

First Generation College
Students in Communication
Disorders: Perspectives,
Strengths, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose- The goal of this study was to investigate the experiences of first-generation college students, specifically within the CMD major, including their: perspectives, challenges, possible advantages, and unique characteristics.

Method- The participants who are in this study were a total of five first-generation college students in the Communication Disorders major at SUNY New Paltz. The interview was in-person, and audio recorded. In this qualitative study, data were analyzed for patterns and compared to previously collected data about the experiences of first-generation college students in other majors.

Results- Disadvantages found in this study included pressure/high expectations, isolation, and confusion about the academic process. Advantages included high motivation, independence, work ethic and family support. Unique characteristics included the graduate school application process, science, and maintaining high grades due to the competitive field.

Conclusion- It was found that the participants shared similar stress factors about the graduate school application, maintaining high grades due to a competitive field, and the science aspect of how it wasn't anticipated to be so much science.

KEYWORDS: Communication Disorders major, First-generation college students, perspectives, disadvantages, advantages, unique characteristics, stress, high pressure, motivation, family support, independence, financial aid, isolation, interview

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this study, we will define first-generation college students (FGCS) as those who are the first in their family to attend college (NASPA, n.d). Studies have found that one third of all college students in the U.S. are first-generation students and only 27 percent of first-generation college students finish college within four years (Rivera, 2022). Sometimes, this can overlap with kids whose parents are immigrants or are from underserved populations. As we look further into FG students, it is shown that they are more likely to drop out at the end of their first year and have poor graduation rates making factors that affect retention critical to FG students (Goldman, 2022). Goldman also states that first-generation (FG) college students have been a popular subpopulation to study within educational literature as these students experience many unique challenges in their academic careers causing them to drop out within their first year. This gives courses with high first-time freshman numbers such as introductory psychology courses a unique opportunity to reach many of these students. They may also show feelings of guilt for leaving their families and/or work to pursue a degree of which their family and peers may not understand the benefits of doing so (2022). The financial constraints some students experience puts them in a position to commute back and forth to school instead of living on campus. This may leave little time to socialize with other students before or after class, or becoming involved in learning communities and study groups (Lightweis, 2014).

Sometimes, these challenges correlate with different majors in college. For example, there have been investigations done to show a general percentage of the majors FG students typically pursue. Engle reported that low-income, first-generation students were most likely to remain in

business majors at 86 percent and the least likely to remain in majors in mathematics and science at 44 percent. The largest gap between low-income, first-generation students and their peers in terms of being retained in their major was in mathematics and sciences, where they were 15 percent less likely than their peers to stay in their major. So by comparison, students who were neither low-income nor first-generation were most likely to stay in the social sciences at 72 percent and the least likely to remain in the humanities at 55 percent (2008). For this study, we are looking specifically at first-generation college students in the Communication Disorders major and will compare their unique characteristics and find out what is different about being in this specific major and what their experiences have been like.

BACKGROUND

The Communication Disorder Major (CMD) can be difficult whether you are a first-generation college student or not. Research has been done to compare challenges within CMD to other majors. Previous studies have looked at stress and anxiety in CMD majors and found that it's common for students in CMD to have high levels of stress and anxiety. A 2011 study done by Beck, et al., compared undergraduates (UG) in the CMD major to UG in social work and found certain sources of stress were unique to CMD students. The two most salient themes that occurred for the number one stressor were school-related stressors such as homework, projects, tests, grades, and being prepared and the other factor was the graduate school application process.

In addition, a fairly high number of CMD students were found to be perfectionistic and that

many of these students demonstrated maladaptive aspects of perfectionism (2011). Maladaptive perfectionism is defined by having high personal performance standards and tendencies to be extremely self-critical in self-evaluations. Maladaptive perfectionists possess a need to control their environment and when events do not go as planned, they develop negative attitudes (ILCS, 2017). The low number of CMD students who were classified as non-perfectionistic is consistent with other literature. This comparison to other students who are also majoring in a clinically oriented program suggests that high levels of perfectionism might be an intrinsic characteristic of CMD students. Another explanation could be the competitive nature of admission to graduate school (Beck, et al., 2011). There are many stresses that involve the Communication Disorders major, but there have been no studies done to date that explore the experiences of FG students in this major.

