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COM 415 I

An Examination of Memorable Messages First Generation College Student Receive

It is sometimes said that people are, “a product of their raising.” That can often be true one way or another. Whether we choose to lean into what our parents say or lean away, they still influence us. And their life experiences impact the messages they impart. One significant life experience is a college education. When parents don’t go to college, they may form a different worldview than their college educated peers, which means they may share different messages with their children.

To contextualize the higher education journey of first-generation college students, it is important to note that they face numerous disadvantages. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Redford and Hoyer 4) found that over 50 percent of first-generation college students come from household making $50,000 or less, compared to less than 25 percent of continuing-generation students (4). This income inequality, among other cultural differences, appear to be propelling first generation students to be fixated on earning potential of their degree at a much higher rate than other college students. According to the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, over 80 percent of first-generation students are seeking financial prosperity from their degree, while only 42 percent of first-generation students are concerned with developing a meaningful philosophy. With each passing year, they place more emphasis on financial prosperity and less emphasis on meaningful philosophy (Saenz, et al. 35). First generation students are also at greater risk of experiencing imposter syndrome (Reynolds). In a recent opinion piece, first generation student Maya Flores relates that, “Being a first-generation college student means not being able to fully relate to your peers, but no longer being able to relate to or ask for help from your parents” (First Generation Pressures).

What impact do parental messages, along with messages from other sources, have on first generation college students? Can they be linked to the aforementioned mindsets that may emerge? What instances throughout the college process trigger recall of these messages? How can positive, helpful messages for first-generation students be optimized in a manner that will make them “memorable?” These are the questions the present study seeks to answer. In order to begin, it is important to define “memorable messages.”

**Literature Review**

Knapp, Stohl and Reardon’s article, “‘Memorable’ messages,” is the seminal study in which the authors “discovered” a new communication unity, called, “memorable messages” (28). Though they refrain from assigning narrow, hard and fast parameters to memorable messages because they said the memorable nature of the message varies based on the target person (35), the authors did unearth certain trends that help to define the term, such as “messages perceived as memorable are most often brief oral injunctions that prescribe rules of conduct for solving a personal problem” (36). They ultimately conclude their study with two common threads that make messages memorable: people cite them as having an influential effect on their lives and believe they remember them for a long time (40). These factors provide framework for all subsequent studies pertaining to memorable messages.

“Memorable messages, in fact, have been show to impact the everyday implementations of people’s personal standards (Ellis and Smith 98). To gauge this impact, Ellis and Smith conducted a study in which participants completed daily journal entries chronicling a time during each day when they both exceeded and failed to meet their personal standards, along with a memorable message that came to mind when they reflected on each behavior. Participants also noted the source of each message (Ellis and Smith 102). The top two sources for the memorable messages that came to mind when recalling both positive and negative behavior were “mother” and “parents/home,” with other salient stakeholders ranking close behind, including “teachers/school” and “personal experience” (Ellis and Smith 106). This study unequivocally underscores the pervasive linkage between memorable messages and daily behavior (116). Despite this link, however, it is important to note that people who already have an underlying value that correlates to a situation are more likely to recall an applicable memorable message (Smith, et al. 337). Smith, Ellis and Yoo’s research indicates that underlying values shape who a person wants to be, and memorable messages give them a roadmap toward being their “best self (338).

People have a barrage of messages stored in their head that they may recall when facing different decisions throughout life. For the purposes of this present study, however, it is important to extrapolate the categories of messages that manifest themselves as memorable in a college setting. In “Memorable Messages for Navigating College Life,” Nazione and her colleagues sought to do just that, collecting information from college students regarding a specific memorable message that guided them as they navigated college (123). The study is approached through the lens of control theory, taking the hypothesis that memorable messages spur action that closes the gap between their ideal and actual states (124). In examining the different types of challenges associated with the memorable messages received, the data found that academics was ranked the highest at approximately 45 percent, followed by relational challenges at around 20 percent, then work/career challenges at about 15 percent (130). The top two categories of memorable message topics, at roughly 20 percent each, were believe in yourself/keep going and work hard/exert effort (133). The plurality of these messages, 35 percent, came from family members (134). A correlation between memorable message recall and a positive attitude change was uncovered (136). With parents accounting for such a high percentage of the messages that shape students’ approach to college, it makes sense to begin by analyzing parent memorable messages.

