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FIRST GENERATION LAW STUDENTS:
BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

A Dissertation Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Education in the Department of Higher Education at the University of Mississippi

by

MELISSA L. JONES

August 2021

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ABSTRACT

A significant population of higher education students are first generation students; students who come from a home where neither parent has completed a bachelor's degree (Vasil & McCall, 2018). These first generation students experience a gap of education, knowledge, and support which creates a persistent problem of unequal access to higher education for first generation students (MacLachlan, 2017). This unequal access shows itself in barriers faced by the students coming from these first generation backgrounds of interconnected, heightened risk factors (Gardner, 2013).

This dissertation was completed using qualitative analysis to interview six first generation college graduates in the juris doctor program at the University of Mississippi School of Law. Using the intersectionality of theories from Tinto, Bourdieu, and Labaree, we are better equipped to understand these students. Tinto's persistence and self-efficacy, Bourdieu's ideas on socialization as related to cultural and social capital, and Labaree's emphasis on the democratizing benefits of an educated populace meld together in a lens through which to view these first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program. First-generation students fulfilling an educational pathway to the level of a juris doctor are uniquely situated to fulfill the democratizing benefits of an educated populace and can fill roles as mentors so desperately needed in their underrepresented communities. By reducing the barriers for these students, we can advance efforts of ethics, equity, and social justice in higher education for this populace.

This dissertation assessed the barriers to success for first generation college graduates in the juris doctor program at the University of Mississippi School of Law as well as the traits possessed by each participant that aided in overcoming these barriers. This dissertation in practice offers recommendations for practice and research based on the findings from the study including emerging themes of financial barriers, cultural barriers, fear and imposter syndrome, isolation, and lack of a legal mentor. A formalized structure of first generation success could be implemented to guide first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program in a manner that offers support and the tools needed to reduce the barriers for successful juris doctor completion.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Dru, I appreciate your encouragement and support in all ways, always.

To Victoria, you are the reason I have always worked so hard to pave the way. To

Aubrey Grace, your hugs, smiles, and inquisitive nature remind me why I am still working so diligently to pave the way. To my mom, you are the one who showed me the importance of life-long learning. Thank you for passing along your brains, determination, work ethic, and love of learning.

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Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Hutchens, Dr. Edmondson, and Dr. Ortwein. Dr. Hutchens, your insight was the determining factor in me pursuing this program. Dr. Edmondson, your example of continued education post-JD showed me this goal was achievable. Dr. Ortwein, it was the lightbulb moment in your class that gave me the idea for the lens of intersectional theory for this dissertation during a time when I was not sure which direction to follow.

Thank you to my mentor, boss, and friend, Billy Gottshall. It is your encouragement, support, and understanding that allowed me to accomplish this goal while managing all of the other facets of work and life.

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CHAPTER I: AN OVERVIEW OF BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Based on the number of institutions of higher education in America, both non-profit and for-profit, Americans spend substantial amounts of time, energy, and financial resources on higher education. Due to these significant investments, success in higher education is important. In American higher education, success is often defined as graduation or degree attainment. This success is particularly important in professional, applied graduate degree programs. “Doctoral and professional degree earners are among an elite group in the United States; barely 3.2% of the country has earned this distinction” (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). However, being accepted into graduate school is only the initial step in the battle for first generation students (Gardner, 2013). According to the literature, there are multiple ways to define first generation students. The population I studied are students who come from homes where neither parent has completed a bachelor’s degree. In my Dissertation in Practice, I looked at the narrow focus of perceptions of first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) regarding factors related to their academic success in graduate-level education at the University of Mississippi. The students studied were in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law.

First generation students are a significant population. Based on a 2011 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 50% of students in higher education are first-generation students (Hirudayaraj, 2011). When the National Center for

Education Studies reviewed their 2011 report, they focused on a cohort of high school sophomores. The college enrollment rate of the first-generation sophomores in this cohort was 72% as compared to their continuing generation cohort members of which 93% was enrolled (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Mississippi is a state with significant numbers of first generation and minority students. Mississippi Public Universities published an Enrollment Fact Book that reviewed fall 2019 enrollment. Of the 77,894 students enrolled in the system in fall 2019, African American students comprised 31.1% of the total enrollment (Institute of Higher Learning, 2019), yet they are 37.8% of the state's total population of 2,976,149 (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Looking at 2019-2020 enrollment trends from the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning at the University of Mississippi, of the 10,648 students with Mississippi residency that enrolled, 2,152 or 4.94% identified as African American (University of Mississippi IREP, 2020). Three hundred eighteen (318) resident students enrolled in the University of Mississippi School of Law in 2019-2020, but only 52 (6.11%) of those were African American (University of Mississippi IREP, 2020). African American students in Mississippi are overrepresented in the combined positions of first generation and minority students and have achieved a smaller portion of four-year degrees in Mississippi (Lounsbury & Datubo-Brown, 2019). Due to this situation, it is even more important to look at first generation college graduates pursuing a JD in the state of Mississippi and the barriers they face.

