social relations on campus) remains perhaps the least understood area of the college choice process. Further, the college choice process and its poorly understood balancing of institutional factors and individual preferences and needs is almost entirely opaque among first-generation students who attend 4-yr institutions. Thus, our research represents an effort to examine the intersection of institutional, personal, and psychosocial variables that influence college choice and how those variables may be moderated by first-generation status.

Psychosocial Variables and College Choice

Our study takes as a starting point Nora’s (2004) three-stage model of college selection: predisposition, search, and choice. We focus explicitly on the final stage, the choice itself, in which psychosocial, institutional, and personal preference (e.g., location of the campus) factors converge to produce a student’s decision to apply and actually matriculate at a given institution. Thus, our interest here is in the perceptions of students who have completed their selections and actually enrolled in a college of their choice. A relatively robust literature exists on the influence of institutional and personal variables on choice (Hearn, 1991; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Stage & Hossler, 1988), finding that a perceived fit between personal and institutional characteristics predicts more satisfactory college adjustment and retention (Antonoff & Friedman, 1991; Tinto, 1993). However, more recent research suggests that psychosocial factors may be equally, if not more, important in the choice process (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997).

Work on the influence of psychosocial variables on college choice is less well developed than in other (e.g., financial aid) domains (Nora, 2004). However, this literature suggests that student perceptions of the campus social environment and their understanding of their own psychological needs (e.g., values, interests) will be fruitful areas of study to extend our knowledge of the college choice process, particularly among first-generation students. The role of psychosocial variables is captured by the construct habitus, or the individual’s internalized representation of a given social environment that guides decision-making and action in that environment (Horvat, 2003). Habitus is integral to the student’s perception of a fit between psychosocial needs and the capacity of a campus environment to meet those needs (Nora, 2004) and is consistent with a goodness-of-fit model from the developmental literature (Chess & Thomas, 1991; Hudley, 1995). A goodness-of-fit model specifies individual adjustment as a function of the match between individual characteristics and contextual demands. When a person’s behavior, interests, and motivation match the perceived demand characteristics and benefits of an environment, adjustment in that environment should be optimal and levels of stress minimal (French, Rogers, & Cogg, 1974; Lerner, Baker, & Lerner, 1985). Thus, understanding the intersection of psychosocial, institutional, and personal variables in the college
choice process for first-generation students should yield insights of theoretical and practical significance for programs of recruitment and retention, and ultimately for student success.

The Current Study

This exploration of college choice addressed two basic questions. (1) What psychosocial, institutional, and personal factors are most important to students in choosing to attend a particular college? (2) How do these factors operate differentially across generational status, gender, ethnic, and SES? We answered these questions by testing several hypotheses that explored the conjoint influences of psychosocial, institutional, and personal variables and examined these variables at the intersection of generational status, ethnicity, gender, and social class. We expected first-generation students as a group to rate psychosocial and personal indicators of “fit” as more important in their college choices than their nonfirst-generation peers based on their underrepresented status on campus. However, we anticipated that these relationships would be moderated by race/ethnicity, family income, and gender. We also hypothesized that participants would not differ by generation status in their ratings of financial considerations, and consistent with prior literature, participants would not differ in rating an institution’s academic programs and reputation as very important considerations in their choice of college to attend.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1,539 incoming freshman students attending four different universities, public and private, located in both urban and rural areas (i.e., one each public urban, private urban, public rural, private rural) in the United States. A total of 6,560 students were invited via email to participate in a Web-based survey. Our resultant sample of 1,539 represents a 25% response rate. Based on preliminary descriptive analyses, we eliminated 200 respondents from our sample. The sample size for Native Americans was too small to analyze meaningfully ($N = 5$), and those who did not respond to the item that requested first/nonfirst-generation status were not included in these analyses ($N = 124$). Respondents who identified as ethnically/racially mixed ($N = 71$) were also not included because we are not certain they represent a coherent group. Students in this category reported membership in a number of different ethnic and racial groups (e.g., Black/White; White/Asian; Native American/Latino/White) and thus may or may not have experiences that generalize across the entire group.

