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## American first-generation college students' narratives of positive relationships with their school counsellors

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# American first-generation college students' narratives of positive relationships with their school counsellors

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## Abstract

Trusting and supportive relationships with school counsellors can help first-generation college students access college despite barriers. In this narrative inquiry, 11 first-generation college students in the United States shared stories of their positive relationships with their former high school counsellors. After an iterative and consensus-based data analysis process, we summarised our participants' grand narrative with five themes: family context, school counselling delivery, relationships with school counsellors, impact of relationships with school counsellors, and suggested improvements. Participants valued how school counsellors helped them advocate for themselves, build their confidence, and feel encouraged and accountable through individual meetings, career counselling, and college guidance. School counsellors can offer targeted and relational interventions to help first-generation college students access and persist through college.

**Keywords:** First-generation college students; school counselling; college access; counselling relationships; high school counselling

School counsellors should understand the impact of socio-cultural influences on student opportunities and promote equitable educational access for all students (The American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2016, 2019). High school students who are first-generation college students (FGCS) are one underserved population who often need additional support to access college (including any of a variety of postsecondary educational opportunities in the U.S. such as 4-year colleges and universities, trade schools, and community colleges; Belasco, 2013; Cholewa et al., 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), FGCS are defined as individuals whose parent(s) did not complete a baccalaureate degree. Between 20% and 33% of four-year college students in the U.S. are FGCS (Cataldi et al., 2018). FGCS can experience significant challenges entering college such as lacking resources and knowledge about college applications (Belasco, 2013; Havlik et al., 2020). As earning a four-year college degree is growing in importance in the U.S., more FGCS are attending college and facing challenges in postsecondary institutions that do not support their needs (Belasco, 2013).

Receiving support from school counsellors is crucial for FGCS (Belasco, 2013). School counsellors can help them understand the importance of attending college and provide resources to pursue higher education (Shoffner & Gibbons, 2004). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a U.S.-based organisation that supports school counsellors to promote the academic, social and emotional, and career success of all students (ASCA, n.d.). Based on ASCA's (2021) Student Standards, school

counsellors are responsible for preparing all students to be college- and career-ready, with measurable (i.e., evaluated through assessments) knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Yet, some believe school counsellors fall short in preparing FGCS to enter and persist in college (Holland, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). To develop a more nuanced and deeper understanding of how school counsellors can support FGCS, the purpose of our study was to understand these students' positive relationships with their former high school counsellors and the long-term impact of those relationships.

### **Common Struggles Among First-Generation College Students**

FGCS often face challenges in accessing college and persisting in college (Belasco, 2013; Cataldi et al., 2018). FGCS are less likely to have completed advanced high school classes (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate), which tend to be more challenging and provide more opportunities for recognition (Cataldi et al., 2018). Also, FGCS are more likely than non-FGCS to face financial challenges (Belasco, 2013). Many FGCS work off campus, since they cannot rely on their families for financial support (Bergerson, 2007). Additionally, FGCS may not have knowledge of essential resources for college matriculation, including college admissions requirements (Steele et al., 2010). Similarly, once enrolled in college, FGCS are less likely to access institutional resources, including counselling and career services (Belasco, 2013; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013).

### **The Need for Relational School Counselling Services**

Positive relationships with school counsellors can help FGCS develop skills and knowledge to access college despite barriers (Steele et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2015). Relational school counsellors focus on developing supportive relationships with students, which can support students in the college administration process (Belasco, 2013). ASCA (2021) emphasises that school counsellors should help students develop relationship-building skills, and relational school counselling allows school counsellors to model these skills for students.

Since FGCS have limited access to college-related resources outside of school, they often rely on school-provided resources (Belasco, 2013). Compared to non-FGCS who often navigate college applications and resources autonomously, FGCS value relationships with their school counsellors, characterised by connection, trust, advocacy, and accessibility (Holland, 2015; Knight et al., 2018). FGCS feel genuinely cared for when school counsellors know them holistically and express warmth (Knight et al., 2018). Similarly, FGCS have reported finding school counsellors more helpful when counsellors set clear expectations and exhibit sincere personal regard (Holland, 2015). Students who lack self-efficacy and support from other adults indicate that having a school counsellor who believes in them is especially important (Knight et al., 2018).

