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Thriving in College: International, First-Generation, and Transfer Students

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ABSTRACT

Underrepresented-student groups experience unique challenges throughout their college experience, the impacts of which can be assessed by measuring students' levels of thriving. The purpose of this study was to understand the thriving of underrepresented college students—first-generation, international, and transfer students, specifically. To understand this, we sought to measure students' thriving levels and determine the experiences contributing to or detracting from their perception of thriving. This study utilized a sequential exploratory design using the established 72-item thriving quotient survey to measure students' overall thriving levels. In addition, the study utilized a qualitative content analysis on an open-ended question asking participants to describe contributory experiences. The results show variation among first-generation, international, and transfer students. Our findings reveal first-generation students to have the lowest overall levels of thriving among the underrepresented-student groups, international students to suffer most in social connectedness, and transfer students to be thriving the most. Finally, our content analysis reveals six emergent themes of experiences contributing to the students' perception of their thriving levels: university support, policies, and procedures; faculty and assignments; life events; concern over money and finances; self-confidence; and belonging.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though applying to and being accepted into college is a difficult process on its own, students face additional barriers to success once they arrive at their universities. College students may face struggles to balance academic and social demands, develop new relationships, and succeed academically (van der Zanden et al., 2019). However, these typical college demands may be compounded and exacerbated for underrepresented college students who find themselves in new environments far from home or who have not had substantial exposure to the college experience. We chose to focus on first-generation, international, and transfer students as underrepresented students due to the gap in the literature on the extent to which these students thrive in college. Indeed, these three student groups face additional struggles during their university experience that traditional college students may not.

These struggles may stand in the way of the ability of underrepresented students to thrive, or even survive, in college. Thriving refers to more than just academic success, and includes healthy relationships, a sense of community, and more (Schreiner, 2010a). As such, an understanding of the barriers to thriving faced by underrepresented students may allow these students to achieve higher rates of success through university intervention. However, though first-generation, international, and transfer students may experience common additional struggles not faced by traditional students, each group also faces its own unique barriers to thriving. Thus, an understanding of group-

specific issues is essential for successful university intervention.

A. *First-Generation Students*

Different institutions may adopt differing definitions of first-generation students. Generally, first-generation students are those who are the first in their families to attend college (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012 as cited in Boyd, 2017). However, some institutions define first-generation students "as those with no parent who has earned a baccalaureate degree" (Pike & Kuh, 2005 as cited in Graham, 2017). First-generation students have unique demographics when compared to continuing-generation students, as shown in Table 1 below.

First-generation students also experience their own unique struggles in college separate from the struggles of continuing-generation students. According to current research, first-generation students experience performance disparities when compared to continuing-generation students due to a lack of parent-student communication about college, resulting in a lack of exposure to college values and expectations (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). First-generation students' performance also suffers because they are hesitant to seek aid from resources or are not aware that resources exist (Parker, 2017). For example, critical thinking, if not practiced in the household, threatens to be a skill that students first see in college (Kilgo et al., 2018). Deficit-based research seeks to ameliorate the lack of assistance around university structure received by first-

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Demographic Characteristics of Students	Percentage of First-Generation Students within Demographic Characteristic	Percentage of Continuing-Generation Students within Demographic Characteristic
Identify as White	28%	72%
Identify as two or more races	24%	76%
Identify as Hispanic	48%	52%
Identify as a dependent	25%	75%
Identify as unmarried with dependents	48%	52%
Aged 18-23	27%	73%
Aged 40 or older	50%	50%

Table 1: Percentage of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students Within Student Demographics

generation students in their households. Similarly, the foreign nature of the college experience for first-generation students has led to asset-based research focusing on the challenges that can arise from family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Asset-based research also focuses on the ingenuity of first-generation students in seeking resources. Though current research on the thriving of first-generation students is limited, Boyd (2017) found that first-generation students at the research site were thriving in all five subscales of thriving. In addition, Graham (2017) found that there was no significant difference in the thriving levels of first-generation students who participated in a living-learning program compared to first-generation students who did not.

B. *International Students*

Similar to first-generation students, international students must also adjust to new expectations as they move abroad for education. International students are those who are not United States (US) citizens or permanent residents who have enrolled at higher-education institutions in the US to engage in a course of study. These students may hold student visas, temporary worker/trainee visas, temporary educational exchange visitor visas, or vocational training visas (Korobova, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education Open Doors 2019 report, 1,095,299 international students (representing 5.5% of the students enrolled in higher education in the US) studied in the US during the 2018–2019 school year—a record high (Institute of International Education, 2019). In addition, the 2018–2019 school year was the fourth year in a row that more than one million international students studied in the US (Institute of International Education, 2019). These statistics show a pattern of an increasing number of international students coming to study in the US.