First generation students face multiple barriers and are at greater risk of not persisting or not completing a degree due to their lack of academic preparation prior to

entering higher education, being older, married, and working full-time while enrolled (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Many of them are financially independent from their parents and are single parents themselves (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Even first-generation students that are academically prepared for higher education still lack certain cultural capital from their families that affect their journey (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Cultural capital is the relevant skills, abilities, or knowledge that someone gleans from their familial experience which enlightens them to the commonly accepted overall culture (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). This cultural capital can represent the familiarity that an individual has with the dominant culture of an area, group, or even academic program (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These students face significant challenges not experienced by other students including barriers to accessing higher education, succeeding once they are enrolled, and also in completing the degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Add Imposter Syndrome, an internal feeling of not belonging or that a student's credentials are not truly worthy for access, and first-generation students have an additional layer of complications (Schwartz, 2018). Imposter syndrome can keep students from interacting with other students or faculty in the manner needed for a field such as law (Schwartz, 2018). Schwartz goes on to discuss the differences of law school as opposed to other programs including the extremely competitive, intimidating culture that requires connections to those in the legal field (2018). This Imposter Syndrome factors into Tinto's theories on retention and the research that determines the importance of interaction with faculty in and outside of the classroom (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Being able to interact with law faculty and gain

exposure to their work outside of the classroom is of significant importance to the successful development of a law student (Longwell-Grice, 2008). This interaction provides a skills-based, informal training to a variety of practice areas that is extremely valuable. A first-generation law student may not be aware of all of the arenas of law that are practiced. The interaction with faculty outside of the classroom aids in the development of a support network as well as a source of academic, social, and cultural capital. Law faculty are an invaluable source of mentors, particularly for first generation students.

Engle and Tinto (2008) assert an opinion that based on continuing research outcomes, first-generation status is itself a risk factor. Add that risk factor to being a graduate student wherein there is a constant battle to prioritize and make decisions, all of which are crucial for school, family, work, or a combination thereof, and the first-generation graduate student is exponentially at risk (Brus, 2006). Supporting Brus' idea, Gardner (2013) indicates that first generation students have unique characteristics that put them in a different standing and cause them to face significant challenges than their continuing generation peers do not face. Due to the fact that this population is significant and also has many interconnected, heightened risk factors, higher education institutions must address the barriers faced by such students (Gardner, 2013). Because there is such a variety of definitions for the classification of first-generation students, those labeled as such in this study were students who come from a home where neither parent has completed a bachelor's degree (Vasil & McCall, 2018). This is particularly significant because even parents whom have completed post-high school coursework through

completing associates degrees or technical training will still not be fully versed in the demands, rigors, and necessities of successful completion of a four-year university program or an applied, professional program such as a JD. Based on a study published by the U.S. Department Education in 2018, only four percent of first-generation graduates in their study sample had enrolled in a doctoral or professional program within four years after earning their bachelor's degree. Programs and correlative funding need to be developed to support the needs, inclusion, and opportunity for success for first generation and other at-risk populations (Gittens, 2014).

First generation students are entering college without the cultural capital from their families and are often unaware of what questions to ask or even how to understand the process of higher education. This causes a significant disconnect that requires persistence and self-directed pathways (Gardner, 2013). Without examples at home or from their recently completed undergraduate programs, first generation doctoral students do not know the path or rules of graduate education (Gardner, 2013). Oftentimes, they do not have the adequate academic preparation, solid financial resources, or familial support (Engle, 2007). They lack knowledge of financial assistance opportunities including how to obtain financial aid or renew student loans (Gibbons, Rhinehart & Hardin, 2019). Some first-generation students may not understand the difference between an undergraduate and graduate degree. They did not grow up in homes hearing parents speak of continuing legal education credits or writing a thesis or dissertation. They are left to figure out this mysterious lingo and world on their own, or by seeking resources outside of their families. They must operationalize networks of mentors, educators, friend's

parents, and community leaders to build social capital. This social capital is something that they may not even be aware that they lack or need. Social capital exists in the relationships between individuals that help to facilitate the transmission of necessary resources (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2001). There are certain qualities such individuals must inherently possess or develop. Tinto (2016) talks about persistence and self-efficacy. Students want to persist, overcome obstacles, and achieve their goals. They have to possess some foundational self-belief that they have the ability to achieve this goal of a graduate education even if they do not necessarily know how to accomplish it. Bourdieu speaks of the necessity of developed cultural capital through socialization. However, socialization and cultural capital are not often analyzed through the lens of graduate school students. Winkle-Wagner & McCoy (2016) suggest this lack of application to graduate school students leaves a significant gap in knowledge about graduate students that needs to be filled because graduate students are “exemplars of upward social mobility and may offer important insights about how to disrupt social reproduction.” Labaree (1997) speaks of the idea of democracy and the importance of the democratizing benefits of an educated populace. Certainly, first-generation students that complete their education to the level of a JD are uniquely situated to understand and fulfill the democratizing benefits of an educated populace. Furthermore, they can fulfill the roles of much-needed mentors. Students need to see educators and other professionals that look like them, that came from the same areas, and endured some of the same experiences to visualize themselves in these career and educational roles.

Currently there is a gap of knowledge, education, and support for first generation students. MacLachlan specifically asserts that there is a persistent problem of unequal access to higher education in the United States (2017). In assessing equity, ethics, and social justice we often look at the four As of access, affordability, accountability, and attrition. How can we, as higher education professionals, claim we are addressing issues of access, affordability, and attrition if we are leaving this large percentage of students to fend for themselves? We are not holding ourselves accountable if we are aware these first-generation students exist and do nothing to help them find the support they need to be successful in their educational endeavors. As research has shown, first-generation students interpret this lack of knowledge and support to be an actuality of faculty being less supportive and caring less about them than other students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Adequate support and preparation are critical components in access to and success in higher education (MacLachlan, 2017). These components serving as barriers can be alleviated through a strong support network and relevant programming on campus.

POSITIONALITY

Who I am as a person, student, educator, and lifelong learner has shaped my DiP. I am a first-generation student. I am the first person in my family to achieve a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, a juris doctor, and now a doctoral degree in higher education. My entire academic career has been one of uncharted territory with little to no guidance. I have been fortunate in that my family offered significant verbal encouragement and moral support for me to accomplish my goals. However, the ability to provide guidance and understanding based on personal experience was not possible. In addition to being

first generation, I was also a non-traditional student simultaneously working a full-time career as a self-supporting single parent. This enhanced my determination to succeed. The goals I set for myself were mine to achieve based on my own research, determination, resilience, and financial capabilities.