In one strain of memorable message research, Waldron and his colleagues examine parental memorable messages in the context of morality (374). They found that memorable messages pertaining to morality often encompassed relational ethics such as duties/obligation, or self-honoring behavior such as self-development and self-respect (384). Importantly, self-development messages often encompassed work ethic, financial independence and education (384). Their quantitative analysis found that culture factored into the messages; for example, the offspring of immigrant parents tended to report having received memorable messages highlighting their moral responsibility to make families proud (391). This warrants investigation into whether there are specific moral cultural trends in first generation families. Some elements of these moral memorable messages fit under the messages college students cite as salient to their higher education journey.

Kranstuber, Carr and Hosek conducted a 2012 study exploring ways that college students process the messages they get from their parents about the college experience and what impact those messages have on the students’ college success outcomes (45). Students who participated in the study revealed that their parents’ memorable messages encompassed “working (and playing) hard, the necessity of attending college, providing encouragement and support, and general advice based on parents’ own experiences” (Kranstuber et al. 44). This segmentation raises questions about how these messages may vary for first generation students due to a lack of college experiences that their parents can draw from. Ultimately, however, the data indicated that the manner in which college students perceived their parents’ memorable messages was a better predictor of college success than the actual message content (Kranstuber et al. 57). Essentially, the findings showed, higher relational satisfaction led to a more positive reception of the message, which in turn correlated with better results (Kranstuber et al. 58). This finding raises a question for my research regarding the levels of relational satisfaction specifically of first-generation college students and their parents.

One notable study conducted by Tiffany Wang focuses specifically on parental memorable messages about family that first-generation students draw from as they transition to college. Students received messages imploring them not to forget about family (277) and to set a good example for their younger siblings (280). This study underscored the tenacity imparted in students by their families and the strength they drew from knowing their families had their back. Since this research’s appears to be relatively unique, it would be beneficial to further explore these messages to corroborate the study’s findings. Furthermore, its authors recommended an examination of the negative implications of parental memorable messages for first-generation students (285). Another noteworthy consideration in the parental memorable message arena for first generation students could be messages received by students raised by blue-collar parents or parents who went through hard times.

Kristen Lucas conducted research probing into socializing communication in blue-collar families by interviewing a mix of people who were raised by blue collar parents and landed in a variety of blue-collar and white-collar jobs (102-103). Subjects’ parents were interviewed as part of the study as well. In order to be classified as a message, conversations had to meet at least one criteria of memorable messages as derived from existing bodies of research. Lucas’ findings reveal starkly contradictory messages that seem to simultaneously perpetuate the status quo and encourage social mobility (110). The present study will seek to factor this disconnect into the research, endeavoring to unearth contradictions and probe into how participants may be grappling with mixed messages as they proceed through college. One potential coping mechanism could be trying to “do both,” overcompensating by tempering college studies with work and extracurricular involvement that is approached with a blue-collar fervor. In addition to highlighting several mixed messages, Lucas’ research also unearthed cases where parents unequivocally, emphatically urged their children to go to college (108). The present study will explore whether cases like this led to students being ambitious to a fault in their college endeavors and losing perspective. Whether or not this is the case, though, there is still research indicating that instability can lead to positive memorable messages.

In “Memorable Messages of Hard Times: Constructing Short- and Long-Term Resiliencies Through Family Communication,” Kristen Lucas and Patrice M. Buzzanell explore constructive messages and practices that parents employ in conversations with their children in the wake of social and economic instability (190). By interviewing families who suffered financially through the 1980s recessions, the authors discovered that family communication during financial hardship served to foster resilience that the children carried with them throughout the remainder of their life (Lucas and Buzzanell 196). Four common threads in all the family conversations were: “numbers talk,” which emphasized objective details over emotions (Lucas and Buzzanell 197); “tightening the belt,” which focused on monitoring and trimming expenses by getting by with less (198); “sidelining” which referred to maintaining marketable skill sets outside of their existing job duties so that when income levels decreased, they could take jobs elsewhere (199); and “preparing,” which essentially referred to stocking up (200). These principles were conveyed through memorable messages such as “save for a rainy day” and “always have a backup plan” (Lucas and Buzzanell 202). Due to the tendency for first generation students to have lower socioeconomic statuses, which could cause their families to be more affected by economic downturns, it is possible that first generation students carry these messages with them to college. Specifically, even if students do not have financial strain during their time in college, the messages of “sidelining” and “preparing” may lead them to seek learning opportunities outside of their major and work beyond what would otherwise be deemed necessary.