Though the international-student population in the US has increased in recent years, research has shown that international students experience more discrimination and feel a lower “sense of community” than domestic students (Van Horne et al., 2018, p. 354). Institutions of higher education must pay attention to international students’ needs and work to meet them if they hope for international students to continue coming to the US. Indeed, universities should desire to retain international students, as their presence contributes substantially to the US economy (\$44.4 billion in 2018) and enhances domestic students’ understanding of diversity (Institute of International Education, 2019). Thus, the presence of international students in the US benefits both

the international students themselves and domestic students, as well as the broader national economy.

Our study sought to understand the thriving of international students enrolled in higher education through a positive psychology– and asset-based perspective. Much of the literature on international students has focused on the needs of these students that universities fail to meet or the skills that universities fail to provide them with. Thus, most of the literature on international students is deficit-based (Korobova, 2012; Van Horne et al., 2018). Such an asset-based analysis allowed us to focus on the strengths of international students, as opposed to the skills that they lack upon coming to study in the US. Extant research on the thriving of international students details their low thriving levels in social connectedness (Chen & Yang, 2014; Nwokedi & Khanare, 2020).

C. *Transfer Students*

Though they may not travel between countries to pursue higher education, transfer students must still adjust to new institutional environments. Transfer students are college students who attend more than one institution. They may start at a community college and transfer to a 4-year institution or may transfer from one 4-year institution to another. Almost 60% of college students are transfers (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). These students may be aged around 18 to 22, the traditional college age, or may be older, may attend school part or full time, may be commuters, may live on campus, and may work part- or full-time jobs (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). These statistics demonstrate the variety of backgrounds from which transfer students may come. In addition, students may transfer schools in different ways, such as “co-enrolling (attending more than one institution at the same time), reverse transferring (from four-year to two-year institutions), and swirling (transferring from one institution to another more than one time)” (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012, p. 390). Thus, not all transfer students move from school to school in the same manner.

Unfortunately, transferring colleges is not an easy task. Transfer students’ struggles can include transfer shock and academic trauma, which may cause grade drops and more semesters or years to complete their degrees (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). According to a 2005 US Department of Education study, transfer students moving from 2- to 4-year institutions were shown to take an average of 5.4 years to complete their bachelor’s degrees, and students transferring between 4-year institutions were shown to take an average of 5.1 years. Students not transferring were shown to take an average of 4.4 years to complete their

degrees (Li, 2010). Transfer students also struggle with social connectedness given the fact that they do not start at the university with the freshman-year orientation experience had by nontransfer students. They may experience difficulty finding their place in already developed social groups and may be overwhelmed by the large size of the universities to which they transfer (Xu et al., 2018). At predominantly White institutions or those with a high population of students from high-income brackets, transfer students' difficulties with social connectedness may be compounded by their racial or economic backgrounds.

Transfer students often come from a minority background, whether it be racially or economically. Minority students or those who are economically disadvantaged often choose to start at a community college because it is much more affordable for those without the income or means to pay for a 4-year institution. Many students who transfer lose credits in the transition, as universities do not always accept credits from other universities. For example, one study found 14% of students transferring from community colleges to have close to zero of their community college credits accepted and 58% to have nearly all of their credits accepted (Xu et al., 2018). While 14% is not a majority, this statistic indicates that many transfer students face academic barriers at their new institutions due to the necessity of repeating coursework.

As transfer students are a diverse population, "one-size-fits-all" policies do not provide valuable assistance (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012, p. 405). These students come from different social, racial, and economic backgrounds. Therefore, universities have difficulty coming up with ways to counter the challenges faced by these students. In addition, many universities fail to place transfer students in a position of priority. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) asserted that one reason for this lack of prioritization may be that universities do not receive significant benefit from the success of transfer students. Thus, transfer students may face challenges due to systemic biases within the university.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This project aimed to measure the thriving levels of the three groups of underrepresented students discussed above: first-generation, international, and transfer students. To achieve this, we chose our conceptual framework based in positive psychology literature on human flourishing and student success. Our conceptual framework is college-student thriving. We chose this conceptual framework due to the abundance of deficit-based literature and relative absence of literature based in positive psychology. Schreiner (Eastern University, n.d.) described thriving as "getting the most out of the college experience, so that students are intellectually, socially and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience" (para. 1). In this paper, we adopt Schreiner's definition of thriving, as she developed the established thriving quotient instrument.