Findings reported here are based on a final sample of 1,339 students. Mean age for our sample was 18.37 ($SD = 1.41$), and the gender balance was 74% female and 26% male. Although females were somewhat overrepresented, our sample is consistent with the troubling trend of declining enrollment of males in higher education, who represented 43% of the postsecondary enrollment in 2005 (NCES, 2006). The racial/ethnic distribution of the sample was also relatively consistent with the national estimate of student enrollment (NCES, 2005). European American/White students made up 68% of the sample and Latino/Hispanic represented 13.7%. However, compared to the national estimate, Asian/Pacific Islander students were overrepresented in our sample at 12.3%, and African American/Black students underrepresented at 6%. The self-reported family income score was 2.70 ($SD = 1.30$) on a scale that ranged from 1 “less than $34,999” to 5 “more than $200,000.” Finally, our sample contained 42% first-generation students ($n = 556$).

Measure

Participants responded to a self-report, Web-based survey comprising 39 substantive questions. Additional demographic questions included age, gender, racial group membership, work status, first-generation status, languages spoken, and family income. The 39 substantive questions asked about students’ experiences in the following three areas: (1) factors that affected participants’ college choices, (2) participants’ high school experiences, and (3) participants’ college experiences. The analyses undertaken for this study were explicitly concerned with data on college choice as a function of first-generation status and demographic variables. Questions pertaining to college choice included: college rankings, college demo-
graphic characteristics, financial considerations, personal preferences, and perceptions of the campus and community environment. Response were recorded on a four-point scale ranging from 1 “extremely unimportant” to 4 “extremely important.”

The individual questions on college choice were either combined into three scales or used individually for subsequent analyses. A psychosocial scale ($\alpha = .60$) included three questions: (1) perceived security and safety on campus, (2) friendship with students or alumni, and (3) positive perceptions of social activities. An additional scale comprising psychosocial variables scale explicitly examined the importance of racial/ethnic climate, given that first-generation students tend to be disproportionately from underrepresented groups. This racial/ethnic scale ($\alpha = .91$) comprised two questions: (1) enough members of my racial/ethnic group on campus to feel comfortable and (2) enough members of my racial/ethnic group in surrounding community. A scale measuring academic quality ($\alpha = .80$) included five questions: (1) graduates get into graduate/professional schools; (2) this school has a reputation for strong academics; (3) this school has academic support programs; (4) this school has unique educational program; and (5) graduates get good jobs. Finally, we included three individual items tapping personal family preference (my parents wanted me to come here) and two items tapping economic concerns (this college is affordable; financial aid is available). A complete listing of survey questions is available from the second author.

**Procedure**

Survey questions were posted on a secure, password-protected site maintained by the information technology staff at the second author’s university. E-mail invitations were sent to all incoming freshmen students in the first month of the 2004 through 2005 academic year on each of the four campuses. E-mail addresses were obtained through cooperation with the institutional research offices at the respective institutions. Each invitation contained a unique password for that particular student to use to access the Web site, complete the informed consent form, and complete the survey. Students were able to access the site for 6 weeks after the initial invitation, and two follow up reminders were sent to all freshmen students. The survey took 20 to 30 minutes to complete in its entirety, and participants were required to complete the survey in a single sitting. Participants who completed the survey were entered in a raffle for a $50 gift certificate at each of the participating universities.

We analyzed our data to explore the conjoint influences of psychosocial, institutional, and personal variables with an omnibus multivariate analyses (MANCOVA), and follow-up univariate analyses. Our three scales (psychological, racial/ethnic, and academic quality) and three individual variables (personal and economic concerns) were the jointly dependent variables, generational status, race and gender served as our grouping variables, and family income was a covariate. We used family income as a covariate because of the substantial imbalance in the highest and lowest categories of income. We report the results of multivariate analyses using the Roy’s largest root test criterion, because Roy’s criterion has been found to be most consistent with post hoc tests to evaluate means (Lutz, 2000; Gabriel, 1968).