Despite the importance of school counsellors' relationships with FGCS, some believe school counsellors can fall short in building strong connections with FGCS (Holland, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). In one field study of two schools, few students felt they had close relationships with their school counsellors (Holland, 2015). School counsellors in this study relied on clearinghouse strategies that provided a wealth of college-related information to students without proactively connecting students with this information. This mentality can put the impetus on students to seek help and take initiative, which favours more advantaged students. Additionally, many school counsellors come from more privileged socio-economic statuses than most FGCS, which may make it difficult for them to understand the experiences and needs of FGCS (Holland, 2015). ASCA (2020) has emphasised that school counsellors should build awareness of the influence of their backgrounds on their knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and their abilities to connect with diverse students. Finally, high student-to-counsellor ratios can hinder school counsellors' efforts to provide proactive and targeted support for FGCS (Pham & Keenan, 2011).

Although many researchers have uncovered the barriers that FGCS face in high school and college (Belasco, 2013; Bergerson, 2007), few scholars have investigated the positive impact of FGCS' relationships with their school counsellors. Additionally, much of the research on low-income college students has focused on college access, without examining students' persistence in college and the possible long-term impact of their relationships with school counsellors (Cox, 2016). Therefore, we sought to understand FGCS' stories of positive relationships with their former high school counsellors and the long-term impact of these relationships in the present narrative inquiry study. These stories may help inform how school counsellors can develop positive relationships with clear guidance to support FGCS' abilities to access college and succeed in college. We sought to answer the following research questions: (a) What stories do FGCS tell of their positive relationships with their school counsellors? and (b) How do FGCS' stories of their positive relationships with their school counsellors fit within the context of their journeys into and through college?

## Method

We utilised descriptive narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008) to investigate FGCS' stories of positive relationships with their former high school counsellors. Narrative inquiry helped us present a collective story of our participants with awareness of place, context, relationships (people), college choices (actions), and how they evolve over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We sought to understand how these student-counsellor relationships developed and evolved, and the impact of those relationships beyond students' time in high school (Hays & Singh, 2012); therefore, the focus on people, time, and context of narrative inquiry was an appropriate fit.

## Participants

Criteria for participation included: (a) self-identification as a first-generation college student, (b) completion of high school, (c) enrolment as a college student, (d) age 18 or older, and (e) self-report as having a positive relationship with a school counsellor during high school. Of 11 participants, 6 (54.55%) identified as female, 4 (36.26%) identified as male, and 1 (9.10%) identified as nonbinary. Ten participants identified as White, and one participant identified as Hispanic/Latinx. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 40 ( $M = 24.64$ ;  $SD = 7.21$ ). One participant was in their first year of college, three participants were in their second year, one participant was in their third year, three participants were in their fourth year, and three participants were in their fifth year or beyond.

## Sampling and Recruitment

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, we utilised purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide us with rich and deep information about their positive relationships with their school counsellors (Patton, 2015). We recruited participants at two institutions within one U.S. Midwestern state. One institution was a 4-year private suburban institution, and the other was a 4-year public urban institution. We chose these two institutions because they had high percentages of FGCS. We obtained email lists of all current students at the first institution ( $N = 6377$ ) and all FGCS ( $N = 555$ ) at the second institution by contacting appropriate departments at those institutions. We emailed the study invitation to a random selection of 3508 students from the population of all students at the first institution. We also emailed the invitation to all 555 FGCS at the second institution. We determined that we had reached meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017) after 11 participants. We did this by noting new dimensions of each theme by going through one interview and letter at a time. By the time we arrived at the 11th participant's data, no additional dimensions emerged, and we only noted repetition of previous dimensions (Hennink et al., 2017).

### **Data Collection**

After agreeing to the informed consent, participants engaged in semistructured interviews and a letter-writing activity. The interview protocol, with five main questions and scripted probes, allowed us to address important topics with the flexibility to explore each participant's unique story (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). In the interview protocol, we asked participants to discuss their positive relationship with a specific school counsellor and their experience when deciding to attend college. We developed the interview protocol based on a review of 12 journal articles related to the needs of high school students who would be FGCS and our own professional counselling experiences. After integrating feedback from one auditor who identified as a first-generation college student, we finalised the main interview questions: (1) Describe the journey you took to your current enrolment in college? (2) Who or what has influenced your persistence in college? (3) How did you develop a relationship with your school counsellor? (4) How have you changed as a result of your relationship with your school counsellor? and (5) What else would you like to add about your relationship with your school counsellor or your college experience? The first, third, and fourth researchers conducted interviews through Zoom. They were recorded and transcribed.