These findings appear to converge with Merolla, Beck and Jones’ study examining the levels of hope in emerging adults instilled through memorable messages across three domains: academics, finances and relationships (457). The study demonstrated that positive memorable messages recalled by people facing difficult moments supplied them with inspiration to persevere. The present study will explore how these findings converge with the memorable messages deployed by blue collar parents of first-generation college students. Some, such as socializing messages encouraging social reproduction that either directly or indirectly de-emphasize the importance of a college education, could potentially serve to decrease hope in an academic setting. The aforementioned memorable messages of hard time, such as “sidelining,” that foster resilience, though, may bolster hope and subsequently boost agency in the financial domain during the college years (Lucas and Buzzanell 199). There could potentially be overlap as well; for example, positive memorable messages in the financial domain may fuel students to press through challenging academics in the pursuit of long-term financial success.

No matter what messages first-generation college students may receive during their upbringing, they receive new messages from new sources as they enter the college setting. Kevin Barge and David W. Schlueter’s “Memorable Messages and Newcomer Socialization” uses memorable messages to investigate the discourse linked to organizational entry (238). In this study, participants were asked to list and elaborate upon a single memorable message that impacted their work life when they first entered the organization. Analysis of participants’ responses indicated that the discourse around the socialization of newcomers emphasizes “fitting into” a set organizational pattern but being individual at the same time (Barge and Schueter 249). It also revealed that the vast majority of the messages (over 90 percent) were received via informal face-to-face communication (Barge and Schueter 250). Though their research focuses primarily on organizational jobs, Barge and Schlueter identify a possibility that their findings may be more broadly applicable to the implications of socialization (234). Their research certainly could be considered applicable to college students, because there are many parallels between college and “work” organizations. Both are environments in which the person entering them will be spending most of their time; both are steeped in their own specific culture and laden with unspoken norms; both often involve a formal onboarding/assimilation process, etc. Cynthia Stohl also studied the variables of the content and context of memorable messages in an organizational setting (231). The finding most relevant to the present study is that a person’s position factors into what messages he or she may recall (237). Though the same barrage of messages may be circulated to a wide range of students, those messages may be recalled and applied differently based on a student’s background.

Both organizational memorable message articles will be factored into the present study. One manner in which this will be done is by adapting Barge and David W. Schlueter’s

Question – asking participants to list and elaborate upon a single memorable message that impacted their higher education journey when they first entered college. This study may also inquire about the medium through which that communication was received; i.e face-to-face or digital; formal or informal, etc. Furthermore, this study will factor in Stohl’s findings, analyzing how first-generation students’ upbringings impact how they recalled and applied those messages.

One notable way for first generation students to determine the roles both college education and families should play in the lives of first-generation students is through messages received from on-campus mentors. Wang conducted a study examining such messages (340). They often proved hard to reconcile, with some messages advocating for a strong college focus and others urging students not to focus on college to the extent that their family dynamic was derailed (351). Perhaps even more interesting, though, is that several students in the study confessed to lacking a mentor to discuss non-academic struggles. Their independence, however, prevented them from seeking out such a mentor (351). The present study will seek to explore the role this independence plays in first generation students’ approach to college. It is important to note that in Nazione’s study examining memorable messages that shape how students navigate the challenges of college, school related messages constitute a smaller percentage of the messages cited by students as the specific memorable message they recalled that guided them as they navigated college than those delivered by family members (135). However, the memorable messages unearthed in Wang’s study seemed to contribute to the students’ success, so the present study will explore how important advisor memorable messages are to first generation students compared to other messages and whether the students think there are ways the credibility and memorability of on-campus-mentor messages could be bolstered. One way to bolster these messages could be by including more alumni.

In “An Initial Examination of Facebook as a Source of Memorable Messages for First-Year College Students,” Russell, Nazione and Smith analyzed messages from alumni directed to new college students in a university’s social media page (118). Though the study did not explore the specific impact these messages had on college students, the authors found that the messages lined up with previous research. They postulated that messages collected in this format could prove helpful and relevant to first generation students due to the perceived credibility of someone who has “been there, done that” at the same school (117). To maximize such contributions, it is important to identify ways to deliver messages from alumni to students in a way that is relevant, practical and interesting (Dewhurst and FitzPatrick 7). The present study will seek to assess the content factors that cause messages to resonate with first-generation college students, so that those factors can be deployed across communications from alumni, teacher, and other on-campus sources.