The younger of my two brothers began law school shortly after I did, also as a non-traditional student, so I provided a fair amount of guidance for him. I have been working on my education from undergraduate to my current program continuously since late 1999. During that entire time, I have worked at least one full-time job or a combination of multiple part-time jobs while also raising a daughter and now a granddaughter. Through my professional experience in the insurance, medical, legal, and now higher education arenas, the consistent thread I have seen is the importance of education. Every position I have held required some amount of educating others, oftentimes because of their lack of formal education or area-expertise. I have created resources where they did not exist and used creative problem-solving skills to fight for the ability to take classes and continue my education. I did not have the understanding or support, many times, even from my professors because my schedule was so complicated. I ended up taking graduate level classes and substituting them for many of my undergraduate classes just to make the schedule conducive to working a full-time career and caring for a child. I am currently working in higher education as an associate director for the Trent Lott Leadership Institute at the University of Mississippi and as an adjunct instructor for legal studies. The Lott Leadership Institute is an extremely viable location for a program that focuses on and serves first generation professional students. I want to

create resources and a support system for students navigating the uncharted territory of being a first-generation student with respect to graduate study. First generation students have additional barriers than other undergraduate and graduate students. There is a significant number of first-generation students that do not complete their graduate degree. I would assume that because a smaller percentage of first-generation students complete their undergraduate degree, then an even smaller portion begin and complete masters or doctoral degrees. My spouse, who I married after completing law school and being admitted to the Mississippi Bar, also works in higher education. He works with a different population of students, but serving in a parallel environment also enhances my personal life because of this added commonality and understanding. Even though he is not first-generation, he teaches a significant number of first-generation students so he fields many of the same questions I experienced as a first-generation student. His different experiences and perspective make him a reliable source of innovative ideas for problem solving and assisting students.

CARNEGIE PROJECT ON THE EDUCATIONAL DOCTORATE

This Dissertation in Practice is written to fulfill part of the educational requirements in affiliation with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). The goals of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate are to prepare leaders who can develop and apply practical knowledge to make a positive difference in their communities and institutions (Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate, 2014). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate has three organizing principles which are equity, ethics, and social justice (Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate, 2014).

As scholar practitioners, in the spirit of CPED, we must work to solve issues in the effort to continually advance equity, ethics, and social justice.

I have studied the narrow focus of perceptions of first-generation JD students regarding factors related to barriers and their academic success in professional, applied degree graduate education. These graduate students studied were in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law. I discussed connections between my participants and the CPED principles of equity, ethics, and social justice.

I. EQUITY

Equity as a goal in higher education is ensuring all students have the support needed for them to be academically successful. It is not about equality. Equality would signify making higher education the same for all students. That is not beneficial because each student is different. Equity is providing the support to meet students where they are, at each student's specific level of need, so each student has the ability to be academically successful. The 2019 report on the Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States provided an insightful quote about equity (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright-Kim, & Jiang, 2019). Stakeholders in higher education are looking for ways to develop the "evolution of a dynamic higher educational system that provides equity of opportunity while respecting the diversity of talents and gifts among us" (Cahalan et. al., 2019). All stakeholders in higher education have diverse talents and gifts. We have to use equity as a means to foster and support that diversity within higher education. High risk students, those that come from low socio-economic backgrounds and are first-generation students, are prime candidates for students that need equity in higher education. They are

less likely to complete their degrees, face more financial barriers, and have inadequate support systems. The report provides that “Growing stratification by family income sorts students in ways that profoundly affect their ability to develop their talents and earn a living wage in a global economy” (Cahalan et. al., 2019). Being a first-generation student is considered an at-risk status, a status that impacts the ability to start and complete higher education in a multitude of ways. Gardner (2013) notes that if all students were given the same access to the same resources and information, then there would be a better basis. No one would be using secret or insider information (Gardner, 2013). Higher education would be working to ensure equity for all students.

II. ETHICS

In a world where values and even language have shifting meanings, incorporating ethics in higher education is even more important. Higher education administrators and practitioners should feel the necessity of incorporating the lessons of ethics in the classroom so our students realize the ability to think globally, inclusively, and become actively engaged citizen leaders (Siegel & Watson, 2003). In addition to teaching skills or theories, we need to be concerned with the holistic development of the student. Students must realize that ethics are behaviors that promote and honor truth and integrity. Many students are being exposed to ideas and philosophies they have not seen before. Their comprehensive learning must be based on ethics as an integral part of higher education. They need to develop their critical thinking skills and conduct themselves in a way that is selfless, inclusive, accepting of diversity, and invested in their communities at large (2003).

First generation students are being exposed to new thoughts, ideals, and a previously unknown profession. The place they will learn ethics is in the classroom, from instructors and classmates alike. Instructors and students must be guaranteed academic freedom – the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn. Intellectual integrity as well as the respectful treatment of each other are all imperative. Higher education is a place of significant diversity where instructors and students from a plethora of backgrounds meet, intersect, and work together. For the environment to lend itself to the support of integrity and fair treatment so students have the opportunity to learn and grow despite their backgrounds, ethics are integral.

III. SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is the justice that focuses on the distribution of wealth and opportunities in society as they are afforded to or unattainable depending on socioeconomic background, race, or other statuses. Gordon, Elmore-Sanders, & Gordon (2017) more specifically described social justice work as work that will address inequality and oppression in its plethora of variations. Higher education, in its efforts to develop an educated, informed populace must address the issue of social justice. Students along with faculty must broaden their understanding of the power of inequality as well as ways to resolve it. They must think critically and assess the issues related to the diversity of different sociopolitical stakeholders (Gordon, Elmore-Sanders, & Gordon, 2017). Students on a college campus can be considered a representative microcosm of society with its diversity. Students are being exposed to diverse thoughts, ideas, and people during their higher education experience. They are meeting people from very different

backgrounds, opportunities, and ways of life. They must be taught about the inequality that another student may face because they are low SES, a first-generation student, or of a different race. Higher education should be a time of growth, acceptance of diversity, and the development of a desire to address social justice issues as they transition to adulthood. In seeking a more educated populace as indicated by Labaree, higher education must seek to address social justice issues.

In the effort to address social justice, the question must be asked as to how a more equitable, just, and respectful society can be created (Gordon, Elmore-Sanders, & Gordon, 2017). The time to develop and enhance interest and efforts in addressing social justice is through higher education. Students are experiencing a particularly meaningful time of development while they are in college (Gordon, Elmore-Sanders, & Gordon, 2017). They learn the lessons and habits that will shape their futures. The populations that primarily suffer the first-hand effects of a lack of social justice are lower SES, first-generation, and minority students. Doctoral programs, and law school in particular, are demanding and exceedingly complex (Esposito et. al. 2017). A first-generation student in a JD program may particularly feel that the opportunities necessary for successful law training and preparation are unattainable due to inequities. Without support and effective social justice programs, first generation JD students coming from low SES families will have an even harder time attaining the network and opportunities they need to progress successfully. This could be a significant, career-altering impact if not resolved. First generation, low SES students that are able to achieve a JD and pursue a successful career are stakeholders that have the ability to perform social justice work and offer support

based on their unique perspective. Therefore, we must ensure that our higher education institutions are critically considering social justice issues now and for the future. In the end, society as a whole loses in an instance of doctoral attrition. Certainly, the individual loses due to financial strains, feelings of defeat, and lack of a way to progress. The academy loses in that enrollment declines, but its reputation could also be tarnished if the attrition would have been avoidable with proper support systems. Society as a whole loses because individuals with higher levels of education are the individuals who are able to solve complex societal issues. Furthermore, when those individuals with higher levels of education come from an underrepresented minority or at-risk demographic, traditional structures of power can be beneficially shifted (Esposito et. al., 2017).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are several individual theories that, when melded together, are particularly insightful when looking at first-generation students. Tinto (2016) speaks of persistence and self-efficacy. Bourdieu (1986), speaks of the importance of cultural and social capital as related to socialization. Labaree's (1997) idea of democracy addresses the importance of the democratizing benefits of an educated populace. Even though these concepts were originally three separate ideals, when evaluating first-generation students, it seems imperative to meld them to have a comprehensive understanding of first-generation students if we are to advance the equity, ethics, and social justice in higher education as it relates to this specific student populace.

Tinto (2016), Bourdieu (1986), and Labaree (1997) all speak to theories that have not significantly shifted since they were introduced. Thomas Kuhn (1970) introduced

scientific paradigms and the paradigm cycle in his text. Based on the direction Kuhn (1970) gives in his text, we appear to be in a state of normal science where the paradigms stated by Tinto, Bourdieu, and Labaree, as described herein, have not yet shifted. They have remained stable as being applicable to our assessment of first-generation students.

Tinto's (2016) persistence and self-efficacy underscores the idea that students want to persist and achieve their goals. They want to overcome obstacles and possess the foundational self-belief they have the ability to achieve this goal of a graduate education even if they do not necessarily know how to accomplish it. They have to be, and are, resilient in their pursuit of higher education (Gardner & Holley, 2011). First-generation students, on some level even if only subconsciously, have personality traits or ingrained beliefs that they can achieve their goals. The motivating factor may be to provide additional support for their parents and siblings or to not have to work as many hours at a minimal level of pay and struggle as their parents have done (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

In persisting, first-generation students are able to increase and enhance their cultural and social capital, but according to Bourdieu, access to and the possession of capital is not evenly distributed in society (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). Some students bring cultural and social capital to college. Many first-generation students do not have this advantage. Therefore, college as an experience in itself becomes a significant opportunity for students to either enhance the cultural and social capital they already have or to begin developing cultural and social capital (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Thus, this is another barrier that first-generation professional students must overcome through dedicated efforts. The ramifications of unequal access to higher

education exist across the United States. Individuals must have at least a four-year degree to earn a living wage, and higher education has become a mandatory requirement before being able to obtain professional employment. Without reducing the barriers for first generation students, this population will not grow proportionately in these higher-level academic programs (MacLachlan, 2017). Bourdieu talks of cultural capital which is “culturally relevant knowledge, skills, or abilities” that serve as forms of currency in social settings and are acquired either through someone’s family/community or through education (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). Bourdieu also discussed social capital which is the capital that consists of knowledge, skill, and education. Parental education is a component of Bourdieu’s cultural capital (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016) that emanates from one’s family and their background (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). Cultural capital flows from their “encounters with certain social and cultural agents in society that contributes to” one’s educational achievement (Vasil & McCall, 2018). The cultural capital an individual possesses depends heavily on their network or group membership that supports a specific collective capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, a first-generation student/child of two laborers will not have the same cultural capital as the child of two physicians because the first-generation student does not have parents whom attended college and can direct and guide his higher education endeavors. However, this does not mean a first-generation student cannot acquire the necessary capital to integrate and succeed. It means that acquiring the capital that non-first-generation students already possess and employ as second nature is an additional step or barrier that must be overcome by first-generation students. “Different forms of capital in the educational

system work to ensure success for some students while constructing obstacles for others” (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

