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Do I Belong Here?: First-Generation Students & Support at Trinity College(s)

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ABSTRACT

First-generation students (FGS) are those whose parents have a high school education or less. They are disproportionately low income, of color and less academically prepared than continuing-generation students, complicating college access and enrollment. The psychological and cultural challenges that FGS face on college campuses further exacerbate these barriers. Higher education institutions have implemented initiatives to facilitate FGS transition and belonging. While some research has examined FGS transition, less has focused on specific initiatives for FGS belonging. This project assesses the effect Trinity College's First-Generation Pre-Orientation Program (FGPO) had on students in the Class of 2021. In order to do so, students who participated in the FGPO, and students who did not, were interviewed. The results showed that the FGPO accelerated student belonging by connecting them to groups and support services. All interviewees perceived Trinity College as two different places, one wealthy and exclusive and another with many inclusive subcultures. Students who did not participate in the FGPO did not feel that they belonged to either Trinity until their second semester. Non-participants more often struggled finding services, and joined organizations within the more exclusive Trinity culture, but did not identify with that culture. The FGPO helped student's navigating college as it connects them with groups, resources and support. There are material and psychological risks that students faced without the FGPO service.

I. Introduction:

Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut was established in 1823, long before men of color and women were legally permitted to enroll. Like many institutions of higher education, Trinity's history is rooted in selectivity. While it has been decades since Trinity opened its applicant pool to all students regardless of race, gender or class, deep socioeconomic disparities persist.

The Class of 2013 at Trinity had a median family income of $257,100, and 26% were in the top one-percent financially (Chetty, Friedman et al 2017). In stark contrast, only three percent of students in this class were from the bottom fifth. While income and race gaps still exist at Trinity years later, efforts have been made to close these gaps as is evident with the the Class of 2021. This class made Trinity history with a record high of 23% students of color, 14% international 14% first-generation students (FGS) many of which came from over 50 different community-based college access organizations (Trinity College 2017). The rise in first-generation students is particularly interesting because it went up 5% from the previous two years (Megan 2017). Despite the record achievement of including students that traditionally have not always attended the institution, Trinity acknowledged that enrollment was only the first step to actual student success, the resources and community it provided were key aids and next steps toward having students actually graduate.

The Class of 2021 was the first Class at Trinity to participate in the first-ever First-Generation Pre-Orientation program (FGPO), in 2017. The program was designed and facilitated by the Office of Student Success (OSS, now Office of Student Success and Career

Development, OSSC), a relatively new office of only a few years. The pre-orientation program is three days and created to "acquaint first-generation students- the first in their family to complete a four year college degree-with the college experience and the Trinity community" (Trinity College 2017). The three days are filled with workshops and activities that aim to orient students with the skills and knowledge to succeed academically and "flourish personally" as well (Trinity College 2017). While the program is mainly crafted by the OSS, peer mentors play keys roles in facilitating some workshops, sharing their experiences and advice on how they navigated Trinity. Some workshops to highlight were a "Design Your Life" session led by an administrator of the College, and a "Belonging Workshop" led by peer mentors on the last day. This latter workshop had students feel community by discussing one another's leadership, kindness, work ethic and several other qualities positively associated with success. The overarching theme of the program was to take pride in being first, build community and resources to facilitate the college transition.

In order to participate in the program students had to apply themselves; the program was free. Emails from the College are sent out to all students the summer before their first-semester, offering five distinct pre-orientation programs, including the FGPO. The are programs that are $200 at minimum, but offer need-based aid and fee waivers. These programs are the Venture Women's Leadership conference, a four-to-ten day backpacking trip across the Appalachian trail through the Quest program and Bantam Beginnings which in itself includes eight different programs to get to know the city of Hartford itself as well as Trinity through community service, biking, architectural studies, spirituality and entertainment venues. Lastly, the Promoting Respect for Inclusivity in Education (P.R.I.D.E.) program is designed to help primarily students of color

and international students acclimate to Trinity College and Hartford through diversity. All pre-orientation programs are optional and offered to all students, they must choose to opt-in themselves. For the focus of this study, the FGPO, out of 83 self-identified first-generation students in the Class of 2021, around 40 students signed up for the FGPO. Some students who participated in the FGPO also participated in other pre-orientation programs and for others, the FGPO was the only pre-orientation program they participated in. Included in Trinity's definition of first-generation students, are international students whose parents did not complete higher education in the United States.