METHOD

The goal of this study was to investigate the experiences of first-generation college students, specifically within the CMD major, including their: perspectives, challenges, possible advantages, and unique characteristics. Few previous studies look at advantages within FGCS, and no other studies looked specifically at the experiences of FG in the CMD major. To investigate FG students, an interview process was approved through the Human Research Ethics Board (HREB). The participants were a total of five first-generation college students in the Communication Disorders major in SUNY New Paltz. This was confirmed while setting up the appointment to meet each student and meet at a designated study room in the library at SUNY New Paltz campus. Participants were recruited by using flyers that were posted on campus. Each participant signed an informed consent document to document their agreement to being

interviewed. The interview was in-person, and audio recorded. The interview consisted of 28 questions involving general information about their experiences being a first-generation college student, including experiences on-campus, their childhood growing up, and with their major.

In this qualitative study, data was analyzed for patterns and compared to previously collected data about the experiences of first-generation college students in other majors. Transcriptions were made by the primary investigator and were used to identify keywords, patterns, and themes to determine what the main factors were in this study. These include any references to challenges faced as first-generation college students, advantages perceived in being a first-generation college student, specific experiences related to the CMD major, and additional information that the participant wants the CMD faculty to know about the experiences of first-generation college students. Information on key patterns were organized across participants using a Microsoft Word chart.

Four participants were seniors, one was a junior and four of them were in the Deaf Studies minor. Two of them were in the Honors Program and all of them worked off campus. Four of them worked more than one job while attending college, balancing their studying, and family obligations. Four of the participants were commuters and drove to campus for their classes. All of the participants had immigrant parents.

COMMON DISADVANTAGES

PRESSURE/HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Some major factors were found when going through the interview process, and one of the factors

included pressure and high expectations, whether it comes from your family, parents, or yourself. One participant mentioned that they feel as if their parents would be disappointed if she did not go to college or get the best grades she could. She also said “I think my mom is also vicariously living her life through me because she wanted to be a speech pathologist and I feel like I would definitely slack off more if I didn't have the weight of having to do good on me. It's like my parents kinda force you to stay in line and scare you into it and the pressure that comes along with having to do it for myself as well as my parents is a lot”. Another participant continued to say “With being first gen right, I think that it's easy for a lot of first gen students to feel like they're not doing enough or feel like enough. Or like to have some sort of impostor syndrome as well”. Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. 'Imposters' suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence (Corkindale, 2019). The mention of imposter syndrome was very interesting because more than one participant mentioned this in their interview.

Another mindset that was noticed among all participants was the “I have to do what I have to do to get the work done and get good grades” mentality. One participant stated that “I have to be perfect and everything has to be done”, and another participant said “but at the end of the day, I get stuff done”. This mental state was shared among all students, just in different wording. Another participant stated that “All values are very different. And you can see that by like, you can also tell when you're like interacting with individuals and the level of stress that you have internally is so different to because you always have like voices in your head, the back of your head that are like, you have to be doing this, your parents risk so much to be here. But like, that's not the same for other individuals. Like my parents always said, they're like, oh, like,

we came to this country, like, we gave you a good life, and this makes me scared to fail and not do right by them”. Pressure and high expectations run very high among all participants and the core to their fear is letting their parents down, and they are more scared letting them down than letting themselves down.