According Bourdieu (1986), social capital is not widely available to people uniformly. Social capital is only available to those who make the effort to acquire it though achieving positions of power and status. Social capital is directly related to an individual’s investment. Students earning a professional applied degree have the ability to gain social capital and move forward in a classed society if they expend the effort. If they do not expend the effort, they will not progress in class or power. Much of the effort and class attainment can depend on the student’s individual perceptions and persistence. For first-generation students pursuing professional applied degrees such as a JD, the acquisition of this social capital is even more important if they are going to be able to navigate this professional world. Taking a step back, in order to gain the social capital needed, a first-generation student must discover not only that they need social capital, but that it even exists in the first place. Gaining appropriate social capital is a process of gaining a conglomeration of individual as well as collective knowledge (McElroy, Jorna, & van Engelen, 2006).

In support of Bourdieu’s assertions about social and cultural capital, Gardner and Holley (2011) examined the barriers first-generation students must navigate and negotiate when pursuing a doctoral program. Students had difficulty developing access to networks because they came from a background that did not prepare them with the knowledge needed to pursue a college education. They did not understand the process to intentional network development. The pathway to obtaining a degree was full of financial barriers

making the journey for first-generation students even more difficult (Hirudayaraj, 2011). These financial barriers require many students to find additional sources of funding including jobs. These jobs increased time to degree and lowered persistence. Students felt a sense of dissatisfaction due to feeling isolated or that they did not belong. Many marginalized students in doctoral programs do not see themselves as intellectuals (Naidoo, 2015). Furthermore, Naidoo (2015) explains they are unprepared for the rigor and expectation of creating new knowledge. They are uncertain as to what the new knowledge would be as well as how to create it. They experienced imposter syndrome because they did not possess the social and cultural capital they felt was needed to compete, so they felt like a fraud that would soon be discovered. They are often disconnected to valuable campus opportunities including studying in groups, engaging in academic enhancement activities, and utilizing support services so they end up feeling isolated or disassociated (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). They felt they were trying to live in two different worlds while experiencing significant otherness (Gardner, 2013). As these students progressed through their programs, they also felt a broadening chasm between them and their families. Many first-generation students feel there is a lack of similarity or congruency between their families and communities and the college campus. Specifically, they feel “worlds apart” (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This is a further indicator of the isolation because of a lower cultural and social capital in the student’s familial background. First-generation graduate students have to utilize resilience to overcome the obstacles of communicating across this knowledge and experience gap, or even going so

far as to distance themselves from their families which enhances the isolation (Martinez, 2018).

The typical student support services offered on campus are not geared to many first-generation students. Many first-generation students spend more time working to afford their academic opportunities than they do going to class, talking with professors, studying, or interacting with other students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Some first-generation students are unaware that these crucial support services even exist, or factors such as imposter syndrome or a lack of belonging force them to not utilize the services.

Building on persistence and the development or enhancement of social and cultural capital, first generation students can develop into leaders that provide democratizing benefits to others through their advanced education. One of the three arguments for higher education discussed by Labaree (1997) is democracy. The success of students in professional, applied degree programs is important because of the democratizing benefits of a more educated populace. A more educated populace, specifically those that have attained a JD, have the ability and knowledge to reinvest in society. They are oftentimes the leaders and the problem solvers. They represent and assist others. In order for first-generation students to overcome the barriers they face and transform into those that provide others democratizing benefits only provided by a more educated populace, equity and social justice would be enhanced.

By using the conceptual theories of Tinto, Bourdieu, and Labaree as continuums in a process of educational attainment instead of standalone theories, processes to

evaluate, understand, and support the needs of first-generation students can be developed in order to enhance equity, ethics, and social justice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided my efforts to understand the journey of first-generation JD students and the barriers to success that they experience at the University of Mississippi.

1. What are the perceptions of first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) regarding barriers and successes related to their academic success in professional, applied degree graduate education?
2. How did these barriers and successes affect FGCG-JD students in their academic endeavors in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law?
3. What recommendations do FGCG-JD students propose to assist success to other first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program?

METHODOLOGY

The method of data collection conducted was qualitative research in order to identify participants based on interviews of 6 individuals. Individual interviews were beneficial for this participant because I was able to interact with the needed demographic of first-generation graduate students in the JD program - first generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD). I was able to develop a detailed understanding of the perceptions of a variety of such FGCG-JD students from both genders and multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. In discussing qualitative research, Merriam terms interviews as a “conversation with a purpose” (1997). Merriam’s

instruction on being adaptable as a researcher in order to discern how participants interpret and make sense of the world around them is extremely important and the purpose behind my selected research method of semi-structured interviews (1997).

The participants of the study were first generation students in the JD program at the University of Mississippi. FGCG-JD students are an understudied demographic. As a first-generation MBA and JD student, I take a personal interest and want to look for improvements that could possibly be implemented on campus at the University of Mississippi.