As a first-generation student at Trinity I have witnessed these disparities and the culture they create first-hand, but I have also been able to see and participate in some college initiatives that aim to help students transition to the college, and foster community as well as support. Given all this information, my own status as a first-generation student and peer mentor for the 2017 FGPO I question: *What effects have Trinity College first-generation initiatives had on the Class of 2021 students' belonging? I focus on the FGPO as the primary first-generation initiative.*

Based on seven interviews I conducted with students from the Class of 2021, four participants of the FGPO and three non-participants, the FGPO accelerated participant's belonging to Trinity in comparison to their non-participant counterparts. It is key to note however, that all interviewed students made distinctions between "two Trinity's". All students identified the first Trinity as the more overt and dominant one, with a culture of exclusivity that they associated with extracurriculars that are costly such as athletics and Greek life. I call this Trinity, the "typical Trinity". The second Trinity was much less overt, with several inclusive

subcultures., which I call "the other Trinity". These subcultures students associated with free extracurriculars such as Student Government approved clubs and organizations. Second to note, none of the interviewed students identified belonging to the first Trinity described. Non-participants more often struggled finding services, and joined organizations within the more exclusive Trinity culture, but did not identify with that culture. Of course all students I interviewed persisted into their sophomore year and contextualized 98% of all FGS were retained into their second year at Trinity as well. This study's goal is not to show that the FGPO was the exclusive factor in students' belonging, but instead to determine the effects influencing it.

II.   Literature Review:

Definitions & Context

It is key to understand the reasons for why Trinity College and many other educational institutions have been paying increasing attention to first-generation students and initiatives for their successful enrollment and graduation. As definitions for first-generation students vary by institution, I use the The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) definition. First-generation students as those "whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less" (Nunez and Alamin 1998). Trinity College also includes international students in their definition, even those whose parents did go to college, but outside of the United States. In the 1999-2000 school year FGS were 37% of students attending post-secondary education institutions and in 2011-2012, 33% (NCES, 2018).These students face a host of issues that affect their college admission, and if enrolled their student success and degree attainment. As of 2013,

first-generation students are 46% of the undergraduate population enrolled in four- year institutions (NCES 2018).

One of the largest barriers to first-generation student college enrollment is income. First-generation students are disproportionately low income, defined here as yearly earnings below $25,000 (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In 1990 alone 23% of first-generation college students had incomes from the lowest quartile. This is a stark contrast to 59% of continuing generation students (CGS) that came from the highest income quartiles the same year. Due to financial limitations, more than CGSs, FGSs have to divide their time for academics, social events and quality interactions with faculty or peers with serious obligations such as jobs, babysitting and other familial duties (Engle and Tinto 2008).

Inextricably tied to the effects income has on these students is cultural capital. Cultural capital "is acquired mainly through the socialization process at home" (Bourdieu 1986). For students, cultural capital is the knowledge parents, family and their social circles have. Since first-generation students are the first in their families to go to college, they do not have the cultural capital that facilitates college access or navigable success (Dumais and Ward 2010). This knowledge ranges from knowing the Federal Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) exists, filling it out, to knowing the advantages of Professor office hours (Collier and Morgan 2008). Along these lines, combining income and cultural capital is the fact that FGS are less academically prepared for college than their peers. Lower income areas have schools with less resources to prepare students for college (Chen and Carroll 2005; Horn and Premo 1995). For FGS social capital is also key, defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), social capital is the "networks together with shared norms, values and

understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (OECD 2007). Stanton-Salazar (2011), further explain social capital as the "value of a relationship that provides support and assistance". Networks are helpful not only getting into college, but once on campus as well. The support networks' support help students navigate unknown places, participate in extracurriculars, degree plants, academic achievement and personal growth and lack thereof has been found to influence drop-out rates (Pascarella et al 2014).

FGS are also more likely to be from underrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds. According to the NCES, 42% of first-generation students are Black compared to the 28% that are white (NCES, 2012). Thus, while the barriers first-generation students face are often academic and financial, they also transcend into cultural and psychological challenges, experiencing "overt and covert forms of classism, racism, and other oppression related to marginalized identities in their college communities" (e.g., Pyne & Means, 2013; Quaye, Griffin & Museus 2015, Vaccaro & Newman 2016).