Generally, thriving in college can be reliably measured along five factors: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connection (Schreiner, 2010b, 2010c). These factors show malleability in response to specific pedagogical strategies and information, such as mindfulness, goal-

directed thinking, and living-learning communities, and they predict student success outcomes beyond traditional measures, such as grades, gender, ethnicity, generation status, and test scores (Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Student beliefs, motivations, quality of involvement, and other noncognitive factors, as revealed through measures of thriving, such as the thriving quotient, predict student persistence, student retention, and course-taking patterns (McIntosh & Colver, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2009, 2013; Vetter et al., 2019b). Methods used to increase student success also benefit student well-being and mental health (Wilcox & Stiles, 2017).

Measures of thriving and associated institutional interventions also impact special populations of students, such as honors students, students of color, first-generation students, 1st-year students, sophomores, and transfer students (Cuevas et al., 2017; Schreiner, 2018; Vetter et al., 2019a). Interventions have included campus involvement, student-faculty interaction, faculty education and intention on race, and increasing a sense of community (Cuevas et al., 2017; Schreiner, 2018; Vetter et al., 2019a). Researchers have called for inclusion of more diverse samples of students, an examination of the impact of systemic privilege on these psychosocial factors, and more longitudinal analysis (Cuevas et al., 2017; Okello & Pérez, 2018; Schreiner, 2013, 2017, 2018; Vetter et al., 2019a). Therefore, this study fills a gap in the literature by centering on diverse samples of undergraduate students.

3. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of the study was to understand the thriving of underrepresented college students. For the purpose of this study, underrepresented students included transfer, international, and first-generation college students. As shared previously, this study addresses a previous gap by including a more diverse sample of students, which has been called for by scholars (Cuevas et al., 2017; Okello & Pérez, 2018; Schreiner, 2013, 2017, 2018; Vetter et al., 2019a). We had two research objectives: (1) to describe to what extent each student group is thriving and (2) to explore student experiences that impact their sense of thriving.

4. METHODS

This study used a sequential exploratory design (Berman, 2017) consisting of two distinct phases. In this design, quantitative data were collected using the existing thriving quotient instrument (Schreiner, 2010a). The second phase of the study was conducted to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase. This study concerns itself with phase one or the quantitative data collected via a survey.

The research site was Southern Methodist University (SMU). Southern Methodist University is a mid-sized, private, liberal arts university in the southern US. SMU enrolls nearly 12,000 students annually from all 50 states and approximately 90 countries. The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs through seven schools.

The three underrepresented-student groups invited to participate in the study were undergraduate transfer, international, and first-generation college students. These

three underrepresented-student groups were determined based on their overall make-up of the undergraduate-student body at the research site. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

5. RECRUITMENT, POPULATION, SAMPLE

The population frame was all currently enrolled undergraduate students in the fall 2019 semester who were at least one of the following: a transfer student, an international student, or a first-generation student. The accessible population frame was 1,777 unique participants from the three groups of undergraduate students at [research site]. Transfer students were identified based on secondary data obtained through their admission application type via the university's student information system. Based on their undergraduate admissions application, students are classified as one of the following: a new-student applicant, a transfer-student applicant, or a first-time-in-college-student applicant. Students with a transfer-student application were invited to participate in the study. First-generation-college-student status was determined by a calculated field that students reported on their admission application. Students were asked to independently report their mother's and father's education levels. Students were considered first-generation college students if both levels were self-reported by the student as less than but not an associate's degree. Finally, international students were included in the study using secondary data in the student information system. Students disclose their country of citizenship when they complete their university profile upon admission to the institution. Students with a country of citizenship other than but not including the US were invited to participate.

Recruitment occurred via participants' university email address during the fall 2019 semester. Recruitment email bodies and subject lines utilized the tailored design method of Dillman et al. (2009), which contributes to higher response rates. Up to five email reminders were sent to non-respondents, and subject lines and email body messages were modified each time to provide variety and intrigue.

A total of 243 participants consented and began the survey, yielding a response rate of 14%. The sample that was studied included 148 participants, or 8% of the accessible population, who completed the survey in its entirety. Partial responses were not included in this count. Within this sample, 80 students, or 54% of the sample, were female. The sample included 68 students, or 46% of the sample, who identified as male. In addition, the sample consisted of 31 (21%) first-generation students, 47 (32%) international students, and 94 (64%) transfer students. It is important to note, considering intersectionality of identities, students could be counted in more than one underrepresented-student group. For example, a student could be an international student and a first-generation student. Finally, the sample included 55 (37%) White participants, 51 (35%) nonresident alien participants, 21 (14%) Hispanic participants, 10 (7%) Asian participants, 8 (5%) Black or African participants, and 3 (2%) participants of two or more races.