**Methods Section**

**Participants**

This study involved a purposeful sample. In order to hear from first generation students that comprise a wide range of different demographics, the following participants were interviewed:

* Hispanic female junior from a low-income family at a private liberal arts college
* White female senior from a wealthy family at a private liberal arts college
* White male senior from a low-income family at a large state school
* White female junior from a low-income family at a private liberal arts school
* Black male junior from a low-income family at a private liberal arts college

All participants are first generation college students, meaning neither of their parents completed a bachelor’s degree. This study purposefully involves a variety of races and socioeconomic backgrounds so that trends can be identified among first generation students regardless of other factors.

**Procedures**

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. Data was collected through three in-person interviews and two video-conference interviews. Each interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and was digitally recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. The interviewer asked questions that sought to reveal memorable messages first generation students received from parents, mentors and other stakeholders. Through a review of existing memorable message literature, questions emerged that either have not been addressed or warrant further exploration. This study is not a “deep dive” into any particular facet of first-generation college students and memorable messages, but rather an exploratory study that seeks to connect the dots between potential correlations in various existing studies. The questions have been organized into a sequence as follows:

**Before college:**

**Values:**

* What are your most important values?
* What is the most important message growing up that shaped your life philosophy?

**Parental relationship:**

* How would you describe your relationship with your parents? (are you satisfied with that relationship?)

**Parental impact on college:**

* Growing up, your opinions are formed by your own research, but they are also formed by those around you. What memorable messages did you receive from your parents about college growing up?
* What memorable messages did you receive from your parents specifically about the role college should play in your life?
* Were there any messages or things you observed not directly about college in your parents’ words or actions that either confirmed or contradicted what they had explicitly said about it?

**During college:**

**Top memorable message:**

* What is the top memorable message that you recall throughout the college journey?
* Who did you receive this message from?
  + *(Note which of the following sources it came from):*
    - *Upperclassmen*
    - *Professor*
    - *Family member*
    - *Staff/administration member*
* Where were you when this message was received?
* What were the factors that caused that message to resonate with you?

**Organizational memorable message:**

* What is a single memorable message that impacted your higher education journey when you first entered college?
* Who did you receive this message from?
  + *(Note which of the following sources it came from):*
    - *Upperclassmen*
    - *Professor*
    - *Family member*
    - *Staff/administration member*
* Where were you when this message was received?
* What were the factors that caused that message to resonate with you?

**Other memorable messages:**

* “Is there a memorable message pertaining to college that you have received from \_\_\_\_\_? (Fill in the blank with one of the following categories that has not been mentioned.)
  + *Upperclassmen*
  + *Professor*
  + *Family member*
  + *Staff/administration member*
    - *(Repeat this question with category that hasn’t been mentioned).*
      * *Note the order in which the messages are recalled.*

**Campus involvement:**

* Tell me what you’re involved with across campus.
  + Are there memorable messages that led you to pursue those opportunities?
* Do you ever feel like you’ve bit off more than you can chew?
  + Is there a memorable message that motivates you to keep going?

**Juggling conflicts:**

* Has there been a situation in college where conflicting memorable messages came to mind?
* Which messages did you default to, and why?

**Barriers:**

* Do you value independence or interdependence?
* Do you find it hard to ask for help?
  + Any message(s) that shaped these attitudes?
* Who are some people on campus that you feel comfortable discussing non-academic struggles with?
  + Do you feel like those people are the best equipped to help you?
* What are some of the barriers that prevent you from discussing non-academic struggles with other people on campus?

**Reflection:**

* Who has been the most helpful source of memorable messages throughout college? (Not necessarily the one you listen to the most, but the one you think provides the best guidance.)
* In reflecting on all these memorable messages, what are some of the factors that have caused them to stick with you?

Prior to asking the aforementioned questions, the following was explained:

* The purpose of the study.
* What constitutes a memorable message.
* That if they have already answered the question I’m asking in response to a previous questions, they may refer back to it instead of seeking a new answer.
* That “college” encompasses more than just academic studies. It includes:
  + Work
  + Extracurriculars
  + Relationships
  + Balancing all of the above.

Prior to conducting each interview, the interviewer explained that the study seeks to better understand the impact parental messages, along with messages from other sources, have on first-generation college students and how to optimize positive, helpful messages for first-generation students in a way that will make them “memorable.”

To set the stage, the interviewer provided each participant with a definition of memorable messages based on Knapp, Stohl and Reardon’s article, “‘Memorable’ Messages,” explaining that they are most often short oral statements that “prescribe rules of conduct for solving a personal problem” (36) and that people tend to cite them as having an influential effect on their lives and believe they remember them for a long time (40).