At the conclusion of their interviews, we invited participants to write a letter to their former school counsellor and email it to us within one week (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These letters helped us gain insight into the impact of participants' relationships with their school counsellors by triangulating their interview data (Hays & Singh, 2012). The pre-scripted prompt asked participants to write a letter to their former school counsellor, sharing thoughts, feelings, or stories they wanted to share regarding their relationships, their transitions to college, and their lives in college. We did not require participants to send their letters to their school counsellors. Seven out of 11 participants completed their letters. Collectively, these data collection methods allowed us to collect rich and contextualised information to make unique recommendations to the field about the complexities of FGCS' relationship with their school counsellors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Coding Team**

The coding team consisted of four members, the first, second, third, and fifth authors. The first author identifies as a White, able-bodied, male assistant professor in counsellor education with experience working as a high school counsellor in schools with a predominantly first-generation college student population. The second author identifies as a White, able-bodied, female assistant professor in counsellor education who has previous school counselling experience working with middle and high school FGCS. The third author identifies as a Japanese-Asian, able-bodied, female assistant teaching professor and licensed counsellor who has experience working with FGCS. The fifth author identifies as a biracial, able-bodied male, doctoral student with experience working with FGCS in schools and clinical settings. We also utilised two auditors. One auditor, the seventh author, identifies as a White cisgender female, first-generation college student, and former foster youth. The second auditor, the eighth author, identifies as a White, able-bodied cisgender female first-generation college student.

To promote reflexivity and minimise the impact of our experiences biasing the grand narrative process (Hays & Singh, 2012), each team member wrote a reflexivity statement before engaging in the data analysis process. In these statements, we reflected on our experiences when making decisions about attending college and working with FGCS. After writing our statements, we discussed them together as a team before analysing the data. The first author wrote about his experiences working in an innovative college access program as a school counsellor in a rural school and not wanting to push his beliefs about the importance of college onto FGCS. The second author talked about how working as a school counsellor helped her recognise her privilege in receiving familial and financial college support. The third author felt she had limited knowledge of the concept of and needs of FGCS, having grown up outside of the U.S. in a country where most young people attend college. The fifth author discussed his experiences of working hard in kindergarten as he did significant work to acclimate to a

new educational system and culture as an immigrant. He also discussed how his doctoral program helped him see possible ways that FGCS have likely developed positive character traits from being a marginalised group coping with living in an oppressive society. The two auditors also wrote statements. We continued to engage in reflexive discussion throughout the data analysis process (Patton, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded in narrative theory, we conducted an iterative, team-based data analysis process to tell a story of our participants' positive relationships with their school counsellors, with a focus on characters, places, time, action, and context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). For our thematic structure, we sought to restore the individual interviews and letters to tell a grand narrative, the shared story across all our participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout an iterative four-step process, we repeatedly asked ourselves about the meaning of our participants' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). First, we individually read each transcript and letter and developed a list of preliminary main themes. The four coding team members then met to discuss our lists and developed a consensus list of themes, returning to the data as needed (Patton, 2015). Second, each of us individually read the transcripts and letters again and evaluated how well our consensus list of themes fit our data, paying special attention to important components of participants' stories that might be missing. We also reflected on how well our thematic structure told a grand narrative with characters, places, time, action, and context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, each of us individually developed a list of subthemes for each main theme. Then, we met to discuss our edits to the consensus theme list and to reach consensus on the list of subthemes. Third, we individually read each transcript and letter again to verify our thematic structure and find representative quotes that illustrated each theme and subtheme. We then met to reach consensus on these quotes and to further revise our thematic structure. Fourth, we sought feedback on our thematic structure from our two auditors. Then, the coding team met one final time and reached consensus about how to adapt the thematic structure based on the auditors' feedback.