ISOLATION/LACK OF INVOLVEMENT

Since four of the participants were commuters, a common theme that was noticed was the feeling of being secluded and getting left out. One of the participants mentioned how “I would love to be more involved in the campus life, but just a lot of the clubs and activities happen later in the day, somewhere like eight or nine at night and I can’t do that because I either work or it’s too late for me to drive an hour back and forth”. This was said by all of the commuters, and each of them expressed how late events were inconvenient both because of the drive and how they also had to balance work and family obligations while also balancing school. A few suggested that more clubs could have the option to be online once in a while, just so they can feel more connected. Another participant continued to talk about how “I wish I had more friends on campus but because the commute makes it harder”. This resonated with all the other commuters since they are not familiar with campus life, besides going to and from their classes. One more quote from a student that supports this is “Yes, I think that there's a lot of organizations and clubs and stuff. I personally am not in any, I think it's a little harder because I am a commuter. So it's hard to balance, like my jobs and commuting and just trying to figure out a time where I can, like come to campus for all those different things”. This results in them being secluded and given less opportunities to make friends while also missing out on potential study groups or just socializing with other students in their class. Many of the club events or campus events are over the weekend as well, which commuters attend because they have other commitments including

work, studying, and other responsibilities.

CONFUSION ABOUT THE ACADEMIC PROCESS

All participants unanimously agreed upon how confusing the navigation process is when it comes to financial aid. “It’s a lot that goes through our head, and we’re not really educated and aware of it. As a first generation, my parents don’t really know much about financial aid or taxes” was said by a participant, and another student stated that “I’m not sure how my parents helped me with the financial forms because they are just as confused as I am”. There was a lot of discussion about how frustrating going through this process is because both the student and their parents are confused on how to fill out financial aid paperwork. Participants shared the hope that they didn’t do anything wrong or put any wrong numbers down. One student stated “I was not necessarily prepared for it. I feel like it’s, I feel like I became prepared as I go through the actual process of college, but I wasn’t prepared, like coming into college with that makes sense and having to like, navigate that on your own is like very difficult and very unclear”. Participants also followed up by saying that more guidance might be beneficial because this is their first time doing anything like this and do not have a model to go off of. When there is a question and try to call the financial aid office, it is either always busy so they have to wait on the phone for over two hours, or nobody answers. This creates frustration because the financial aid process is already long and tedious, so when they try reaching out for help and have a difficult time trying to access someone to help them over the phone, it’s very hard.

COMMON ADVANTAGES

HIGH MOTIVATION

The theme of motivation was spread among all the participants. They all had the drive to do well and work hard for their grades. A lot of the motivation was derived from family, and wanting to do well for them. A participant said “I think my parents definitely influenced the way that I go about life. I'm always trying to not only make them proud, but like, I'm trying to do it because I know that the effort and the sacrifice that they've put into me, so I need to give that back to them. So that's why I go so hard” and continued on saying that “they came here and had the goal. I think that like most people who come here, they're looking for this American dream, they want a better life for themselves and for me. So, because of that, growing up, my family has always been very heavy on getting an education”.

“My parents were always very strict about having 90 or above in high school and if I didn't, I would get grounded. So it was like that sort of motivation to do good” says another participant. This similar theme was mentioned throughout all the FG students who were interviewed. They want to do well for their parents because they know the struggle and have seen them work hard to get here, so making them proud is a core reason and drive for their motivation. In all interviews, the question “Do you think you are succeeding in this major?” was asked, and all participants responded yes.

INDEPENDENCE

All of the participants in this study are not only first generation college students, but first

generation children in the United States. They felt that this made them grow up to be more independent when it came to taking care of things on their own, and made them grow up being able to do things without needing help from their parents or anything in general. One participant said “I think I learned very young to be extremely independent. I don't really like saying this, like, in this way, but I don't know how else to describe it. I guess I also learned to be very strong, from a very young age and kind of be okay with being like, alone when navigating sometimes difficult things” and continued to say “If I needed to help in writing a paper in elementary school or something like that, like, my parents couldn't necessarily help me because they didn't have those foundational education structures that they needed in order to help me, so I kind of am in it a little bit on my own to an extent. And it's not that like, I don't have the support for my parents, of course I do. But they just don't have the skills to support me always in the way I need when it comes to things like that”. Since all the participants had immigrant parents, they all resonated with this and said similar things in different ways. These students had to find their own way to adapt and to adjust in this American society and live out being first generation while also having no previous experience or model to follow.