6. INSTRUMENT

An established 72-item thriving quotient survey (Schreiner, 2010a) was used with permission as the primary

research instrument for the first phase of the study. The survey contains five distinct constructs: academic determination, engaged learning, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness. Thriving comprises five factors: engaged learning ($\alpha = 0.89$), academic determination ($\alpha = 0.81$), diverse citizenship ($\alpha = 0.78$), social connectedness ($\alpha = 0.78$), and positive perspective ($\alpha = 0.77$), all of which contribute to a secondary-order factor of overall thriving ($\alpha = 0.89$) (Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner et al., 2013).

In addition to the thriving quotient items that formed the five constructs, two additional questions were relevant to the present study. The first question asked participants to self-report their level of thriving using a six-point Likert scale. Specifically, the question read, "Thriving is defined as getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience. Given that definition, to what extent do you think you are thriving as a college student this semester?" The scale ranged from 1 to 6, "not even surviving" to "consistently thriving," respectively. The second question was an open-ended text field that asked respondents, "What has happened this semester that has led to your perception of whether you are thriving or not?"

Chronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the scales for the present sample: engaged learning ($\alpha = 0.87$), academic determination ($\alpha = 0.84$), diverse citizenship ($\alpha = 0.83$), social connectedness ($\alpha = 0.82$), and positive perspective ($\alpha = 0.83$), all of which contribute to the secondary-order factor of overall thriving ($\alpha = 0.81$). Generally, a Chronbach's alpha of 0.7 or greater is considered satisfactory (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Survey data from the first phase were evaluated using descriptive statistics. First, descriptive statistics by subscale and the overall thriving quotient were computed. Subscales were computed using the coding guide provided by Azusa Pacific University, where the thriving quotient was developed. These statistics answered the first research objective: describing to what extent students are thriving by student group. If needed for analysis, listwise deletion was utilized.

A qualitative, inductive content analysis (Thomas, 2006) was conducted on the open-ended survey question for the second research objective. Thomas (2006) elaborated: "...the purposes for using an inductive approach are to (a) condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; (b) establish clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the raw data" (p. 237).

The content analysis was conducted on the open-ended text responses to the survey question, "What has happened this semester that has led to your perception of whether you are thriving or not?" We used methods outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) to guide our analysis through the preparation, organizing, and reporting phases. Peer debriefing and reflective journaling were used to aid triangulation. Additionally, peer debriefing and reflecting

journaling contributed to rich, thick descriptions of categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

8. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A. Objective 1

We sought to describe the overall level of thriving within each subscale for the three student groups. Based on the information provided in Table 2, it is clear that international students reported higher levels of thriving for the subscales of engaged learning and positive perspective. Transfer students had the highest mean scores in academic determination and overall thriving. First-generation students reported the highest mean score within the subscale of social connectedness. Of our three student groups, transfer students were shown to be thriving at a higher overall rate than the other two groups. According to the data, first-generation students showed the lowest levels of overall thriving within these subscales compared to the other two groups.

We asked students to self-report their level of thriving using a six-point Likert scale. As a reminder, the Likert scale ranges from “not even surviving” (1) to “consistently thriving” (6). According to the descriptive statistics in the table, transfer students were the most likely to self-report as either “thriving most of the time” or “consistently thriving,” followed by international students. First-generation students had the highest percentage of students self-reporting as “not even surviving.” Most students within all three categories fell within the range of “surviving” to “thriving most of the time.” If we were to rank levels of thriving based on these self-reported data, international students would have the highest level of thriving, as 90% of participants self-reported themselves as “surviving” and higher, followed by transfer students at 73% and first-generation students at 73%.

B. Objective 2

In order to address the second research objective, the content analysis on the open-ended text field, “What has happened this semester that has led to your perception of whether you are thriving or not?” revealed six emergent themes, which were derived from the 76 responses to this question that we received. Within these six themes, there were positive and negative responses within a single category that provided dimensionality to the theme. Themes are presented as representing the entire sample, as themes were not distinguishable by student community. Table 4 summarizes each category and associated dimensionality. Following the table, we provide a narrative description of the category name and associated excerpts from student respondents.

University Support, Policies, and Procedures

Participants cited how a lack of university support detracts from their overall sense of thriving. Participants shared issues related to course enrollment, class sequencing, medical absence policies, and others as particular policies and procedures that undermine thriving. Specifically, academic advisors are actors identified by participants as not fully understanding degree requirements and expectations. This seems to cause confusion and ambiguity that also decreases self-reported thriving. One transfer student wrote, “[I have] a class schedule that pertains to my interests and major.” However, nine participants disagreed with the level of support from the university. A first-generation and transfer student wrote, “Resources are impossible to reach when you have to go through 10+ people. Encouragement from my advisor to find a major that works for me has not been good. There is no help formulating my semesters here, finding a major that fits me and will help me graduate on time.”