We analysed each participant's transcripts before their letters. We used the letters to confirm and deepen our initial themes and to add a few new themes. In cases where the two sources of data conflicted, the coding team returned to the data to search for additional nuance and clarify meaning. Then, we discussed the discrepancies until reaching consensus on a deepened theme definition (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Trustworthiness**

We promoted trustworthiness by using triangulation of investigators, triangulation of data methods, and reflexivity (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2015). First, we triangulated investigators during the data analysis process with the use of a coding team of four members from diverse backgrounds (Hays & Singh, 2012). Throughout our data analysis process, we utilised consensus to arrive at our conclusions for our data analysis process with intentionality around creating an egalitarian environment and seeking input from all research team members (Patton, 2015). Second, we triangulated investigators by utilising two external auditors to provide feedback on the themes (Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, the auditors provided feedback about missing components of the thematic structure based on the data. Third, we utilised triangulation of data methods by collecting both semistructured interview data and data from participants' letters to their school counsellors (Hays & Singh, 2012). This combination of data methods provided more depth, as participants expressed different components of their experiences when their audience was an interviewer versus their former school counsellor. Finally, we used individual reflexivity statements and discussion of those statements to help us become more aware of the impact of our positionality and experiences on our understanding of the data (Hays & Singh, 2012).

## Findings

We developed five themes to tell the grand narrative of our participants' positive relationships with their school counsellors: family context, school counselling delivery, relationships with school counsellors, impact of relationships with school counsellors, and suggested improvements. Below, we describe the five themes and their subthemes, using exemplary quotations and pseudonyms.

### Family Context

The family context theme describes the influence of participants' families on their college plans and decision-making processes. This theme contains two subthemes: (a) family influence on college decisions and (b) family financial situation.

In the *family influence on college decisions* subtheme, participants described the ways their families shaped their decisions to attend college. Madeline (2nd year) shared: 'What's kept me motivated is knowing that my parents are doing this for me because they want me to succeed and they know that . . . I'm aspiring to get this degree and be well off someday.' Some participants described how they saw that life was harder for their family members without a college degree and they wanted more stability. Amelia (5th+ year) shared: 'I was surrounded by a lot of family that have not gone to college and I've seen them struggling.' Participants' parents often expected them to attend college to pursue a better life. Beans (3rd year) shared: 'So my parents said, "You will need to do it, you will do it, you're going to be the first one to go to college. You're the first one to graduate."'

In the *family financial situation* subtheme, participants described their families' ability to support them financially in college. For example, Paige (2nd year) shared: 'My mom didn't have any money saved for me . . . so she made it clear to me not to get my hopes up.' Similarly, Helen (5th+ year) described how college caused her to take on a large amount of student debt because her parents were unable to support her financially.

### School Counselling Delivery

The second theme, school counselling delivery, describes the specific services that school counsellors provided to prepare participants for college. Four subthemes emerged in our analysis, including (a) individual meetings, (b) career counselling, (c) college guidance, and (d) advocacy.

In the *individual meetings* subtheme, participants described advisement and counselling with their school counsellors. Although many participants described having few individual meetings with their school counsellors, they felt those meetings were impactful. For example, Ashley (4th year) mentioned how her school counsellor met with her after her dad passed away: 'I remember everything she told me as far as how to handle my emotions and how to not beat myself up. And that stuff sticks with you.'

Participants also valued the career counselling services provided by their school counsellors in the *career counselling* subtheme. These services included counselling on career development and the use of tools such as career interest inventories. Derek (4th year) recalled having conversations with his counsellor after taking career assessments that helped him discover he liked the helping professions. He said, 'He was showing me facts. Like, here's what some evidence that you're showing me is saying that you might like to do as a career.'

Similarly, in the *college guidance* subtheme, participants described receiving advisement on college options, applications, and matriculation. College advisement ranged from encouraging participants to enrol in higher-level courses to explanations regarding scholarships and the college application process. Jay (5th+ year) recounted conversations with his counsellors about course selection: 'They start putting those first seeds of college into your mind . . . so that way you can enrol in classes your junior and senior year of high school that might better prepare you for college courses.' Paige shared: 'I feel like the reason I got the scholarships I did was because of [school counsellor]. Like otherwise, I would have had no idea how to . . . make my application look good.'