Singularly all the aforementioned factors pose disadvantages for first-generation students' college admission and completion, together (which they often are) they are significantly exacerbated. These structures contribute to first-generation students knowledge on post-secondary education, their retention, social integration, grade-point averages and graduation rates than their peers (Chen 2005; Choy 2001; Ishitani 2003, 2006; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998, Pascarella et al. 2004). These power dynamics frame first-generation students opportunity and resource constraints as "evidence of their less ability or potential" (Pyne and Means 2013, Macias 2013).

Nevertheless, while most literature on first-generation students show their challenges and consequent outcomes, it is key to highlight that these students have unique characteristics for college success. Chavez (2007) describes how low-income first-generation students in particular have strong work ethics and high motivation while first-generation students of color are remarkably "relational, collaborative and reflective" (Hayes 2013). First generation students are about half of the nation's college undergraduates and have the potential to exceed in college, if given the right resources and support.

Student Achievement: Sense of Belonging & Persistence

Theories and models to help first-generation college student's achievement have been developed. Theories of belonging emphasize how belonging causates and correlates with student success. Strayhorn (2012) defines belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty peers)" (p. 3).

Tinto's (1997) theory of persistence inextricably ties belonging to student success and degree attainment. He writes

"enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students, and an emphasis upon the importance of social and intellectual community in the education of students" (p. 146).

While some institutions hire staff specifically for retention programs, it is all members of the institution that must support students to graduate. Thus, it is not the institutionalized programs themselves that alone will aid student persistence, but the "orientation" of the

institution as a whole. The second principle of effective retention lies in the institutions educational commitment to all students. When put into practice this broadly is equipping students with the base resources and information to do well academically. Best student learning practices are implemented throughout the institution, promoting active rather than passive learning. Key to this is the feedback students provide on their learning. The third principle, social and intellectual belonging, centers on community. Institutions with the highest retention embed community in their mission and learning process. Retention programs focus on dialogue with students across different social groups, and interconnect them along with faculty and staff. A fundamental aspect of the the third principle of effective student retention is recurring quality contact between students and faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom. This aspect is often put into practice through faculty/peer mentorship and residential learning programs that aim to foster peer to peer dialogue.

While Tinto's theories of student persistence are well renowned in the literature, further research has been conducted to expand his model. Bean (1980), worked off, and adds on to Tinto (1970). His theory expands to student goals, expectations as well as "external and internal environmental factors" (Metz 2002). These expectations focused on student's satisfaction with the institution and perceived quality of interaction. External and internal factors included finances and familial support. Bean found that these two concepts were a major reason students left college. Working off of Tinto (1970), Astin (1975), Bean (1980), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), focused on peer-faculty interaction. They found that as peer-faculty interaction increased, both inside and outside of the classroom, student persistence increased. Alongside Bean (1980), Metzner (1987) found further evidence that not only highlighted the environmental factors

(finances etc), but the psychological factors that affect student persistence. Thus, first-generation students were not as socially integrated as their peers, if they were at all.

Critiques of Tinto's theory state that it relies mostly on the student, and not nearly as much as it should on the institution. As Johnson et al, 2007 note, if a student were unable to form relationships or dialogue outside the classroom with faculty, Tinto's theory holds the student attributable. Furthermore, many scholars have questioned whether Tinto's theory "does not value culturally supportive alternatives to college participation but instead emphasizes Anglo activities, which may not foster [all] students success (Esquivel 2010). This is key to note as a significant number of FGS are students of color and from culturally diverse backgrounds.

It is key to highlight the risks associated with not belonging, while students of color can experience "discomfort and alienation in the form of racism, isolation and the sense of not fitting in their new and unrecognized world", white students can also feel this isolation (Esquivel 2010, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton Pedersen, & Allen 1999). Students who do not feel they belong have a higher probability of withdrawing (Christie and Dinham 1990; Hurtado and Carter 1997). Key positive outcomes of belonging are academic achievement, retention and well-being (Means and Pyne 2015). First-generation students who feel like they belong to their institution are more engaged, have higher levels of academic and social involvement and thus more likely to stay in college and graduate (Tinto 1997).