Within this subcategory, another transfer student expressed difficulty with the transfer of credits. They wrote, “My transfer credits are not being counted and [there is]

Measure	First-generation			International			Transfer		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Engaged learning	37	4.39	1.28	53	4.64	0.87	117	4.45	1.19
Academic determination	29	4.52	1.06	39	4.61	0.91	90	4.69	0.90
Social connectedness	29	3.69	0.74	39	3.52	0.66	90	3.54	0.77
Positive perspective	29	4.21	1.26	40	4.59	0.83	90	4.57	1.24
Diverse citizenship	29	4.75	0.85	40	4.59	0.83	88	4.83	0.85
Overall thriving	29	4.31	0.81	39	4.36	0.65	88	4.44	0.74

Table 2: Descriptives of Overall Thriving and Subscales by Student Group

Measure	First-generation	International	Transfer
Not even surviving	2 (9%)	1 (3%)	6 (8%)
Barely surviving	4 (17%)	2 (6%)	15 (19%)
Surviving	5 (22%)	7 (21%)	19 (24%)
Somewhat thriving	6 (26%)	15 (45%)	14 (18%)
Thriving most of the time	5 (21%)	6 (18%)	17 (22%)
Consistently thriving	1 (4%)	2 (6%)	7 (9%)

Table 3: Frequency of Self-Reported Thriving by Student Group

Note. Participants used a six-point Likert scale to report their current level of thriving. 1 = not even surviving, 2 = barely surviving, 3 = surviving, 4 = somewhat thriving, 5 = thriving most of the time, 6 = consistently thriving

insufficient information on enrollment services.” In addition to university administration and policies, university faculty and assignments were cited as having a strongly negative impact on student thriving.

Faculty and Assignments

Participants described faculty behavior and attitudes as having a significant impact on their overall sense of thriving. Within this category, faculty’s understanding of the student experience is in question. To illustrate, participants cited individual and group assignments being due all at once or assignments not being challenging to the student demographic in their classes. Eleven participants expressed negative attitudes toward the faculty and assignments at the university. One transfer student wrote, “My professors do not care about the course that they are teaching. They simply read off the slides.” Another transfer student agreed, “My comments and questions are constantly

shut down by my professor, made fun of, and my beliefs disregarded . . .” However, though university faculty strongly impact student thriving, participants also discussed burdens on thriving from their life experiences outside of the university environment.

Life Events

Participants shared many examples encompassed in the life events category. Life events are external, non–university-related experiences that hinder participants’ sense of thriving. To illustrate, participants shared life event impacts related to the realities of divorce, natural disasters, medical diagnosis (self or others), life after college, and sudden loss of financial independence, as well as concerns related to physical and mental health. Twenty-three participants wrote about certain events hindering their ability to thrive. One transfer student wrote, “Every family member I have lost their job to an unethical reason which in turn, took

Positive dimensions	Category name and description	Negative dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● On-campus organizations ● On-campus employment ● Enrollment in desired classes 	<p>University support, policies, and procedures: a lack of university support detracts from their overall sense of thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medical absence policies ● Costly housing and tuition ● Facilities issues ● Class registration and offerings ● Lack of resource availability ● Misadvisement by advisors ● Communication problems ● No nontraditional student support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students enjoy classes 	<p>Faculty and assignments: faculty behavior and attitudes have a significant impact on their overall sense of thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Confusing instructions ● Comments and questions rejected ● Disregard of student beliefs ● No awareness of student workload ● No support for individual needs
	<p>Concern over money and finances: impacts of past, present, and future concerns for money and financial well-being on overall sense of thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trouble paying debt ● Concerns about degree value ● Family finances ● Decreasing financial aid
	<p>Life events: external, non-university-related experiences that hinder overall sense of thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stress caused by living situation ● Family job loss ● Lack of work flexibility ● Family deaths ● Mental or physical illness ● Divorce
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● On-campus organizations ● On-campus employment ● Connection to university ● Deep and various friendships ● Belonging in residence halls ● Interest in classes/major 	<p>Belonging: characterized by both contributing and detracting experiences. Experiences within the university impact the overall sense of thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overworking and overextension ● Institutional comparison ● Off-campus living ● Lack of significant other ● Isolation from peers/family ● Lack of diversity on campus ● Peers are clique-y
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Obtaining desired grades/classes ● Pride in being a legacy student ● Internship synergy with classes ● Appropriately difficult classes ● On-campus/community impact ● Pride in approaching graduation 	<p>Self-confidence: confidence in academic and social domains. This category and its subcategories contain an observable spectrum of negative to positive impacts on thriving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overly challenging classes ● Excessive amounts of schoolwork ● No sense of progress ● Rejection from major of choice ● Lack of academic challenge