**Results**

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted preliminary analyses to identify any significant demographic differences between our first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers (see Table 1). $T$ test results showed no age difference between the first- and non-first-generation students. Chi-square tests re-
revealed no differences by gender, but did reveal significant differences in family income categories. First-generation students were underrepresented at the highest category of income (4.8% for first-generation vs. 12.8% for nonfirst-generation) and overrepresented at the lowest category (39.6% for first-generation vs. 13% for nonfirst-generation), $\chi^2[4, 1243] = 170.17, p < .001$. We also found significantly more ethnic minority students in the first-generation sample (47%) compared to the nonfirst-generation sample (22%), $\chi^2[3, 1339] = 100.55, p < .001$.

**Psychosocial and Personal Variables**

Our expectation that ratings of psychosocial and personal factors would differ but differences would be moderated by race/ethnicity, family income, and gender was supported. Our omnibus test revealed an interaction of first-generation status and gender, $F(2, 1191) = 3.57, p < .01$ that was partially shown in differences on the psychosocial scale, $F(2, 1195) = 2.76, p = .06$. Males differed more strongly by first-generation status than females, who rated this scale higher overall (see Table 2).

Recall that we included a psychosocial scale assessing campus racial/ethnic climate, and this was also marginally significant in follow up univariate analyses, $F(6, 1195) = 1.94, p = .07$ of our omnibus interaction of first-generation status and race/ethnicity. It is noteworthy that our covariate, family income, represented a particularly strong influence on this scale ($F(2, 1195) 6.26, p < .01$), suggesting that the effects of first-generation status and family income on perceived ethnic climate are quite confounded in this sample. However, when holding income constant, multiple comparison post hoc tests revealed that all African American students rated this scale significantly higher than their peers of other races. Latino first-generation students perceived this scale as significantly more important than their nonfirst-generation peers and all Asian and White students (see Table 3).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>2.77 (.65)</td>
<td>2.88 (.59)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not first generation</td>
<td>2.51 (.64)</td>
<td>2.57 (.63)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3

Perceived Parental Preference and Racial and Ethnic Climate Scales by First Generation Status and Race/Ethnicity ($N = 1,339$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale or item</th>
<th>First-generation status</th>
<th>Non-first-generation status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of parental preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent preference</td>
<td>Asian M (.65)</td>
<td>2.52 (.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, our results suggest that measures of the perceived psychosocial quality of a campus affect college choice substantially. However, as one might expect, racial climate is more important to some groups of underrepresented students. Gender differences in perceived school climate reflect women’s greater interest in physical safety and social acceptance. A secure and welcoming feeling on campus seems to be important to both females and first-generation males. All African American students and Latino and Asian first-generation students appear to weigh parental input in their college choice process as more important than their peers of other races. Acceptance of racial diversity was more important to all African American respondents and Latino first-generation students in comparison to their peers of other races.

We also observed an omnibus interaction of first-generation status and race/ethnicity, $F(6, 1195) = 7.56, p < .001$, and the follow up univariate analysis revealed a significant effect for students’ perceptions of their parents’ preferences, $F(6, 1195) = 3.06, p < .01$. Asian- and African American first-generation students differed most strongly from their nonfirst-generation peers in their reliance on their parents’ preferences for which college to attend, followed by Latino first-generation students, with relatively little difference for White students (see Table 3).

### Academic Quality

We also hypothesized that first-generation participants would not differ from nonfirst-generation participants in their ratings of academic quality scale. However, contrary to our expectations, a significant omnibus three-way interaction between first-generation status, gender, and race, $F(6, 1195) = 4.93, p < .001$ remained significant in follow-up univariate analyses based on the academic scale, $F(6, 1195) = 4.34, p < .001$. Compared to other groups, first-generation females, African American in particular, considered the academic scale more important in their choice of college. Surprisingly, Asian males overall rated academic quality lower in importance compared to their peers. However, it is important to note that, irrespective of first-generation status, gender, or race, all students rated academic quality as the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item or scale</th>
<th>First-generation status ($n = 556$)</th>
<th>Nonfirst-generation status ($n = 859$)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic quality</strong></td>
<td>Asian M (SD)</td>
<td>Non-first-generation M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.92 (SD)</td>
<td>2.64 (SD)</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.54 (SD)</td>
<td>3.04 (SD)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.036*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial considerations</strong></td>
<td>Asian M (SD)</td>
<td>Non-first-generation M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.00 (SD)</td>
<td>2.60 (SD)</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.003**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.00 (SD)</td>
<td>2.69 (SD)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.036*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial availability</strong></td>
<td>Asian M (SD)</td>
<td>Non-first-generation M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.76 (SD)</td>
<td>2.50 (SD)</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>.003**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.54 (SD)</td>
<td>3.35 (SD)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.036*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
top influence in their college choice process (see Table 4). As with perceived ethnic climate, our covariate, family income, represented a particularly strong influence on ratings of academic quality, $F(2, 1195) = 76.57, p < .001$. First-generation students in the lowest income category (less than $35,000) rated academic quality more important than their more affluent peers.