Once all research was conducted, the data was be evaluated in the context of how it addresses the questions that emerged in existing literature pertaining to memorable messages and first-generation college students. New questions and findings also emerged, along with potential methods for college administrations to apply the findings to continue improving first-generation students’ transition into college through positive memorable messages.

**Results:**

**Values:**

The five students listed the following when asked to share their most important values, which they attributed to both their parents’ advice, observations from their parents, and college experiences:

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| * Faith * Hard work/working with head more than having to work with hands. * Thinking through everything. * Not being afraid to ask for help. |
| * Positivity * Love * Compassion |
| * Family * God * Determination |
| * God * Family * Finding a job and becoming a better leader |
| * Religion * Doing the right thing |

As a follow up, students were asked about the most important message growing up that shaped your life philosophy. They gave the following answers, all attributed to their parents:

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| Mom was always like, “Just figure out for yourself. You don't need to ask anyone for help.” I learned from experience that the opposite is true. |
| Whatever you do, do it for yourself and do it out of love. |
| That I can change my narrative in my life. |
| Whatever you start, you have to finish. |
| Everything happens for a reason. |

**Parental relationships**

Parents’ levels of investment in the college journey ranged across the spectrum. Two students strongly emphasized that their parents did not understand their world and indicated that they didn’t bother going into detail updating their parents on their college experiences. Another two students, on the other hand, said that to their parents sought to immerse themselves in their child’s world despite college being totally unfamiliar to them. Finally, one student said that, though her parents understood college, they did not frequently converse about it with her.

Two students indicated that that their parents didn’t even discuss college until their academic achievements in high school indicated that they might be a viable candidate:

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| Me being a first gen student it wasn’t talked about it very deeply. The more I progressed through high school the more it was like, “You have a good head on your shoulders. You’re smart, you’re compassionate. We want you to go to college. We want you to be successful. |
| They were always like just do whatever you want. But when I was in 11th grade, they were like, “Oh, you’re about to graduate top of your class. You could potentially get into UGA.” Then it was like, “Oh, you should try doing that. |

Four of the students said their parents promoted college as the path to a dream career.

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| “Just making sure you **do what you love for you.** Don’t feel like you have to do these certain things just because everyone else does it. Just do what makes you happy and we’ll support it.” |
| So my dad has always told my brother and I like, “You guys better get your butts through college, because that's gonna make your career stable, and **you're not gonna end up doing something that you don't really love, like me**.” |
| For my parents it was more of like **going to college and figure out what I love** – because both my parents are doing what they love but not exactly – so like my mom wanted to be in physical therapy and my dad wanted to own his own logistics company. So my parents were both like go to college. |
| I like one thing that they said to me. “Just study what you want to study. It doesn’t matter how much we have to pay.” And I guess it’s just because they never got that opportunity. Their message to me, I guess, was just, **“Dream big and go for it.”** |

One interviewee even related that her parents were perfectly happy with her completing a degree in English, while explaining that her non-first-gen peers in the English major received pushback from their parents for not choosing a more lucrative major. Parents seemed determined for their kids to be happy.

One student was an outlier from the four parents that linked college to a fulfilling career, saying his parents were “totally fine if [my siblings and I] wanted to not go to college, or if we wanted to do a one year certificate program at a community or tech school or something like that. They didn’t care what I did.” However, he did not seem to perceive this attitude as a deterrent, saying they taught him he could change the narrative in his life. They believed there were ways to achieve a meaningful like outside of college, but he still felt like the supported the college path he chose.

**Throughout college**Students gave the following answers when asked about the top memorable message they recall throughout the college journey:

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| **Message** | **Source** | **Factors that caused it to resonate** |
| You never have to work a day in your life when you're doing something that you love. | Dad and grandparents | Seeing people in jobs they don’t enjoy |
| Take everything one day at a time. | Dad | The fact that his dad seemed to truly feel his pain |
| Think it through | Parents | Necessity/being overwhelmed due to not thinking initially |
| You just need to go for things. | Seeing peers chase their goals | Observing her own negative repercussions of not acting |
| Always go say hi first. | Desk assistant and organization director | Timely advice when he was nervous about not knowing people |

Students were then asked to recall a single memorable message that impacted their higher education journey when the first entered college

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| **Message** | **Source** |
| Don’t be afraid to ask for help. | Thinking back to negative repercussions of failing to ask for help; upperclassmen |
| Same as top message (take everything one day at a time). | Dad |
| Just enjoy it. | High school teacher |
| Don’t be afraid to ask for help. | BCC instructor and other Berry mentors.” |
| Same as top message (Always say hi first). | Timely advice when he was nervous about not knowing people. |