Belonging Theory in Practice:

First-generation students face systemic barriers to successful transition into and completion of college. Institutions of higher education across the country have created various programs, initiatives and policies to ensure first-generation students have the resources to

succeed, graduating with a degree and social networks. These programs are emphasized in the first year, the time of greatest student attrition (Porter 1990).

Tinto addresses orientation programs in particular, stating how they often fail in fostering long-term relationships with school staff and generally the various types of communities at the institution. It is the orientation programs that foster long-term "personal linkages...the basis for eventual incorporation of the individual into the social and intellectual life of the institution" (Tinto 1997, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle 1985). Thus, the most successful programs do not only last during the orientation period, but well beyond it into the first-year and further through faculty-peer tutor programs. These relationships foster dialogue outside of the classroom and mentorship.

Orientation programs can be successful for pre-entry assessment, determining which students need what kinds of resources. They focus on academic, personal and social integration in the transition from high school to college. They do so by "familiarizing student with campus services, and helps new students conceptualize potential new living environments" (Robinson, et al 1996). Generally orientation is the time for academic advising, choosing classes etc. Orientation programs help students transition to college through anticipatory socialization where "individuals come to anticipate correctly the values, norms and behaviors they will encounter in a new social setting" (Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle 1986).

Pascarella et al 1957, connect this anticipatory socialization to integration, working within Tinto's theory of persistence to determine whether pre-orientation programs can be effective ways to positively influence students persistence and integration. Their longitudinal study worked with 763 incoming first-year students at a mid-sized, private university. Students

were sent questionnaires prior to the start of their first semester and in the middle of their second semester. The school's two day pre-orientation program prior to the start of classes aimed to familiarize students with academics, services and help develop institutional attachment. Their results found that attendance in pre-orientation had a significant effect of social integration and institutional commitment. They defined extracurricular involvement as averaging two or more hours per week, student faculty contact of 10 minutes or more outside the classroom, a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on peer relationships, and a similar scale for student-faculty interactions. Students social integration helped their persistence, the researchers wrote "It appears that the orientation experience impacted freshman persistence largely by facilitating a student's initial ability to cope with a new set of social challenges in an unfamiliar environment" (Pascarella et al 1986).

Means & Pyne (2017), conducted interviews with ten first year first-generation students sense of belonging at different institutions across the country. These 10 students were a part of the same college access program. Their results showed that "institutional-need-based scholarship programs, social identity-based student organizations, community-building within residence halls, academic support service and high-impact education practices, such as study abroad" were key structures that fostered belonging (913). However, these structures also posed challenges for students and the most significant findings showed that sense of belonging was already triggered before their matriculation.

Some students described peoples reaction to their enrollment at predominantly white higher education institutions and college in general. Teachers would warn them saying their identity would not be the norm at these institutions, while students originally did not even think

about their identity as barriers. They had not even had their first-day of class and already "feared their identity would be an impediment to their opportunities" (913). Others based their sense of belonging once on campus, feeling invisible, unwelcomed and disconnected. Like Trinity College, the predominantly white institutions some students attended also had Greek life. The first-generation students of the study felt that the school provided these organizations with an abundance of resource, time and value, but did not reciprocate that with organizations that made students of color included and accepted.

Institutional need-based scholarship programs were notably effective in fostering belonging for participants. Financial aid was only the surface of the support these programs afforded; social and emotional networks were also incorporated. All the participants at their respective schools felt communal ties to peers in their program. At institutions where these programs did not exist, students had to work through financial, social and emotional issues independently.

Student Persistence:

Astin (1993) describes community building as key to student persistence. Becker, Shelbe et al (2017) studied a group of first-generation students from an academic enrichment program, GenOne the summer prior to their first- year of college. Seeking to determine what the effect of the program was on student well-being, the researchers found that the program increased well-being, fostered belonging and resilience among the FGS. The school program was two months long, with introductory courses, peer mentors and study labs. There were consistent meetings through which students were connected with resources like the counseling center and

other services. Once the semester beings the program continues with monthly meetings, exposing students to new resources each meeting and connecting with peers and staff.