I worked with rising third year law students (3Ls) because of the current impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. By working with 3Ls, they have completed at least a year and a half of law school before the pandemic made any impacts on their studies, class attendance, or internship experiences. They have taken multiple exams and experienced the grading process unique to law school. Because the pandemic was an unusual interruption, I want to make sure the data gleaned from participants was not skewed in a way that makes the data inapplicable to future FGCG-JD students or unusable because the impacts of the pandemic were such an anomaly. I worked with these rising 3Ls in fall 2020, as they returned for their final year of law school and started preparing for graduation, the bar exam, and post-law school employment. Interviews were conducted throughout the fall semester.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted. Through developing open-ended questions and interviewing students that fit the first-generation JD student demographic, appropriate data was gleaned. By asking each individual open-ended question, it helped

students feel comfortable in answering candidly since it is not an anonymous survey. By having a loosely structured format for the interviews, students were able to assist in the direction of the subject matter, allowing topics and trends to organically develop. This loose structure also allowed for flexibility in the interviews as they progressed. Weiss instructs researchers to meet participants where they are when beginning an interview (1994). Interviewers must be flexible and build a bond that facilitates honesty and trust from the participant toward the researcher so a relationship between the two can endure the course of the research. This advice is particularly relevant when interviewing future JD candidates because in the practice of law, an attorney takes a client as they find them, Attorneys have to work with what they are given, and their current circumstances cannot be altered. The attorney has to gather information and try to resolve the issues going forward. This process is much like what the researcher intends. Knowing the current status seems to make more sense as a relatable starting point and also allows the researcher to keep that status in perspective as he is listening to and analyzing what the interviewee is stating. Working with first generation students and their perceptions of barriers to success for law school made more sense starting at their current status of their 3L year and then going backwards because certainly their perceptions now are somewhat different from their original perceptions as an entering 1L.

The selected structure allowed for the researcher to ensure personal perceptions were not imposed. Certainly, we must be cognizant that all JD students have different variances and nuances to their graduate experience. It is not a one-size fits all situation (Gardner, 2010). Any patterns in emergent themes need to be evaluated. When Glesne

discussed qualitative analysis, he discussed the need for interpretivism (2016). A researcher must interact with participants in a manner that allows background and contextual knowledge to emerge as a foundation of the data's interpretation. Glesne's interpretivism lends to the researcher being able to discern common patterns amongst participants (2016). In collecting the interviews, the overall procedure for this qualitative analysis included preparing and organizing the data, exploring and coding the data, building descriptions and themes in the data based on the coding method, reporting the findings, interpreting the findings, and validating the accuracy of the findings. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. They were audiotaped and then transcribed for analysis.

The following interview questions guided my efforts to understand the journey of first-generation JD students and the barriers to success that they experience at the University of Mississippi.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Is anyone in your immediate family a lawyer?
3. What has been your educational journey to law school?
4. Is there anyone that impacted you during your educational journey?
5. When did you decide you wanted to go to law school?
6. Did you complete any bridge programs for pre-law students prior to attending law school at the University of Mississippi?
7. How has your law school experience been thus far?
8. How has it made you feel?

9. Is there something that you would change about your law school experience?
10. Is there anyone that has impacted you in your law journey?
11. Summers are important for law students. Tell me about your experiences for your 1L and 2L summers.
12. What advice would you give other first-generation law students?
13. Why did you select the University of Mississippi School of Law for your law school endeavors?

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER I

In this first manuscript, I have studied the narrow focus of perceptions of first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) regarding factors related to their academic success in graduate-level education at the University of Mississippi. The students studied were in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law. I have discussed my Problem of Practice, my positionality, the CPED connection, my methodology, and my literature review.

In the second manuscript, I discussed the data gathered from the qualitative study.

In the third manuscript, I discussed the meaning of the data, its limitations and potential future recommendations for research as well as future recommendations for practice.

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CHAPTER II: DATA PRESENTATION

INTRODUCTION TO DATA PRESENTATION

First generation students are a significant population of students in higher education. They face multiple barriers and are at greater risk of not persisting or not completing a degree due to their lack of academic preparation prior to entering higher education, being older, married, and working full-time while enrolled (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Many of them are completely financially independent from their parents (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Some even offer a level of financial support to contribute to their parents' financial well-being. Even first-generation students that are academically prepared for higher education still lack certain cultural capital from their families that affect their journey (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). This cultural capital can represent the familiarity that an individual has with the dominant culture (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These students face significant challenges not experienced by other students including barriers to accessing higher education, succeeding once they are enrolled, and also in completing the degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Add Imposter Syndrome, an internal feeling of not belonging or that a student's credentials are not truly worthy for access, and first-generation students have an additional layer of complications (Schwartz, 2018). Imposter syndrome can keep students from interacting with other students or faculty in the manner needed for a field such as law (Schwartz, 2018). Law school, as opposed to other programs, involves an extremely competitive, intimidating culture that requires connections to those in the legal field (Schwartz, 2018).

Interaction with faculty in and outside of the classroom is crucial (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Being able to interact with law faculty and gain exposure to their work outside of the classroom is of significant importance to the successful development of a law student (Longwell-Grice, 2008). This interaction aids in the development of a support network as well as a source of academic, social, and cultural capital. Law faculty are an invaluable source of mentors, particularly for first generation students. This dissertation seeks to identify ways to enhance efforts to support first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) through a critical analysis of successful 3Ls' perceptions of the barriers to their success that they had to overcome.

DATA PRESENTATION

The data presented in this manuscript reflect the individual experiences and nuances of six first-generation 3Ls at the University of Mississippi School of Law with regard to their perceptions of barriers to success for first-generation law students. The interviews with these students are the source of all direct quotes or paraphrased examples presented in this manuscript. These students are from various locales across the United States.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Participant	Gender Identification	Traditional Student	Home State	Age Range	Notes
1	Female	No	Florida	29-32	ESL, first generation American
2	Female	Yes	Mississippi	23-26	Married
3	Male	Yes	Virginia	23-26	Homeschooled
4	Male	Yes	Alabama	23-26	First in his family to leave hometown

5	Female	Yes	Louisiana	23-26	Single parent home; High school pre-law bridge program
6	Male	Yes	North Carolina	23-26	Military affiliation; Minority

Personal Profiles

The interviews included questions that revealed demographic data about the participants including their home towns, familial backgrounds, high school and law school involvement, and other specific identifying factors. The participant group was relatively small due to the limited number of 3Ls that fit the criteria for the study and were willing to participate. Therefore, any descriptors which could potentially harm anonymity are not included in the reported data. Additionally, a pseudonym is assigned to each participant to protect anonymity. This subsection introduces the quoted participants with brief narratives about their positionality. These brief participant profiles are not presented as an exhaustive data presentation; as later sections will expound the data, findings, and recommendations.