WORK ETHIC

All of the interview participants worked, and four out of five of them worked more than one job. Working and balancing school is difficult, but it also makes them have a strong work ethic. One participant mentioned that “as a family that has to work a lot and pull a lot of hours and just manual labor heavy stuff, it has been a dream to have an education overall”. Growing up with hard working parents, children tend to follow in their footsteps as well and want to work hard to

earn their money. Two of the participants are in the Honors Program and shared how it made them feel so happy to know that hard work can actually pay off. Another participant mentioned how their “work ethic is like, literally directly correlated to the way I was raised”. All participants agree to this because again, they do what they have to do and are in that mindset. This may also be another reason why they are able to have such high motivation, which is because their work ethic is more than just at their jobs, they put their all into their school work as well because they understand the struggle of working hard so they also want to study hard and get to the end of their goal.

FAMILY SUPPORT

When it comes to family support, all of the FG participants had full support of going to school and continuing their education and career. One student mentioned “My family is very much a factor into why I attended college” and another also “I feel like a big part of it was definitely my parents because they just want me to be successful and like, not have to deal with struggles in life”. All participants said something along the lines of how they think that their parents had a big impact in school and don't think that they would be in school if it were not for them.

However, so much family support could also lead to feelings of pressure as one student said because “I don't think that I would be as tough on myself or do as good if it weren't for them”. Another participant said “Schooling was very important to my parents, and it was so important that I did continue my education and pursue a degree in something. And that also definitely played a large role in pushing me towards doing the schooling and pushing me to do the best I can possibly be”. Support is something that all the FG students have in common and

because of this, they are succeeding in all their classes and say they are getting good grades in all or most of their classes.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES TO CMD

GRADUATE SCHOOL/APPLICATION PROCESS

When asked how they felt about starting the graduate application process, participants were unanimous in their responses. They all shared how they felt very uneasy, scared and anxious. “But now as I'm starting to, like applying to grad school, it is very, very scary” was said by a participant. When asked if they feel like they have any challenges, they all responded with not being ready for the application process. One mentioned the reason was “because like, everyone applies to the cheap schools, and especially in the city, there's 600 plus applicants, and only 20 seats that are open, so it's like, my odds are very low in that sense and it's terrifying to have to just wait to either get denied or accepted. But if I don't get into grad school, then that's a whole other stress factor with what I'm supposed to do if I get denied, especially wasting so much money to apply to so many schools and to only go or get into one because that money is gone”. The application process also requires money, and many of the participants spoke about how they have to pay so much money and may only end up being accepted to one school. Since a large factor in graduate admissions is getting good grades, that is the top of their priority. This can result in students having negative attitudes towards themselves when they do not get the grade they were hoping to get. This leads into the next unique factor in CMD which is maintaining high grades because of how competitive the field is.

MAINTAINING HIGH GRADES BECAUSE OF COMPETITIVE FIELD

Since the Communication Disorders major has very high competition, this results in students fearing they won't get into graduate school. Because this field is so competitive, there is also fear that there will not be enough spots for them to get in the graduate program. Students have to think about back up ideas to do if they do not get accepted. One student talked about having potential back ups already planned in case things do not go the way she wants, because that way she still has a path she can follow until she is able to apply again the following year. Anxiety about graduate school also correlates strongly with getting good grades and maintaining the best GPA possible in hopes that they would benefit them getting into the school they want. "If I study for so long and don't get the grade I want, then it's kind of like a slap in the face like I should have done more," one participant said. This mentality resonates with the aspects of maladaptive perfectionism because if a student does not get the grade they want or studied for, they beat themselves up and let it affect them in a negative way, which is very bad for mental health. When students in this major get a 90 in a homework assignment or a test, participants say that it is not good enough and how they will continuously beat themselves up because they study so hard and still don't get the perfect score that they studied for and it disappoints them greatly. The only acceptable grades that they consider good would be above a 95 and even so, they get mad getting the one or two questions wrong that stop them from receiving a 100. In this way, maladaptive perfectionism is being shown among first-generation students in the Communication Disorders major.