The program services decrease after the first year, but students do remain with a college coach. After the sophomore year there are no official services but students do attend meetings, events and share their knowledge with younger years. Some students stated that the program could improve by fostering longer term relationships, recurring events and check-ups with students. However, most students emphasized their perception of the staff and peer mentor devotion to their success as what "keeps them there" (1172). This sense of belonging not only included their first-generation community but extended to the entire school, a predominantly white institution.

The various literature on belonging, persistence and degree attainment as well as student well-being is key to highlight when understanding the importance of assessing first-generation student belonging in particular. Overall, the literature shows that belonging does aid in student persistence, degree attainment, extracurricular involvement, institutional attachment and growth. While there is an abundance of literature on the causation between college student belonging and increased student success, there is few research from student perspectives on whether first-generation initiatives in particular foster belonging at predominantly white, small, liberal arts institutions.

III.   Methodology:

The qualitative data in this study was collected from seven interviews with current first-generation sophomores at Trinity College (Class of 2021). Four of the students interviewed participated in the first-generation pre-orientation program offered by Trinity College, and the

remaining three did not. Utilizing these two cohorts allowed for the dissemination necessary to evaluate the effects of the first-generation pre-orientation program on student sense of belonging. Non probability purposive sampling was the specific technique employed to create these two cohorts. Through this technique, also known as selective sampling, participants are selected based on their knowledge of the area in question, voluntary discussion, and their unique perspective (Bradley 2017). This sampling method ensures participants represent a variety of perspectives, allowing for some semblance of representative findings (Engel & Schutt 2017). Thus, first-generation students from different racial, economic and peer group affiliations were selected for this study. Referenced here, peer affiliations are : membership of sports teams, or clubs/organizations. These peer groups have been proven to foster belonging and increased student degree attainment (Astin 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

A) *Sample:*

With this background informing my methods, the sample of students I interviewed was intentionally selected to represent athlete, international, low income, middle class white and of color students. However, it is limited in that my sample did not have an equal number of students for each individual groups of participants and non-participants. The highest income from students interviewed was in the middle class range, the rest were some variation of low income. This sample size at large allowed for a breadth of perspectives from first-generation student pre-orientation participants and non-participants, with peer group affiliations and without. My sample may not be generalizable to first-generation students and initiatives at large public universities, but may be more pertinent to those at small, predominantly white colleges. I was able to get in touch with my participants through the network of first-generation students I had

met as a peer-mentor of the first-generation pre-orientation program my junior year. I then emailed students inquiring about participation, I never once saw a list of first-generation students from Trinity College itself. It should be noted however that a limitation of this method and consequent results are influenced by selection bias. Since FGPO participants had to opt-in to the program, that students I interviewed were already predisposed to wanting to find a community.

Trinity College's Office of Student Success and Career Development (OSSCD), provided me with the statistical data on the number of first-generation students in the Class of 2021 and their ethnic background in the aggregate (Figure A). Originally, the masked data of all first-generation students' ethnic background, income, first-semester and first-year grade point averages was requested. However, it was denied for the potential identifiable risk and loss of anonymity to the 83 first-generation, sophomore students at Trinity College, resulting in the modified method presented in this project. Thus, no raw data, even masked was viewed on my behalf or my supervisor's for this project. After cross-referencing data from some Trinity College articles on the Class of 2021, I edited the table the OSSCD provided me to include all of the Class of 2021 demographics (Figure B). Out of the 604 incoming students from the Class of 2021, an estimated seven percent (83) were self-identified first-generation students. An estimated 98% of these first-generation students were retained into their sophomore year.

Figure A:

	First-Generation Students - Class of 2021 (N=83)
Gender	
Male	48.19%
Female	51.81%
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African-American	30.12%
Hispanic/Latino	6.02%
Asian	13.25%
White	26.51%
Multicultural	21.69%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.20%
Not Specified	1.20%
Other Characteristics	
Athlete	25.30%
International Student	12.05%
Retained at Institution	97.59%

Figure B:

	First-Generation Students Class of 2021 (N=83)	Class of 2021 (N=604)
Gender		
Male	48%	47%
Female	52%	53%
Race/Ethnicity		
Students of Color	59%	23%
Black/African-American	30%	
Hispanic/Latino	6%	
Asian	13%	
White	26%	
Multicultural	1%	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	
Not Specified		
Other Characteristics	25%	
International Student	12%	14%
Retained at Institution	98%	