The students who had not already cited a memorable message from an upperclassman were asked to whether one came to mind. They answered:

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| Don’t be afraid to ask for help. *(Participant noted that this was the first time she heard that message rather than just having to do it.)* |
| Nothing that stuck. |
| When you're stressed, drive up Stretch. |

The students who had not already cited a memorable message from a professor were asked to whether one came to mind. They answered:

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| No matter what, even if you’re in a field that you're good at, you're still going to have your weak spots, and it’s important to refine those as well. |
| College can be fun! *(Messages administered through actions, not necessarily through words.)* |
| *Nothing that stuck.* |
| *Nothing that stuck.* |

The students who had not already cited a memorable message from a staff/administration member were asked to whether one came to mind. They answered:

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| If you mess up it's okay, as long as you're learning from it. |
| *No specific message. Just teaching about career field via example.* |
| Get out of your head! |
| *Nothing that stuck.* |
| Stay humble. |

**The balancing act**

When asked about their activities across campus, they listed an average of 6.8 significant jobs and extracurriculars. Four of the 5 students indicated that they often felt like they had bitten off more than they could chew. “I feel like that builds character,” one student remarked. When asked if there were memorable messages that motived them to keep going in these situations, students said:

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| Honestly I have a bad memory of specific quotes, but I do have like all these sentiments. *(Referring to all the encouraging messages she has received.)* |
| “Looking behind you and helping others get where you’re at.” I think that’s just more my thought process. I just saw needs of this campus for first gen students, and I wanted them to succeed as much as I had been blessed to be able to succeed, so I think that just came from myself honestly. |
| It’s just kinda realizing what an opportunity going to college is and also what an opportunity it is that I'm at a school where I'm getting to do classes that I love even when they’re stressful sometimes. I guess just putting things in perspective and realizing what an awesome position I’m really in. |
| I don't wanna say it's a message from words. I wanna say it's more like action. It’s my aunt. 'Cause she really raised me throughout my high school years. The drive that she has – the ambition and dedication she has – to enjoy her life and have a better life is something I always fall back on and be like, “If she can do it, I can do it, too.” |
| What my mom used to tell me: “Whatever you start, you finish.” |

Students were then asked whether conflicting memorable messages ever came to mind when they faced certain situations. All five said yes. They were subsequently asked which message they tended to default to, and why.

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| **Conflicting memorable messages** | |
| Everything happens for a reason | Instead of letting things happen to you, you need to go out and seek specific things you want. |
| It’s important to be doing the best and to be success driven. | Take a step back to rest. |
| Do what you love | Take it one day at a time. |
| Be humble | Say hi first |
| Live in the moment | whatever you start, finish. |

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| **Message s/he usually defaults to** | **Reason for choosing that message** |
| Everything happens for a reason | It’s comforting/still stuck in comfort zone |
| Do your best/keep working | Belief that working hard now will lead to things being easier later. |
| Take it a day at a time | Doing this and trusting the process ends up turning out to be aligned toward passion. |
| Say hi first | Loves people/wants to get to know them |
| Whatever you start, finish | Due to having started to hear that message at a very young age |

**Independence prevails**

Students were asked about their preferences toward independence or interdependence. Though they all acknowledged the importance of interdependence, all five admitted that they trended toward independence and that they found it hard to ask for help. When asked about what messages shaped those attitudes, four students indicated that it was due to their upbringing.

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| “I think it’s shaped by my upbringing and shaped by having to be more independent as a kid. Not even what my mom told me but just kinda what my mom taught me by not doing things for me. It’s definitely a fight of my own pride and from raising myself in a lot of ways and having to be independent. |
| Yeah. I think I get it from my dad. It’s a pride thing. There’s something about asking for help, I guess, to us, that just doesn't resonate. For example, he never asked me for anything, and I never really asked him. Say I need $20.00 for gas. He's not the type person that just gives you $20 every week just because. |
| “I want to say it's from seeing my parents. Sometimes my dad will make the simplest task, or maybe it's not so simple, but, a new task, and he wants to do it on his own. Maybe it's to save money, but sometimes I think it's just for pride. He'll just work and work and work and try to figure it out. |
| “Like I said, we were not the most secure financially growing up. I did a lot of work on the farm. I paid for anything I wanted like a cell phone. Anything like that I worked to get. I was taught independence. My dad has always said, “family will always be there, but after that, you’re by yourself. |

**Support system**

When asked who on campus they feel comfortable discussing non-academic struggles with, three students cited friends, but all student cited a faculty or staff member. A coach, supervisor and academic advisor were all included. Most students indicated that they felt like they felt comfortable discussing their struggles with the people on campus that they mentioned, and that those people were the best equipped to help them. However, several of them conceded that pride and fear of judgement or being perceived weak sometimes gave them pause when considering whether to confide in a faculty or staff member.