**Financial Considerations**

In testing our hypothesis concerning financial considerations, our omnibus three way interaction between first-generation status, gender, and race remained significant in follow up univariate analyses because of respondents’ perceptions of college affordability, $F(6, 1195) = 2.33, p = .03$. African American first-generation females and African American non-first-generation males rated the college cost variable highest of all groups in our sample. Finally, Asian students showed the greatest gender differences in their ratings of college cost, with Asian non-first-generation males rating this scale considerably lower than their peers (see Table 4).

A similar three way univariate effect of first-generation, gender, and race emerged for financial aid availability, $F(6, 1195) = 2.33, p = .01$. Univariate analyses revealed that African American first-generation females, African American non-first-generation males, and all Latino first-generation participants rated financial aid availability more highly in the college choice process than other groups (see Table 4). Asian males again rated financial aid availability considerably lower than their peers. As would be expected, our covariate, family income, was the most powerful influence on perceived affordability, $F(2, 1195) = 21.26, p < .001$ and financial aid availability, $F(2, 1195) = 129.21, p < .001$ of all variables under consideration.

**Discussion**

We designed this study to understand how psychosocial, personal, and institutional factors jointly influence the college choice process and how ethnicity, gender, and family income might moderate those relationships. Our findings demonstrated that some psychosocial factors are indeed important considerations for students in the process of selecting a college, although not as important as financial and academic factors. When choosing a college, first-generation students and female students, in particular, were most sensitive to psychosocial characteristics that included perceived safety, positive social climate, and having friends present on campus. Our finding is quite consistent with and expands on findings from a national survey of high school seniors who planned to attend college a decade ago (Market Intelligence for Higher Education, 1997). A total of 57% of all students in that study rated campus safety as “very important,” second only to the quality of the facilities (e.g., labs, dorms, technology) offered by the campus. Among female students, that total rose to 72%, suggesting that differences between male and female students in their concerns about campus safety are a relatively stable phenomenon. However, findings reported here also suggest that among first-generation students, psychosocial characteristics are even more important than for the general college student body. Similarly, a decade ago 58% of all students cited a wide variety of social activities as important in choosing a college, again suggesting that psychosocial variables are important and persistent factors in college choice. Prior qualitative research with females (Horvat, 1997) that examined the idea of a campus “fit” similarly found that for females in particular, social and psychological variables can be critically important, especially in the latter stages of the choice process. Finally, our finding that all African American students and Latino first-generation students reported that the ethnic make up of the campus and the community was important in their choice process is consistent with survey findings. A decade ago, 77% of all students (88% African American and 74% White) reported that an ethnically diverse student body was an important factor in their college choice. Again, our findings also clarify that first-generation status relates differentially to the importance of perceived ethnic climate according to one’s ethnic/racial background.

Overall, our findings support the importance of habitus, or the fit between a student’s social and psychological needs and the perceived campus milieu, in the college choice process. This study extends previous findings on habitus to the population of first-generation college students. It is notable that African American stu-
Students rated the scale specific to racial/ethnic climate more important than other groups of students, regardless of generation status. Latino students differed significantly according to generational status, and Asian (especially males) rated the ethnic climate scale relatively unimportant. On most college, campuses Latino and African American students in particular are severely underrepresented. A wealth of data point to the stress and isolation many underrepresented students feel on campuses when they are a small minority (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Watson et al., 2002). Thus, the importance of ethnic climate relative to other considerations may be especially acute for underrepresented students.