SCIENCE ASPECT OF THE MAJOR

The Communication Disorders major involves aspects of medicine and science. With that being said, the major is broad with different topics that students need to master to be able to apply

certain information towards the career. For example, this field can range from having to learn phonetics, to understanding child development, to knowing about the different types of voice disorders or the difference between articulation and phonological disorders. This makes it so important to understand the anatomy and physiology of speech and swallowing, but also means we need to understand hearing loss and audiology. When getting deeper into the kinds of challenges the participants may have faced so far, all of them mentioned science is some way and it all included how they did not realize how much science was involved. “I did not realize going into it that there would be so much science and like you don't realize how in depth you get scientifically”, said one student. One student also said they wished they knew how much science was involved before getting invested into the major because science was not their favorite subject in class, and now they need to apply more time for studying harder in the science classes, and staying ahead of the class topics to make sure they do not fall behind.

FINAL GATHERINGS

At the end of every interview, the participant was asked one question that involved the faculty of the CMD department that may benefit future first generation students. This can be very impactful and bring awareness for everyone in the major and in general. The question was “If you could tell the faculty of this department one important thing about being a first generation college student in this major, what would it be?”. Every person gave their insight or comment on what they want to tell the faculty of the CMD major about their experience. Their answers were as follows:

PARTICIPANT ONE:

“Sometimes, I think, it's hard for our professors and advisors to really put themselves in our shoes. Not only that, and I'm sure there's plenty of faculty that has been a first-generation college student, but I think having someone on their team that is and can truly relate to us would be so good and reach out to us in an email or something. Or sometimes taking a step back from being, you know, an advisor or a teacher, and just realizing that this support that some of us need at times is important and just realizing that”.

PARTICIPANT TWO:

“I think that professors should take into account the stress level of individuals and learn how to better communicate with both them and their students. I think that especially parents of our culture -they just place more stress, place more emphasis on you and pressure because we have to do good so our future is set and also we can support our parents in the future and there's like voices in your head. It's like fighting demons like extra demons. It's crazy and it can get really overwhelming really fast”.

PARTICIPANT THREE:

“Being first gen comes with a bunch of cultural values that's attached to you. Like our mindset is like, very different than comparing it to somebody who isn't, and I feel like maybe if we even try to create some type of support groups that can bring us together in a way, you know? That would be great because then we could, like, interact with other students who might be going through the

same thing as us and just emphasize the fact that we are not alone and we have people to lean on and vent to who also understand our situation and position. That'd be great if our professors maybe came together to do something like that. It doesn't even have to be just in our major either, because I feel like any major would benefit from doing something like that where people can make those connections and give us a chance to express ourselves and help each other when needed. That'd be really cool”.

PARTICIPANT FOUR:

“Something that would benefit first generation college students like me would probably be to just be supportive and helpful just because we don't have a model to go off of, like yeah, we don't have a model to go off of so it's like a new process to us and we don't know any better. So, like being patient and very helpful and being detailed if we have questions or are freaking out about if we should be doing this or should we not be doing this. I think that would help us a lot, like our major in general”.

PARTICIPANT FIVE:

“I would say that a lot of- well, just speaking about myself because I can't really speak about other people, but it's not that we don't feel worthy, but it's like almost impostor syndrome in college, just like, yeah, like college. I don't know. It's also just supporting them. Even if it's just reassuring them that like, you got this you can do this because a lot of the times like things going on at home and still balancing everything does have struggle. There's times where you're just like, oh my god, like I can't. Yeah, just like providing support and just checking in on your

students to like how they're doing like mentally and emotionally because it could be a lot and you never know what they're going through".

CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, it was found that the participants shared similar stress factors about the graduate school application, maintaining high grades due to a competitive field, and the science aspect of how it wasn't anticipated to be so much science. When asked how they felt about beginning the application process for graduate school, there was general agreement. They all expressed how uncomfortable, afraid, and anxious they were. When asked if they feel like they have any challenges, all participants responded with not being ready for the application process. Since grades play a major role and are everyone's main goal, when they do not receive the grade they were expecting for, they tend to develop unfavorable attitudes about themselves. Due to the level of competition in the area, maintaining excellent grades is the next important consideration. Due to the intense competition in the communication disorders major, many students worry that they won't be accepted into graduate programs. Due to the intense competition in this profession, there is also concern that there will not be enough openings for them to enroll, forcing them to come up with fallback plans in case they are rejected. One student suggested having backup plans ready in case things don't work out the way she had hoped, since this would provide her a path to follow until she could reapply the following year. This is highly related to maintaining the highest GPA and earning good grades in the goal of helping students get into the schools they choose. The medical and scientific component of the Communication Disorders major is challenging and weighty. Having said that, the major is so vast and covers a wide range of

subjects that you must be well-versed in to be able to apply particular knowledge to a profession. For instance, this subject may include learning phonetics, comprehending child development, being aware of the many voice abnormalities, or understanding the distinction between phonological and articulation issues. Because of this, it is crucial to comprehend the anatomy and physiology of speech and swallowing. We also need to learn about hearing loss and take a lot of audiology classes in order to gain a fundamental understanding of hearing loss and all of its aspects.

Some disadvantages found among the first-generation college students in the Communication Disorder major included high pressure and stress, isolation and confusion to the academic process. When going through the interview process, some significant elements were discovered, and one of those factors was pressure and high expectations, whether they come from your family, parents, or yourself. Because more than one person brought up impostor syndrome during their interviews, this was a very intriguing topic to bring up. All of the students had the same mental state; they just expressed it differently. All participants are under a great deal of pressure and have high expectations, and their greatest worry is disappointing their parents. In fact, they are more afraid of disappointing them than they are of disappointing themselves. Due to the fact that four of the participants commuted, a recurring topic was the sensation of isolation and exclusion. As a result, they become more isolated, have less opportunity to make friends, miss out on prospective study groups, and have less time to interact with other students in their class. Many club events and school activities take place on the weekends, making it impossible for commuters to participate because of their other obligations, such as employment, study, and other commitments.

The participants all concurred on how difficult it is to navigate the financial aid system.

Many people talked about how irritating it is to go through this procedure because both the student and their parents are unsure of how to fill it out and worry that they did something incorrect. This causes irritation because applying for financial aid is already a drawn-out procedure, and it becomes even more challenging when they try to get assistance and are unable to reach anyone by phone. Some advantages found among the students included motivation, independence, work ethic and family support. All of the participants shared this theme while discussing motivation. They were all motivated to work hard and earn good scores. Family and the desire to achieve well for them provided a lot of the inspiration. All of the FG students who were questioned shared a common theme: they want to make their parents proud since they are aware of the difficulty and have witnessed how hard they have worked to get where they are. All of the participants are first-generation Americans, making them not only first-generation college students but also first-generation kids. As a result, they were raised to be more independent when it came to taking care of things on their own and to be able to do things without needing help from their parents or anyone else in general. All of the participants related to this because their parents were immigrants; they expressed the same ideas in various ways. With no prior experience or role model to follow, these students had to figure out how to fit in and live as first-generation Americans in this American society. All of the people who were interviewed were employed, and four out of every five of them had multiple jobs.

Although juggling employment and school might be challenging, doing so helped them develop a strong work ethic. Children who have hard working parents are likely to want to work hard for their money and follow in their parents' footsteps. They may also give their all into their schoolwork since they understand the challenge of working hard and want to study hard, which may be another factor in their strong motivation. They have a work ethic that extends beyond

their occupations. All of the FG participants had the full support of their families when it came to attending school, furthering their education, and pursuing a profession. All of the participants remarked that they believed their parents had a significant influence on their academic success and didn't believe they would be in school today without them. However, one thing that all of the FG students have in common is support, which helps them succeed in all of their subjects and report receiving good grades in all or the majority of them. At the end of each interview, each student was asked one question about the department's faculty that would be helpful to first-generation college students in the future. This has the potential to have a significant influence and raise awareness among the general public. When asked, "If you could tell the faculty of this department one important thing about being a first-generation college student in this major, what would it be?" Each student shared their thoughts or made a comment about what they would like to share with the faculty of the CMD major about their experience.

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