The final subtheme, *advocacy*, involves the ways school counsellors advocated for participants' needs and helped them find resources. Helen described how her school counsellor saw her struggling and advocated for her when other adults in the school did not recognise she needed support. She described how her school counsellor 'just kind of tuned in more and paid closer attention and became that advocate . . . he stands out as somebody who was not against me, he was for me. He saw me.'

### **Relationships with School Counsellors**

In this theme, participants described how their relationships with their school counsellors played a central role in their college journeys and provided them support, validation, and encouragement. This theme included four subthemes: (a) acknowledgment, acceptance, and validation, (b) availability and approachability, (c) warmth and encouragement, and (d) accountability.

In the *acknowledgment, acceptance, and validation* subtheme, participants described how their school counsellors recognised them as individuals with unique needs and provided unconditional acceptance and validation. This relational dynamic helped participants feel heard, valued, and seen. For example, Helen felt noticed and encouraged by her school counsellor. In her letter to her school counsellor, she wrote:

*As an above average, but not exceptional student, I felt lost and invisible in the masses. But in this one situation, you noticed me and, I suspect, you noticed that I needed some encouragement, some direction, something to help me imagine life beyond high school. It worked. This one act of singling me out and opening this opportunity left an indelible mark on me.*

As revealed in the *availability and approachability* subtheme, participants' school counsellors were approachable and accessible, which helped them meet participants' needs and helped the relationship grow deeper over time. Hudson (1st year) wrote in his letter to his school counsellor: 'Every single morning you would be there with a smile on your face as I walked by the office, and it instantly made my day better. I have no idea how anyone could be upset when they saw you.' Ashley highlighted how she appreciated her school counsellors' accessibility and 'the fact that they're there, whether you communicate via email, phone, or in person'. Participants also described approachability in terms of their school counsellor's warmth and encouragement. For example, Amelia described her school counsellor as 'a sunshine'. School counsellors also challenged participants to see themselves in new ways, instead of feeling limited by their statuses as FGCS. For example, Derek described how his school counsellor helped him 'open my eyes to things . . . try to keep your mind as open as possible'.

Finally, in the *accountability* subtheme, participants described how their school counsellors kept them on track in academic and college preparation. For example, Jay described how his school counsellor was 'catching me wanting to slack and reminding me that it might be in my better interest to do something else'.

### **Impact of Relationships with School Counsellors**

The fourth theme describes the impact of participants' relationships with their school counsellors. This theme included five subthemes: (a) self-advocacy, (b) confidence, (c) role-model, (d) expanded view of possibilities, and (e) overcame barriers.

In the *self-advocacy* subtheme, participants described the ways their school counsellors empowered them to advocate for themselves. For example, Helen described how she learned what self-advocacy meant from her school counsellor, who guided her within a school system that was not always sensitive to her needs as a FGCS: 'Knowing that somebody was fighting for me . . . empowered me to feel like I could fight for myself.' She stated later that this self-advocacy has continued to help her in college. Madeline similarly described how her school counsellor encouraged her to not 'be afraid to speak up, if

you feel like something is not going the way that you want, or that it should be, that you should feel empowered to speak up’.

In the *confidence* subtheme, participants described how their confidence increased because of their school counsellors. For example, Paige shared the lasting impact that her school counsellor had on her self-confidence: ‘[He] showed me that I can do anything I set my mind to . . . he proved to me you’re good enough, you can do this stuff if you really set your mind to it.’ Caleb (2nd year) shared a similar sentiment in how his school counsellor increased his confidence by openly supported his identity as a queer person:

*It was . . . the very first time that someone at my public-school career was openly supportive of queer people. That was unheard of. And . . . it made me feel more confident in the way I behaved around my high school because I was very openly queer . . . And knowing I, at least, had this sympathetic support with one counsellor, it was helpful, and it was reassuring for me.*

In the *role model* subtheme, participants described the ways their school counsellor served as an inspiration for them. As Ashley noted, her school counsellor ‘was really good at being a confident role model’. Similarly, several participants shared how they hoped to emulate their school counsellors. For example, Amelia described how her school counsellor was ‘very vibrant and very positive and very warm. And so one of the qualities that I have a lot as a leader is being positive, vibrant, and warm.’