Participant 1 is a non-traditional 3L from Florida who speaks English as a second language. She is first generation American. She attended public schools and then a local public university for undergraduate studies where she majored in political science. She worked through her undergraduate and Master’s degree programs while also financially supporting and caring for aging parents. Participant 1 knew from a young age, after some direct court exposure through a sibling, that she wanted to be an attorney, so she looked for opportunities that would allow her to attend law school while

simultaneously working in order to maintain her financial needs. She was also aware of the physical, emotional, and financial responsibilities her family placed on her and decided to relocate for law school so she could have the time and ability to successfully accomplish her goals. After a year at another Northern University, in a part-time program, she came to the University of Mississippi School of Law as a transfer student. Post-graduation, Participant 1 has multiple employment opportunities.

Participant 2 is a married, traditional 3L from Mississippi. She attended community college for a year at no expense and then received a two-year scholarship for her undergraduate program, so she attended the University of Mississippi for two years to complete her undergraduate career in a total of 36 months. Participant 2 worked two jobs during her undergraduate program to reduce financial barriers. She decided to attend law school because it seemed interesting even though she did not know much about it. She had no prior exposure to the legal field. Participant 2 selected the University of Mississippi School of Law because of the lower cost as compared to other schools. Post-graduation, Participant 2 has a six-month employment contract in Mississippi.

Participant 3 is a traditional 3L from Virginia. He was homeschooled and then, once high school age, he enrolled in a local community college for dual enrollment classes as he felt he was academically delayed. He started his undergraduate career at a large urban university, but then transferred to a small, rural, private university to complete his undergraduate degree. Participant 3 had a solid grade point average and decided to take the LSAT in February of his senior year of undergrad. He enjoyed writing and thought contract law was appealing. However, he did not have any more than a

surface understanding of law school and the practice of law. A point of evidence as to his lack of awareness was his late cycle application to law school. Due to his late application, his acceptances to law school were limited. He selected the University of Mississippi School of Law because it was in the Southeastern Conference, was affordable, and was one of his few acceptances. Post-graduation, Participant 3 has applied to a Master's in Public Policy program on the East Coast to enhance his knowledge base before pursuing a legal career in the field of civil rights.

Participant 4 is a traditional 3L from south Alabama. He attended public schools and earned his undergraduate degree in finance from a state school in his hometown where all of his family lives. Participant 4 was an executive officer in his university's undergraduate student body government and extremely involved on campus. When deciding what to do post-undergrad, he thought about attending law school because it seemed interesting. He did not have an exact awareness of what attorneys do, but thought he would try it. Participant 4 had some limited mentorship through a faculty advisor in undergrad that was an attorney. He received offers from multiple law schools, but selected the University of Mississippi because of the scholarship offer he received. Post-graduation, Participant 4 has secured a position at a regional law firm in Alabama. He looks forward to working with multiple practice areas so he can find his passion.

Participant 5 is a traditional 3L from a one parent household in Louisiana. She attended public schools and based on an interest in the legal field, attended a summer program for high school students held by the Louisiana Bar Association. Participant 5 attended a local state university for undergraduate studies where she joined a sorority and

majored in finance. She chose this school because it was geographically close to home and her parent's health was declining. She also received a significant scholarship. Participant 5 worked two on-campus jobs while completing her undergraduate degree in 3.5 years. Due to her on-campus employment, she established significant relationships with her undergraduate professors. When Participant 5 began applying to law schools, she applied to 23 schools because her financial status provided her with application fee waivers. She chose the University of Mississippi School of Law primarily because of the scholarship she received and secondarily because of the potential opportunity to work on the Innocence Project. Participant 5 was only one of two individuals that mentioned considering clinics or other experiential learning opportunities as part of the law school decision process. Post-graduation, Participant 5 has secured a position as in-house counsel with a large corporation in the mid-west.

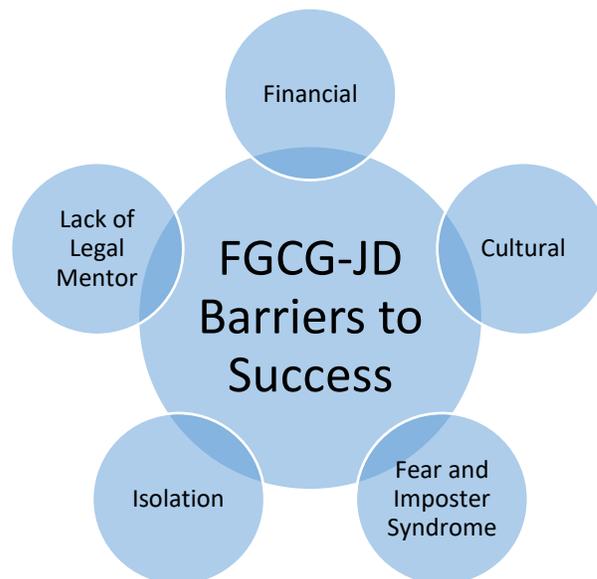
Participant 6 is a traditional 3L from a two-parent household in North Carolina. He comes from a minority background. He attended public schools and then a local state university for undergraduate studies where he majored in political science and participated in ROTC. He chose this school because it was geographically close to home and he carried significant responsibilities as the leader of his family. Participant 6 worked multiple jobs while completing his undergraduate degree. When Participant 6 began apply to law schools, he knew he wanted to practice law in the South so he looked for law schools in the South. He chose the University of Mississippi School of Law primarily of the potential opportunity to work in various skills-based clinics in the law school. Participant 6 was only one of two individuals that mentioned considering clinics or other

experiential learning opportunities as part of the law school decision process. Post-graduation, Participant 6 has secured a position as a faculty fellow with a law school in the western United States.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided my efforts to understand the journey of first-generation JD students and the barriers to success that they experience at the University of Mississippi.