**What makes a message salient?**

To conclude the interview, students were asked what factors caused the messages they recalled to stick with them:

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| Trusting that their experiences shaped what they believe just like my experiences shaped what I believe. |
| I feel like when it comes to what I retain, I want you to tell me what it means to you and how it feels to you so I can comprehend and understand it and truly accept the message that you're giving me. |
| When I grew up watching my parents struggle financially and realizing I didn’t really want to do that. And so I took a lot of wisdom and ran with it and was like, “all right, let’s figure out how to do this.” And also, I trust people, and if they give me advice, I’m going to listen, because that’s just how it is. |
| Whenever I'm in a state of stress with too much on my plate and I don't know what I'm doing. The ones that help me solve that problem. |
| They apply or have a chance to be applied. |

**Discussion**

**Foundations**

Smith, Ellis and Yoo’s research had indicated that people who already have an underlying value that correlates to a situation are more likely to recall an applicable memorable message (337). Their findings also indicated that underlying values shape who a student wants to be, while memorable messages show them how to pursue their ideal self (338). Faith/God/Religion was cited as a value by all five participants. Determination was also a common theme. It would behoove those seeking to formulate helpful messages for first generation students to familiarize themselves with each student’s value system and tailor their message accordingly. Participants’ strong emphasis on religious values indicate that it would especially benefit advice-givers to explore their students’ views on religion and tailor advice accordingly. Furthermore, one study indicated that people who occupy places that lack strong opportunities for upward mobility are more apt to be heavily religious. ([https://dspace2.creighton.edu/xmlui/handle/10504/64442 12](https://dspace2.creighton.edu/xmlui/handle/10504/64442%2012)). First generation students could certainly fall under this designation.

**Parental Impact**

Parental messages recurred throughout the entirety of each students’ interview. For example, one student cited his dad’s messages for five different scenarios he was asked about outside of questions specifically asking about parental messages. Parental messages even indirectly intersected with messages students cited from other sources. For example, one student who cited her mom’s message, “everything happens for a reason,” also found solace during college from another message delivered by a community member: “There's always going to be so many uncertainties in life, but as long as like you keep seeking and asking God for help, then everything will kind of fall into place.” This message has strong “everything happens for a reason” undertones although it was articulated in a different light by a different person at a different time. Another student said, “take it one day a time” is the top memorable message that he recalls throughout the college journey. When asked who he had heard that message from, he explained that it had most notably come from his dad, but that coaches and community members had also shared advice along those lines. These findings suggest that it may be helpful for non-parental advice-givers to explore the messages students value from their parents and frame their advice around those messages. Good advice is good advice. And if it’s already lodged somewhere in their brain, only good can come from expounding on it.

Some other interesting findings emerged regarding parental relationships with college students, though they did not relate directly to memorable messages. Parents seemed determined for their kids to be happy, emphasizing that college could lead to a fulfilling job. This was encouraging as prior research from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute indicated that most first-generation students are seeking financial prosperity from their degree less than half of them are concerned with developing a meaningful philosophy.

Learning from their parents’ misguided notions was also very influential for some students. “You just need to go for things,” one student tells herself. This is in direct contradiction to the passive stance her parents encouraged her to take. Another student’s mom preached independence and self sufficiency, which led the student to ultimately develop the opposite philosophy: “Don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

**The back burner**

Interview answers revealed that advice was often shared that seemed to fall on deaf ears until students learned the hard way. This finding should be encouraging, people often give advice and see that it is not heeded. But responses indicated that when students were told something, then found out for themselves the hard way, it caused them to treasure that advice and conjure it up in similar situations down the road. Interestingly, they didn’t just recall the negative experience when facing similar situations, they remembered the message because of the negative experience. Thus, it stands to reason that imparting wisdom still pays off in the long run even when it appears to be disregarded at the time.