B) Interviews

The interviews conducted were semi-structured into three main themes: journey to college, transition to college, and current state. The focus of the interviews was on the second theme, transition to college, exploring students feeling and behaviors of belonging their first year and in relation to first-generation initiatives. Some key questions I asked to both cohorts were "Do you attend school events?", "Do you feel a sense of attachment to this school or/and a particular group?", "What drives you to persist at Trinity?". "Are you proud to be a Trinity College student" and "Have you ever considered transferring?" These interviews require IRB approval, which was received and accepted. The interviews I conducted required written consent forms (Appendix X), were recorded and portions of the audio transcribed for coding. Any and all information that was identifiable was not included in transcriptions and deleted in all forms of written communication after findings were analyzed. Thus, the names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the interviewees.

Interviews were used to assess if there were any emergent patterns/themes among the interviewed program participants and non-participants, all of which come from a host of different economic, racial and social backgrounds. Coding these themes and patterns was key in assessing how useful, if at all, college implemented initiatives are to fostering students' sense of belonging. They will also provide insight as to what it is that fosters or hinders student belonging, if it is first-generation initiatives. The quantitative data collected was a method to contextualize the larger demographic at Trinity College in comparison to the first-generation community.

IV.   Key Findings:

Persistence: Not a Problem

As the literature shows, belonging is is positively correlated with persistence. At Trinity College the Class of 2021 retained at 97.59% (Figure A & B). During interviews participants were asked about the reasons for continuing their undergraduate career at Trinity. All but one student described a similar reason, other than belonging, for remaining at the institution. Almost all of the participants (6/7) emphasized their background as the key reason for remaining at Trinity. In their own perspectives, the same reason they enrolled at Trinity was the same reason they stayed. It should be noted however that all but one interviewed student considered transferring at least once. Only one student, a non FGPO participant and the only middle class person interviewed, attributed institutional factors in particular for persisting. The extracurriculars she is a part of helped her feel a part of the Trinity community and.

Lucas, a student of color athlete FGPO participant said, "Yeah, yeah I did think about transferring but then I was like, what am I doing? I'm stupid for even thinking that. What matters is getting my education, I'm just here for my education..I didn't even think I was going to college". Similar sentiments were expressed among other student as well, Lucy a student of color non-participant stated,

> "Abso-freaking-lutely I thought about transferring. If it weren't for my friends, I would have transferred. And in my head I was like wow my mom could come to a whole ass new country, work long hours a day, take care of my and my siblings, and I can't handle emotional stress? I need to get it together. My mom did it all. I felt like I was just being whiny, I have a privilege many people don't have and yes I am struggling with something very real but it could be so much worse. But it took me a long time to get there. My drive to succeed comes from my identity, the whole first-gen. thing is actually my biggest drive because if I mess this up, even studying abroad, if I mess this up- I mess this up for all of my family members. My goal to succeed is not Trinity related, Trinity is just a stop on my plan".

It should be noted however that financial aid packages were secondary factors that influenced students self-perceived primary reason for staying. The financial aid Trinity provided

most of the applicants (6/7), from both the participant and non-participant group encouraged students to stay because they felt it was worthwhile opportunity. Thus while persistence is positively above average at Trinity College, and financial aid encouraged students to stay, their self-identified persistence overwhelmingly derived from their own culture and not institutional support services themselves.

Belonging: Finding the other Trinity early on through the First-Generation Pre-Orientation Program

All of the participants of the first-generation pre-orientation program interviewed found that the sense of community the program offered helped them deal with the over Trinity and peer mentorship was key to navigating their place on campus with the "other Trinity". Student athletes, of color and white, agreed that the FGPO comforted them because it introduced them to an identity and community they otherwise would not have understood or known about. Students expressed comfort in knowing that a community like First-Gen. existed and so presently on the campus. Lindsay stated, "If you come in different from the majority population at Trinity it can be very hard to find people who aren't". Danny, a white international student athlete expressed how it was comforting to know that there was a Trinity outside of the overt very wealthy and very white reality.

It was made most clear through the interviews that the social capital the FGPO afforded students was the key to belonging associated with it. The peer mentorship of the program in particular was helpful to students finding a subculture of Trinity to belong to. All student participants interviewed mentioned peer mentorship and sustained (however sporadic) contact throughout the year with peer mentors. Stephanie, a low-income student of color said, "It was through the peer mentors I found out about the [organization/club] I'm a part of now".