Participants’ school counsellors widened their horizons regarding the opportunities available to them in the *expanded view of possibilities* subtheme. For example, Helen shared how her school counsellor planned a field trip for students to learn about local businesses, which ‘expanded our vision for what opportunities existed beyond high school . . . that little experience just opened up so many different like, ideas and possibilities for me’.

Finally, in the *overcame barriers* subtheme, participants described how their school counsellors provided them with individualised supports and resources to navigate challenges that changed over time. For example, Jay shared how ‘any administration problems that I had she’d streamline for me’, which helped him transition into college.

### **Suggested Improvements**

Participants reflected on services and interactions they wish they had from their school counsellors to support their college preparation in this final theme. This theme encompassed the three subthemes of (a) consistent individual meetings, (b) earlier identification and support, and (c) more college support and information.

In the *consistent individual meetings* subtheme, participants wished they had more frequent meetings with their school counsellors throughout high school. Since the few interactions were often meaningful, they would have liked to have had more. For example, John (4th year) described how individual meetings as opposed to classroom lessons could emphasise the importance of the information: ‘In a group setting, the classroom, you’re not always paying attention . . . there’s a sense of casualness about it. So, if you just sit down one-on-one with a student, that shows the sincerity.’

In the *earlier identification and support* subtheme, participants wished their school counsellors had identified them as FGCS so they could receive targeted supports. Paige shared: ‘It would be helpful to identify the students in high school that were FGCS, like if they’re planning to go to college, and give them resources ahead of time.’ Similarly, Madeline wished her school counsellors asked more questions to understand FGCS’ backgrounds and challenges. She stated: ‘I didn’t know that first-generation was a thing until I went to college.’ She believed it would have been helpful if the school counsellor knew that she was a first-generation student and could tell her, ‘there are opportunities for you out there. There are additional scholarships because of this.’

Finally, many participants wanted enhanced guidance surrounding college in the *more college support and information* subtheme. Beans shared: ‘I would say that I didn’t exactly have a whole lot of guidance getting where I am now . . . I got like a little bit of college counselling. But it didn’t really

happen until around my senior year.' Jay shared that he would have appreciated more information on opportunities beyond college: 'There's a lot of my peers that didn't [go to college] and maybe they could have used some direction on alternatives.'

## Discussion

In this narrative inquiry of FGCS' positive relationships with their high school counsellors, we synthesised participants' individual stories into a grand narrative illuminating the ways these relationships influenced participants over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The five themes that emerged highlight first-generation college students' positive relationships with their school counsellors and how these relationships impacted their journeys into and throughout college. The *Family Context* theme highlighted the important influence of families on participants' college journeys, which included financial challenges and motivational support. The identification of financial challenges aligns with previous research that students may not be able to rely on their families for financial support (Bergerson, 2007); however, more research is needed examining positive roles that families play in FGCS' college journeys (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Thus, our results contribute to an asset-focused perspective by highlighting the ways participants' families emotionally contributed to their college journey, including motivation and encouragement. To promote culturally responsive collaboration with families (ASCA, 2022), school counsellors should consider both familial challenges and supports.

As outlined in the *School Counselling Delivery* and *Relationship with School Counsellors* themes, participants described the support they received from school counselling services and the relationships they developed. Our findings deepen existing research about the importance of school counsellors building relationships with FGCS through relational building strategies. Scholars have identified that FGCS often desire relationships with their school counsellors characterised by trust, accessibility, advocacy, and connection (Holland, 2015; Knight, et al., 2018). Similarly, participants in our study described how their school counsellors' approachability, encouragement, and accountability contributed to their positive relationships. Although our results align with prior research, they also fill a gap in the literature by exploring college students' retrospective experiences with a high school counsellor, whereas existing studies have focused on the perspectives of high school students (e.g., Holland, 2015; Knight, et al., 2018). Gaining the perspective of FGCS regarding aspects of their former relationships with their school counsellor is important because college students have first-hand experience of successfully navigating the college matriculation process. Aligned with ASCA's (2021) Student Standards, it is promising that our findings highlight how genuine school counsellor relationships and targeted school counselling services (e.g., individual advisement, college guidance) may help FGCS overcome barriers to college access and persistence. Moreover, as illuminated in the *Impact of Relationship with School Counsellor* theme, participants described the long-term impact school counsellors had on their lives. Since researchers have often focused on FGCS' matriculation and access but not their persistence in college (Cox, 2016), it is encouraging that school counsellors had an impact on these college students in lasting ways beyond high school.