**Boiling it down**

Saavy advice-givers who are aware of the memorable message construct may be concerned with condensing their advice into memorable sound bites. However, this doesn’t necessarily need to be a concern. Interview responses indicated that observations or more broad conversations are internally boiled down into shorter mantras.Even though I defined the memorable message construct with the parameters of short messages, students took actions or longer messages and equated them to shorter messages that weren’t necessarily uttered word-for-word by the sources they cited. Multiple students gave a one sentence memorable message, then clarified that while the sentence encapsulated the sentiments they’d heard, the advice had been much more long winded.

**Irons in the fire**

All five students indicated staying extremely busy. Four of them attributed that to their upbringing. Interestingly, these four motivations were very different, though. One student was driven to facilitate opportunities for underprivileged students since he had felt disadvantaged himself. Two students said their experiences framed the opportunities they’d been given and encouraged them to keep pressing on and maximize college. For example, referring to his aunt, one student said, “The ambition and dedication she has – to enjoy her life and have a better life is something I always fall back on and be like, ‘If she can do it, I can do it, too.’” Finally, one student simply noted the message her mom had regularly imparted, “Whatever you start, you finish.” It is common for on-campus advice-givers to help students navigate the challenges of balance and avoid overdoing it. While it may be beneficial for on-campus advice-givers to help students explore flesh out their subconscious motivations based on their raising, the motivations that were revealed in this study seemed to galvanize the students in a healthy, positive way for the most part.

**Juggling conflicts**

All five students revealed that there were times when they faced a situation that caused them to recall conflicting memorable messages. Existing research from Kristen Lucas that focuses on parental memorable messages administered to low-income college students revealed contradictory messages that seem to simultaneously perpetuate the status quo and encourage social mobility (110). Messages that students cited in the present study seemed to fall along those lines, but they also seemed to balance each other out in a positive way. For example, though a message encouraging hard work may ultimately win the day, the message to take breaks and enjoy life still came to mind and helped stave off workahaulic tendencies. One student even reconciled his two seemingly contradictory messages, “do what you love” and “take it one day at a time.” He reflected that he sometimes wondered whether he was truly doing what he loved as he plugged along through college, contemplating a pivot towards more gratifying activities. Ultimately, however, he said that taking it one day at a time helped prevent the pursit of short-term self-gratification and led to more fulfilling long-term passions.

**Independence**

The beauty of college is that there are structures and resources in place to help students succeed. These resources don’t do students any good if they don’t take advantage of them. All five students’ admission that their upbringing made it hard for them to seek help was an important reminder that first-generation students often need an extra nudge toward seeking help. In fact, the students who had come to emphasize interdependence cited their on-campus mentors as the ones who helped steer them in that direction – and expressed gratitude for that paradigm shift.

Wang’s aforementioned study identified several students who confessed to lacking a mentor to discuss non-academic struggles and attributed their independence as the barrier which prevented them from seeking out such a mentor (351). In this study, however, all student indicated that they had a faculty or staff member who helped them navigate troubling non-academic matters.

In four of the five instances that advisor was someone they didn’t seek out but rather grew to trust that mentor based initially on their proximity. Work supervisors and coaches alike ultimately proved their wisdom day in and day out before students sought their advice. This indicates that first-generation students may benefit from an on-campus job or sport and should be nudged in that direction to solidify their support system.

**Making it stick**

A key facet of this study is to identify factors that cause messages to resonate with first-generation college students and ultimately be deemed “memorable.” Interestingly, the act of being forced to recall these messages seemed beneficial in and of itself. Students sometimes started to recall one message, then thought a little more and remembered one that they said was even more applicable. It seemed to be a useful exercise because it helped them articulate their experiences in their own mind. Students may ultimately benefit throughout college from being posed questions about how they became who they are. The self-awareness may subsequently equip them to play to their strengths and cover their weak spots going forward.

In analyzing the factors students said caused the messages they recalled to stick with them, two key themes emerged: experience and applicability. While these should come as no surprise, they should equally serve as a necessary reminder to avoid self-indulgent advice and truly focus on what will best serve the student. That being said, relating advice to your own experiences with vivid accounts is not self-indulgent. Rather, it shows students that you’re not just postulating but serving-up battle-tested insights.

**Limitations & suggestions for future research**

This study had a small sample size and thus does not have very strong external validity. However, the findings could certainly serve as a springboard to inform subsequent studies that further explore its suggestions. Furthermore, it is possible due to the conversational nature of the interviews that students felt led to provide certain answers. Perhaps a survey could be administered with similar questions so that they results could be compared to the oral responses provided for this study.

**Conclusion**

This study provided a comprehensive picture of the resilience of first-generation students while also further identifying the unique set of challenges they face. Findings can be applied to further empower first-generation students.

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