Throughout the interview Stephanie expressed how she is proud to be Trinity student because she sees herself as an active change agent through her organization which she uses as a vehicle to promote positive change and awareness on campus. This sentiment is also what excites her about Trinity, furthermore Stephanie included her organization as on of her key support systems. While the first-generation program was not the dominant part of the subculture interviewees described as their place, Lindsay says her closest friends are peer mentors, and probably some of the only people she feels comfortable around at Trinity which speaks volumes given that she still, "Just doesn't feel particularly comfortable anywhere on campus".

For the male student athlete participants, the program did serve as a connection to the other Trinity, but this connection did not become their social circle as was the case for the participants mentioned above. Both student athletes described how their sport dominated their social circle because they physically had to be with their respective teams a majority of the time they were not doing homework, attending a TA/SI session etc. However, both Danny and Lucas expressed how they are glad they have the social capital they formed through the FGPO. Danny even said,

"The team pretty much surrounded my whole experience. And while I love them I know I'm different from them. Being around a diverse group of students has made me feel better. And I don't think I would be happy if events about my culture weren't happening, or I didn't know about them. Even though I can't go most of the time, when I do go it's like wow I haven't celebrated this in years, it feels like family".

Danny a low income, student of color and athlete came from a boarding school that required him to be away from home for many years prior to enrolling at Trinity. It was peer mentors that spoke to him and invited him to cultural events. His connection to events that make him feel accepted, and like there is a place for people like him comes from peer networks in the

first-generation program. Thus, the first-generation program served more as a social, rather than material resource for students. Lucas said,

"The most important thing about the program was showing us comfort, that yeah you're in this type of college but they are people like you. Just being surrounded by them was comforting".

Here Lucas is not necessarily highlighting a skill or resource he gained from the program, but a conceptual and emotional resource that helped him feel less out of place at Trinity. Lindsay also expressed a similar sentiment,

"We were taught more conceptual things like how to learn, leadership styles..and weah we had some direct resources but the conceptual things were more, and helpful to deal with emotional stressors, feeling excited but then isolated and then leveling out".

While some participants did mention certain material resources such as book scholarships, help with class registration, and reviewing papers, these resources were either provided directly by peer mentors often times through a Facebook group page. Thus some of the more material resources some student participants knew about were not provided during the pre-orientation program itself but sustained sporadic contact with peer mentors. Half of the interviewees did not even mention these more material resources, and those who did mentioned them in passing. All interviewees emphasized the comfort the program provided them and perceived it as the focal point. It was comforting for them to know they were not the only ones struggling with the new concept of college. Through the program they found a subculture to which they do feel a part of. While this may seem to have been complicated by student athletes who spend a majority of their time with the team, there is a duality where a "best of both worlds" capital is experienced. While student athletes inherently form a part of the Trinity culture, they also have connections to and feelings of belonging to subculture groups, facilitated by the

first-generation program. However it is key to note that all student participants interviewed did not identify as belonging to the "typical Trinity", even though some like student athletes had access to it.

Belonging: Finding the Other Trinity (a lot later) without the First-Generation Pre-Orientation Program

Non participant students interviewed also found their way to belonging to a certain group not included in the typical Trinity. In comparison to their participant counterparts however, they found this sense of belonging much later on, sometimes not even until the end of their first year or beginning of their sophomore year. All but one student interviewed wished they had a starting support like the FGPO. This sentiment was most thoroughly expressed by two low-income students, Jack and Lucy.

Jack, a lower income white student said,

"Orientation was definitely a culture shock, it was the first time I was thrown into something and I didn't know what was happening, not knowing anyone around you. I didn't know what I was doing, what types of groups I wanted to be in...I definitely felt early on, that this wasn't my place. Like how I could be at place where people are actually like this".

It was not until his second semester that Jack found a group he felt he belonged to through an academic extracurricular his older sister (a current Trinity student) introduced him to . It is interesting to note however that Jack is currently joining a fraternity on campus, a token factor of the "typical Trinity culture". However, he does not see his involvement in it as a part of the typical culture. Even though he would be a member of a Greek letter organization he does not see himself partaking in the culture it fosters, wealth and exclusivity. Instead he sees it as something he cares about and adds diversity to the activities he is already a part of.