Table 4: Dimensionality and Definition of Content Analysis Categories

Note. See results and findings for full discussion of subcategories.

my focus off of school for a short period of time.” Similarly, a first-generation student wrote, “I have two jobs, I moved out of my parents’ house, and have to pay all of my bills by myself.” Many participants spoke about outside factors negatively impacting them. One first-generation student said, “Lots of outside factors - I was very sick. There was a tornado that destroyed my parents’ home. I have been struggling with changes to my ADHD that makes doing schoolwork incredibly difficult.” In addition, participants shared specific financial struggles closely related to, but separate from, the life events category.

Concern Over Money and Finances

Participants expressed solely negative impacts of past, present, and future concerns over money and financial well-being on their sense of thriving. For instance, participants noted past and future debt, inability to provide for necessities such as food, college education cost, need to work a high number of hours each week to provide for themselves and others, housing and tuition expenses, and depleting savings. Fourteen participants in total indicated the negative impacts of concern over money and finances on their sense of thriving. One transfer student wrote, “[I] barely have enough money to pay bills and buy food.” An international student agreed, “It is hard for me to pay my tuition by myself. I have little chance to work to pay for my tuition.” Other participants expressed concerns about degree value. A first-generation student wrote that she was “paying so much for housing and tuition and then not getting taught very well by professors.” Lastly, some participants shared that their need to work to provide for themselves or others negatively impacts their sense of belonging. Another first-generation student said, “I work constantly and my relationships have suffered terribly.” However, in contrast to external financial events, participants also expressed faith and doubts in their own abilities impacting their sense of thriving.

Self-Confidence

Participants expressed thoughts related to their own confidence in academic and social domains. Because of the higher counts of thought units, three subthemes emerged. This category and its subthemes all contain an observable spectrum of negative to positive impacts on thriving. Each subcategory is presented below, along with a description of accompanying dimensions.

Self-Efficacy. This category relates to participants’ beliefs about their capabilities to perform at an expected level related to aspects that affect their lives. Participants noted their ability to register for needed classes to progress in their degree programs, high levels of productivity and progress on important goals, and involvement in student organizations and clubs. Seventeen participants expressed feelings of self-efficacy within the self-confidence category. One transfer student wrote, “I have been pushed to carry out a level of productivity that I would not have previously thought was possible for me. Sometimes we just need a little pressure to open up our minds and advance to new levels.” Similarly, another transfer student wrote, “I feel competent and skilled in my major and am often treated as an authority/expert by other students.” In contrast, 20 participants expressed feelings of self-doubt or unachieved expectations.

Self-Doubt. Participants expressed doubt or a lack of confidence in their abilities or experience. Many participants cited particular events that have caused their outlook and belief in their abilities to dwindle. Also, while others expressed not currently struggling, they cited doubts in their ability to balance commitments such as school, work, family, and personal lives. Finally, some participants questioned their worthiness to be in college or their ability to complete a degree. Within the self-doubt subcategory, one transfer student wrote, “Since I am taking many difficult courses, I have to spend almost all of my time studying and doing homework. I rarely have time to do activities I enjoy or hang out with friends.” Another transfer student wrote, “Everyone puts tests around the same time and it’s overwhelming as tests aren’t showing how much I know.”

Unachieved Expectations. The subcategory of unachieved expectations relates closely to self-doubt, as some thought units were interconnected. However, a differentiating element in participant narratives was the psychological impact focused on in the subcategory of self-doubt. Unachieved expectations, however, focused more on specific goals, tasks, or expectations that participants aim to achieve. For instance, participants discussed how their roommate relationships differ from their expectations of closeness, as well as their belief in their ability to improve their grades and grade-point averages (GPAs). Within the unachieved expectations subcategory, one transfer student wrote, “[I] go to class every day and [am] still not getting the grades I want.” Similarly, a first-generation student wrote, “[I] got a 3.4 last semester so I could not get into [business school], which is very annoying because my roommate has a 3.0 and still got in because he is a business direct [student].”

Belonging

The final category related to participant thriving is belonging. For participants, this could be characterized by both contributing and detracting experiences. For instance, academic and social involvement, peer relationships, romantic relationships, and sense of fit in academic programs were all cited as contributors to thriving within this category. On the other hand, detractors included the student body culture being difficult to fit into, social cliques, and a lacking sense of diversity. Nine students expressed the positive impacts of belonging on their sense of thriving. One transfer student wrote, “I was worried about the transition between community college and university. I had heard of transfer shock, but thankfully I am managing very well, and therefore I feel I am thriving. In fact, I am participating more [at] [research site] than I was at my previous community college.”