The ways participants felt supported by their relationships with their school counsellors provides a counternarrative to previous findings about ways school counsellors have fallen short in serving FGCS (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Pérusse et al., 2017). It is encouraging that some school counsellors are providing impactful services to FGCS as described by the participants in our study. Yet, as highlighted in the *Suggested Improvements* theme, participants also wished they had more frequent individual meetings and more college support. Large caseloads may contribute to school counsellors' abilities to hold regular individual meetings and build relationships with FGCS. Therefore, since having more contact with prospective FGCS can increase college application rates (Bryan et al., 2011), school counsellors might advocate for reducing their student-to-counsellor ratios. Reducing this ratio is especially important for schools with higher percentages of prospective FGCS because it can allow school counsellors more time to build trust and connection with students in ways that help relationships go beyond formality (Holland, 2015).

### **Implications**

Given the long-term impact of participants' school counsellors' relational abilities (e.g., approachability, warmth, acceptance), school counsellors should be intentional about remaining relational, accessible, and attentive to students (Holland, 2015). Since participants in our study valued targeted interventions addressing their unique needs, school counsellors should offer such interventions (e.g., career advisement, scholarship support). School counsellors might also form counselling groups for FGCS that combine psychoeducational information about college, as well as discussions of emotions and family contexts, which might help students feel supported and validated by their peers.

Since many participants commented on the importance of their family contexts, school counsellors might direct college-related interventions towards students and their families (ASCA, 2015; Kantamneni et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2015). Families are often important sources of cultural capital for FGCS (Bryan et al., 2011; Kantamneni et al., 2018), even if family members lack resources or knowledge surrounding college (Bergerson, 2007). Thus, taking an asset-based approach and including families in individual meetings and college information nights might help tap into sources of strengths for many FGCS, which can feel culturally relevant for students from collectivist cultural backgrounds (Kantamneni et al., 2018).

### **Limitations**

We noted several limitations of our study. First, our sample lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Therefore, our findings likely do not represent the needs of FGCS of colour. Second, a few participants had graduated from high school more than 10 years ago at the time of their interviews and might not have clearly remembered their relationships with their high school counsellors. Third, the thematic structure that resulted from our data analysis process may not accurately represent divergent experiences of some participants. For example, one participant characterised her relationship with her school counsellor as amiable, but she reported receiving little support or encouragement surrounding college. Her experience may represent a barrier that some FGCS face and a way that positive relationships are sometimes insufficient. Similarly, since students from diverse groups often do not feel they have close relationships with school counsellors (Holland, 2015), the focus of our study on positive relationships with school counsellors may not accurately represent the way FGCS may feel unseen or underserved by school counsellors (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Finally, seven of our interviews lasted less than 45 minutes, which may have limited the richness and depth of our findings.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future researchers might focus on understanding the relationships minority populations of FGCS have with their school counsellors, including immigrants, racial and ethnic minority groups, and students with disabilities (Kantamneni et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers conducting a quantitative study might reveal a more generalisable picture of positive relational components, services utilised, and impact beyond high school across a larger number of FGCS. Such researchers also may examine potential associations between FGCS' relationships with their school counsellors and help-seeking behaviours or the effectiveness of counselling services. Finally, understanding the impact of parents, guardians, and peers on perceptions of and relationships with the school counsellors could help school counsellors serve FGCS in culturally relevant ways.

### **Conclusion**

This narrative inquiry study presented U.S. FGCS' stories of positive relationships with their former high school counsellors and the long-term impact of those relationships. We summarized the grand narrative of our participants with five themes: family context, school counselling delivery, relationships with school counsellors, impact of relationships with school counsellors, and suggested improvements.

To promote equity, school counsellors can build warm and validating relationships and provide individualised and relational services to FGCS like college guidance, career counselling, and individual meetings (Holland, 2015; Knight *et al.*, 2018).

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