Bridget, the wealthiest student I interviewed expressed very similar sentiments to Jack, and is also a part of a Greek letter organization on campus. She was the only student I interviewed that could confidently state she was proud of going to Trinity and felt she belonged to the place as a whole. She actually does not see much of a divide at Trinity anymore either (unlike everyone else interviewed), but despite this feels she is helping change the typical Trinity culture with her sorority through various awareness and empowerment events they host. She did not have anything to say about Trinity increasing their access to first-generation students.

Lucy had a different view on the other hand,

"I think there needs to be a full Office and Dean and whoever and their mothers for first-gen students that have the knowledge, when you go to the health center do this and there's these scholarships and if you want to study abroad or need to do a J-term we have funds, resources. You may have a peer mentor and a workshop like yeah emotional support is important but we need to graduate".

A non-participant of the FGPO, Lucy had no idea that an office (The Office of Student Success and Career Development) specifically for first-generation students existed on campus, or that the Office connected students with key college administrators, like the Vice President of Student Success. Both of these resources would have been very helpful to her feeling comfortable as a student, being able to afford her books, study away and go to the health center without concern like her peers. It was not until the end of her first year that Lucy found out about a book scholarship, and J-term financial support. She was only able to discover these resources through peer networks from other pre-orientation programs she participated in. While these peer networks and pre-orientation programs connected her with the other Trinity immediately, it was not until her second semester that she felt comfortable enough to say she had a place on campus.

It is key to note however, that even now Lucy has these sentiments about Trinity College and their initiatives towards first-generation students:

"I know there's a first-gen program, but honestly I feel like they don't want us to succeed. It's like we always constantly have to do the effort to find resources. It wasn't until the end of my semester that there was a book scholarship. I couldn't afford some books which affected my grade. They have these things because I didn't know about any of them. Even the Health Center, I wasn't supposed to have any copay. I have $900 left in medical bills, see if I can get reimbursed, all that money I could have been saving to study abroad which I really want to do. I found out there was a grant a week before the presentation and I asked the [presenter] if she could tell students incorporate it into the presentation because there are students paying their bills, stressing, struggling when they don't have to and she was like "oh yeah just tell your friends" and I was like wow they don't want us to succeed".

While Lucy is grateful to belong to the groups she does on campus, and the material resources she found through them, she did not feel the overarching support to succeed like her FGPO participant counterparts. She also points out a key critique of the FGPO, without even having been in it, the lack of material resources or knowledge thereof.

V.   Discussion:

Trinity College's Class of 2021 first-generation students persisted into their sophomore year at a rate of 98%. While retention is an issue at many institutions, that is not the case for this particular group in this particular year. What does require more attention is FGS belonging and at Trinity College in particular this notion of the "two Trinity's". Despite that all interviewed students acknowledged this difference and did not associate themselves with the "typical Trinity", participants of the FGPO had an accelerated belonging rate than their non-participant interviewed counterparts.

It is key to note that while the FGPO was successful in fostering student belonging, there are still many things it needs to work on as highlighted by students that participated and some that did not participate. Despite that the FGPO provided a space and dialogue for FGS students

to understand that they belonged to institutions of higher education at large and the social capital to peer networks, it did miss a component of more direct material resources. When students did find out about book scholarships or medical grants it was much later in the year and not all students knew about them. Students who were aware of such direct monetary resources knew from sustained, albeit sporadic, contact with peer mentors. Thus the program not only needs to maintain sustained and consistent contact through peer mentorship to participants, but also to non-participants who may have not been able to apply to the program for a host of reasons. The risks for FGS in particular when they do not have access to direct monetary resources that help with basic necessities cannot be understated either.

This research could extend into looking at the intricacies of how race, income and peer affiliation separately affect belonging among first-generation students who have or have not participated in initiatives. This study was only able to interview seven students, further research could look into all participants of one program. It would also be useful to track FGS progress in college from the moment they step onto campus to the time they graduate, for a full recount of belonging. Nevertheless, belonging is a key concept that needs to be studied in more depth as it could aid higher educational institutions at large to explore reciprocally beneficial mechanisms for degree attainment for student. The enrollment of first-generation students in college is essential, but belonging can be a key factor in what helps them persist to graduation.

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