Similarly, an international student wrote, “I feel like I belong in my residence hall, and I am making an impact.” In contrast, eight students expressed the negative impacts of belonging on their sense of thriving. One transfer student wrote, “The students are separated into their cliques and there are a lot of attitudes. It’s difficult to make friends or feel a part of the university if you have not been in a fraternity/sorority.” Similarly, an international student wrote that she did not have “many friends on campus that I consider ‘close.’” Another transfer student expressed a lack of belonging in terms of diversity, writing, “There is no diversity on campus . . . there [are] virtually no Hispanics.”

Struggles such as those discussed in the belonging category and the other five themes, as well as the patterns revealed by descriptive statistics, informed the policy implications and recommendations discussed below.

9. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings noted above echo those of other researchers who have explored underrepresented student thriving. In our study, international students struggled the most with social connectedness of the three student groups. As Chen and Yang (2014) note, international students often face alienation upon arriving to study in a new country. Further, however, Nwokedi and Khanare (2020) found that international students perceived the university environment as not supporting social connection with their local peers and noted that this barrier to thriving was caused in part by xenophobia and language barriers. Thus, there is a larger pattern in international university education related to social connectedness of international students that prevents them from thriving to their fullest potential. Though our study did not explore the specific impacts to thriving and experiences that international students had with xenophobia and language barriers, this may be an area for future research. In addition, it should be noted that Nwokedi and Khanare's study took place in South African context, while ours occurred in the United States.

Related to first-generation students, Boyd (2017) found that first-generation students at the research site were thriving in the positive perspective subscale at higher levels than the national average. While our study did not aim to measure the thriving levels of underrepresented students compared to the national average, it is interesting to note that first-generation students at our research site did not experience considerable success in positive perspective, as it was the subscale with the second lowest mean thriving levels within the first-generation student group. Thus, further research at other institutions might involve comparing the thriving levels of underrepresented students at the research institution to national averages to get a concrete sense of the institution's performance related to average student thriving levels. It is also interesting to note that Graham (2017) found no significant difference in the thriving levels of first-generation students who were involved in a living-learning program and those who were not. Thus, further research is needed on whether residence halls can help to increase levels of student thriving. Finally, further scholarship on transfer student thriving is necessary to understand how this research fits in with the broader pattern in higher education.

Our results and findings yielded four implications for practice and future research. First, universities should support students through sudden or unexpected issues. They should create specific programming that aids students who are dealing with sudden changes to their life that may impact their ability to thrive on campus. We derived this implication from the life events and concern for money and finances themes that resulted from our content analysis. It is important to note that not all themes had positive responses, as both life events and concern over money and finances only had negative responses. This may have been caused by the fact that students do not consider these themes until an event in one of these themes negatively impacts their college experience. The students who provided personal examples

for these two themes outlined chance happenings that had diverted their attention away from their coursework by creating external stressors. Students have to deal with sudden financial burdens, illnesses, and family struggles, among other unexpected issues. In addition, within the faculty and assignments theme, some students outlined that professors are not always forgiving of these situations, making it easy to fall behind. Thus, universities could provide resources for students that may ameliorate the impacts of these events, as well as educate their faculty on how to provide aid for students if they come forth with concerns.

Based on our results and findings, our second recommendation is that universities should employ identity-conscious programming. Specifically, we derived this recommendation from the mean thriving levels of each of the underrepresented student groups. First, we discuss two possible programming approaches for first-generation college students based on our study. Next, we suggest identity-conscious programs for international students. Table 2 demonstrates first-generation students as having the lowest thriving levels in three out of five subscales. In addition, Table 3 highlights that first-generation students represented the highest proportion of students self-reporting as "not even surviving." Therefore, identity-conscious programming implemented by universities should focus on topics related to social connectedness and positive perspective, as these subscales showed the lowest mean thriving levels within the first-generation group. Student affairs professionals might also examine the dimensions of belonging listed in Table 4 to approach programming focused on social connectedness, as this theme is most closely related to the social connectedness subscale—colleges could provide campus organizations specific to first-generation students, for example.