One interpretation of findings concerning the psychosocial scales becomes visible when we use the lens of the psychological literature on stigma (Major & O’Brien, 2005), or perceived devaluation based on personal characteristics (e.g., race, SES). Current social psychological research on stigma concludes that members of socially stigmatized groups are aware that they are devalued by the dominant group, recognize the negative stereotypes of their group from a young age (Hudley & Graham, 2001), and often perceive that their identity is being threatened by virtue of their membership in a stigmatized group (e.g., ethnic minorities, low income). Members of stigmatized groups often cope by identifying more closely with their own group (Allport, 1954) as a way to seek social support and a sense of belonging that supports their self-esteem. As a result, first-generation or ethnic minority students who are underrepresented and most likely to be stigmatized as incompetent in the academic domain (e.g., African Americans, Latinos) (Hudley & Graham, 2001) may be more vigilant for social opportunities that provide a sense of belonging and connectedness when they are selecting a college. They seek campuses where they will find friends, members of their own group, and supportive social activities. Our scale may be tapping into students’ desires to protect themselves against threats to their identity and feelings of devaluation.

An alternative interpretation of our results specific to the racial/ethnic scale is that among our students who identify as Latino or Asian, more may be from families who have immigrated to the United States relatively more recently than their African American peers. Ogbu proposed a theory of minority school performance (Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) that focuses specifically on immigrant status. According to this theory, immigrant students are less likely to be concerned with campus ethnic climate than are students who belong to what he labels castelike groups because of their orientation toward schooling and American society. Immigrant students see education as an instrumental means to credentials for success in ways that are not possible in their home country and are more likely to see discrimination as a temporary problem of adjustment. Castelike groups, which include low-income, disadvantaged African Americans and Latinos, have visible evidence that discrimination is a permanent feature of life that sometimes negates the benefits of an education for members of their communities. Thus, castelike students are more likely to require that schools demonstrate their commitment to diversity concerns, including a policy of recruiting adequate proportions of members of their racial/ethnic groups.

We also found significant interactions in our academic quality and financial scales, suggesting several important considerations. Perhaps most importantly, nonfirst-generation males rated academic quality considerations lower in importance than any other generation/gender groups, whereas first-generation females rated the scale as the most important of our six scales or variables in the college choice process, even more so than financial considerations. Our scale asked students to rate the importance of available academic coursework and support programs while in college as well as the value of the academic preparation for future career and graduate school plans. We also found that all females, as well as African American and Latino students were much more influenced than their male peers and Asian and White students by the cost of college and financial aid considerations in making a college choice. Although our data are somewhat consistent with previous findings that academic and financial variables are critical factors for all students (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996), we also found that first-generation female students and underrepresented ethnic minority students are especially sensitive to the value of their college choice for...
their college success. We speculate that these students are the most likely to lack resources or family and social networks outside of college that can improve their access to the opportunity structure (Stanton-Salazar, 2001); thus, they are aware that they are more completely dependent on the outcome of a college career to improve their life chances.

Implications for Higher Education Programming

Our investigation adds complexity to the notion of what it means to be “first-generation,” providing evidence that first-generation students are not a homogeneous group, even in their concerns about how to finance a college education. This understanding has obvious implications for college recruitment and retention efforts. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all strategy to recruit first-generation students is likely to be ineffective. All students were very interested in the quality of the academic offerings and supports, as well as the potential for future benefits they might derive from higher education. Thus, recruitment programs that focus on matching prospective students’ interests and future aspirations to available university programs and supports will undoubtedly be more successful in retaining students than programs focusing more generally on increasing admission and matriculation rates. As well, universities might consider more carefully the interpersonal quality of their campuses and plan strategically for students to develop social networks within their ethnic/racial/gender groups as well as strong, positive cross-group ties. Recall that the social psychological literature makes a strong case for campuses to support gathering in groups that share common backgrounds, cultures, and values, and this is especially true to emotionally support members of groups who are typically stigmatized in this society. However, the development of cross-group ties can be critical for developing the kind of intellectually challenging, rich experiences that should be the hallmark of a university education and that will support positive intergroup experiences into adulthood (Schofield, 2001).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study examined the experiences of first-generation students in a comparative frame-
work, which limits the attention we have paid to within-group variability for the sake of analyzing between group differences. Our analyses have revealed the variability inherent in the label “first-generation;” it will be necessary as a next step to examine that variability through other lenses (e.g., ethnic, region of the country). For example, an investigation into how SES, gender, and high school achievement for a single ethnic group affect first-generation students’ choice of college and college adjustment will allow us to more closely consider how best to match the environment on college campuses with particular students’ academic and psychosocial needs.

The response rate for our web survey was 25%, which is within the range reported for previous Web surveys. For example, Fricker and Rand (2002) in a meta-analysis reported that the response rates of six studies published between 1998 and 2001 ranged from 8% to 44%. Porter and Whitcomb (2003) examined students’ perceptions of college and reported a response rate of 14.8% for their Web based survey. Some research suggests that survey response rates are a function of the length of time to complete the survey. Kittleson and Brown (2005) suggest that increased response rates of Web surveys can be gained if the time required to complete the survey is 3 to 5 minutes or less; our survey required 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Future researchers may design a survey that balances relevant questions, a reasonable number of surveys per year, and a reasonable response rate.

Our response rate may also have suffered because of incorrect or infrequently used email addresses (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003) or spam filters. Registrar’s Offices at the four universities from which we collected the data for this study issued the official campus student emails. However, we had no way of identifying how often the E-mails were checked, and students may have other primary E-mail accounts. Further, spam filters may have been too sensitive to include our E-mail invitation on some students’ personal computers. Future researchers might take advantage of multiple means of advertisement for the survey including campus newspapers, campus radio station announcements, banners in residence halls, participation in popular campus blogs, and classroom announcements.
A number of researchers have pointed out several advantages of Web surveys. Surveys are self-administered and anonymous that provides a high level of privacy to the respondent, increasing the likelihood of honest responses. Web surveys are also free of potential bias from an interviewer or test administrator (e.g., McDaniel & Gates, 2005).

Another limitation of our study is the use of the three single-item measures (i.e., personal family preference) with three multiple-item measures (i.e., the Academic Scale). We took strides to balance between using multiple items for each construct that we investigated and keeping the number of items as little as possible to increase response rates. Our initial analysis results revealed that reliability alphas for some scales were relatively low, and thus we decided to use three single items instead. It has been commonly known that multiple items provide a more discriminating response scale than one item, and are inherently more reliable by allowing for calculation of coefficient alpha than a single item only when common methods bias in predictor and criterion is taken into consideration. Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007), however, argued that multiple items are not necessary if attribute is concrete (by expert judgment). They went on to argue that additional items put into a scale run the risk of tapping into another predictive attribute. Indeed, the authors compared multiple-versus single-item measures. Using correlations and regressions, they found that single-item measures demonstrate having as good psychometric properties as multiple-item measures. If single-item measures are as strong as multiple-item measures, future researchers should consider increasing the use of single items for Web surveys since the number of items on the survey is one of the factors that determine response rates. However, before this, a through investigation on multiple-versus single-item measures of dependent and independent variables of a study should proceed.

Finally, we must acknowledge another limitation of our data. Despite substantial advances on recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups, many 4-yr colleges still enroll very small numbers of certain ethnic groups (e.g., African Americans – 1.2 million; Hispanic – .77 million; Native Americans – .09 million; Whites – 6.8 million) (Cook & Cordova, 2007). Our data have significantly unbalanced cell sizes (for which we compensated statistically), and our sample size of African American males in particular was especially small. Further, our number of Native American students was so small as to be inappropriate for analyses. If we are to understand the choices and experiences of all students, we must develop strategies to ensure that all voices are heard. In particular, examining within group variability will require substantially more diverse pools of respondents.

We set out to answer two questions. Our data make clear that students’ understanding of the institutional character, or habitus, of a given university played a part in their college choice process, and the influence of habitus varied, as we might expect, by first generation status as well as by gender. Today, the main source of modern success is education, and the children of those who never entered college can dream of going to college as a first step toward improving their life chances. Although first generation and minority students are actively recruited and congratulated for getting into college, we understand too little about these students’ process of college choice and the impact of choice on their adjustment after enrollment. Continued attention to college choice for first generation students can only improve equal access and opportunity for all students.

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