Continuing with our second recommendation, for programming focused on positive perspective, universities should utilize the dimensions of self-confidence listed in Table 4, as this theme is most closely related to the positive perspective subscale. For example, when referring to unachieved expectations within the self-confidence category, one first-generation student said, "[I] got a 3.4 last semester so I could not get into [business school], which is very annoying because my roommate has a 3.0 and still got in because he is a business direct [student]." Thus, universities might target programming toward first-generation students involving determination of self-worth without comparison to peers. In addition, positive perspective might be improved by efforts to relieve first-generation students of external burdens. For example, when referring to concern over money and finances, one first-generation student said, "I work constantly and my relationships have suffered terribly." First-generation scholarships offered by the university might relieve the financial burden on these students and allow them to develop their positive perspective. Lastly, universities should understand that resources for first-generation students will not go to waste—the literature on first-generation students highlights their ingenuity in using resources to persist through challenges in college (Azmitia et al., 2018).

Next, higher-education professionals should focus on improving the social connectedness of international

students via identity-conscious programs. International students had the lowest mean score in social connectedness of the three underrepresented student groups—this mean score is also the lowest one reported in Table 2. Universities might enhance social connectedness by improving dimensions of the belonging category, as explained above. For example, one international student mentioned not having many friends on campus that she considers “close.” Thus, our study confirms similar findings to those of Van Horne et al. (2018) that international students feel a diminished “sense of community” compared to domestic students (p. 354). To improve the belonging of international students, universities might focus on creating on-campus organizations or employment opportunities specifically for international students, as these dimensions of belonging were cited by students as contributing to their thriving. However, universities should continue to facilitate belonging in residence halls, as participants cited these areas as contributing to their sense of belonging on campus. An international student commented, “I feel like I belong in my residence hall, and I am making an impact.”

Our third recommendation relates to the fact that all the groups of underrepresented students had their lowest mean thriving scores in the social connectedness subscale, as shown in Table 2. Thus, there is a clear need for intervention related to the social connectedness of underrepresented students. As shown by the definition of belonging in our theming analysis, social connectedness could be significantly improved by university efforts to eliminate detractors to thriving that were noted in the negative dimension of the belonging category. For example, when discussing belonging, underrepresented students noted not feeling a sense of diversity on campus. Thus, universities must focus on diversity initiatives to increase underrepresented students’ sense of belonging, as a significant dimension detracting from belonging was shown to be a lacking sense of diversity. In addition, efforts to reduce detractors within the other themes may also allow students to focus their energies on improving their social connectedness.

For our final recommendation, we suggest that universities work to increase the number of underrepresented students who are thriving most of the time or consistently thriving. As shown in Table 3, all three underrepresented-student groups had the highest proportion of students reporting themselves as either “surviving” or “somewhat thriving.” While these levels of thriving are not directly negative, students today pay high tuition prices to attend quality universities, as many participants mentioned in their open-ended responses. For example, a first-generation student shared that she was “paying so much for housing and tuition and then not getting taught very well by professors.” Such high tuition prices should bring about a quality experience for all students, regardless of background. This also is a call for future research, as this is merely one study at one research site. Scholars should advance the use of the thriving quotient and its investigation into diverse student communities of underrepresentative or traditionally underserved colleges over multiple institutional types and geographies.

9. LIMITATIONS

While we believe the study to be sound, we note three limitations. First, the purpose of this study was to describe the extent to which transfer, international, and first-generation college students are thriving. The present study contained one research site, and future studies should include a larger sample at various institutional types; however, our study still provides valuable insight due to the intentionally diversified sample (Cuevas et al., 2017; Okello & Pérez, 2018). We also intentionally did not compare each student group to a control or majority group to honor the positive psychology framework. Due to this, an ANOVA test was not conducted. Second, some survey responses were brief and did not provide much context for framing responses. Therefore, future research may choose to explore interviews or other modalities to elicit more detailed responses to contextualize experiences in college that impact thriving. Finally, the present study captured a moment in time to describe student thriving. Therefore, future studies ought to consider longitudinal studies to monitor thriving levels throughout the college experience.

10. CONCLUSION

We sought to determine the overall level of thriving of underrepresented students. Transfer students, international students, and first-generation students each have distinguishable experiences on campus, both positive and negative, that affect their sense of thriving. Transfer students can experience transfer shock, international students struggle with belonging on campus, and first-generation students lack the guidance and knowledge had by other students. Using a sequential exploratory design, we gathered quantitative and qualitative data that suggest that higher-education professionals should create specific, identity-conscious programming, as well as bolster opportunities for establishing social connectedness. Participants self-reported on their level of thriving, and only 25% to 31% of students in these groups reported themselves as either “thriving most of the time” or “consistently thriving.” This number can be improved by the insights provided in the discussion. Universities need to actively create programming that targets the four major implications on students’ level of thriving. It is the responsibility of the university to make sure that all of its students feel equally cared for and represented. Those who feel underrepresented on campus may leave with a negative experience because of a lack of university support.

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