Figure 1 FGCG-JD Barriers to Success



Research Question One: What are the perceptions of first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) regarding barriers and successes related to their academic success in professional, applied degree graduate education?

Financial barriers.

Each participant discussed financial barriers related to their academic success. Whether they received scholarships or not, all participants reported working multiple jobs throughout law school including jobs in non-legal fields in order to cover their basic expenses. First generation students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so working is not just a matter of gaining legal exposure as it is for other law students, it is a matter of survival. These first generation college graduates balanced competing priorities including academics, work, law school related internships, and family.

An additional financial barrier mentioned by multiple participants was the fact that they were living away from their hometowns for the first time. This was significant in that multiple participants reported that they contributed to their parents' financial well-being. This financial support was reduced or otherwise changed due to the law school enrollment. One participant noted that he was pulled in multiple directions between working part-time, attending law school, and having to travel between Oxford and his hometown to be physically present to assist with family issues. "I had to make enough money not only to eat and pay rent, but I also had to make enough to travel home many times because of family issues. That was not an expense I really took into account" (Participant 6, personal communication).

One participant left a full-time career to enroll in law school. "It was a big change going from a really good salary and a full-time career to part-time work and law school. I could not provide for my parents the way I had done previously. Now, I send them care packages when I can" (Participant 1, personal communication). The financial barriers

mentioned by each participant entailed a fear or the unknown and pressure from being totally self-supporting without even a family member nearby that could provide a meal, if needed. “My entire family lives in my hometown. If I was running short and needed a meal, I could always stop by. Here, I don’t have that option. It is all on me” (Participant 4, personal communication). Two of the participants reported that having a significant other did lessen the financial barrier, but in turn brought about other barriers. “I have a partner that I can rely on and he helps with splitting the bills, but he didn’t go to law school so he really doesn’t understand what I am going through. He doesn’t understand the pressure” (Participant 2, personal communication).

Cultural Barriers

As a transfer student, Participant 1 faced cultural barriers. As a non-native English speaker in the South, she spent a lot of time both during and outside of class explaining her name, her ethnic background, and the fact that she had a professional career before attending law school. “Because I speak to my family in my first language, people stare at me when I am on the phone between classes. When they hear my name, they make assumptions about my nationality” (Participant 1, personal communication). As a transfer student, she was culturally different from the traditional students who graduated undergrad and then immediately began their 1L year as a sectioned cohort with other members of the 1L class. They had the opportunity to bond from the first day and establish groups and cultures which were not easy to break into as a 2L transfer student who suddenly arrived on campus not knowing anyone in the state of Mississippi. “It took a while for me to find my people. I transferred in as a 2L and everyone already had their

friend groups and their study groups from the beginning of 1L year” (Participant 1, personal communication).

Two participants discussed the adjustment of their change in majority/minority status from their hometown. Two participants moved from locales where they were in the majority. Arriving in Oxford, they became members of the minority. They both experienced some of the noted treatment of minorities in the Southern United States. “Suddenly not only am I a black man, but I am a black man in Mississippi” (Participant 6, personal communication). Another participant mentioned that it was an adjustment moving to a locale where she was suddenly in the majority whereas she had grown up as a minority in a community that was culturally diverse. She embraced the diversity of culture in her hometown and schools, but missed that diversity on campus at the law school. “I grew up in a culturally diverse city where my friends were Pakistani, Lebanese, Jordanian, African...I miss all of the cultural traditions. Now I am here in Oxford and everyone is white” (Participant 5, personal communication).

Fear and Imposter Syndrome as a Barrier

Fear of the unknown as well as Imposter Syndrome-related self-doubt were mentioned by most participants. Many of the participants said they entered law school because it was a profession that appeared interesting. They did not have many preconceived ideas or really understand what law school and practicing law entailed. The difference in grading from undergrad and other graduate programs combined with the heightened competitiveness also created unexpected stress. Since these participants entered with all As for prior academic performance, they were dismayed by the grading

curve and the grades they initially received. One participant remarked “I was hoping that someone was not feeling especially well on exam day, so I could feel like I was doing better than at least one other person. Maybe they will be the F or the D” (Participant 5, personal conversation). Each participant was quick to say that their law school grades were above average. However, they were not the straight As they previously earned. The perceived less successful grades caused stress and anxiety which manifested in Imposter Syndrome and considerations of quitting law school. Parents did not understand why they were not receiving all As. “My parents wanted to know why I wasn’t making straight As like I always had. I tried to explain the law school curve, but they didn’t understand” (Participant 6, personal communication). Multiple participants discussed that, in the end, they had to lower their own self standards. They were all used to being high achievers and held extremely high standards for themselves. When their usual methods of studying and performance resulted in lesser grades, even marginally, they began to doubt themselves and their abilities. “I had to reset my standards because I came to the realization after exams first semester of 1L year that I was no longer a straight A student. I am a solid B student in law school. I really doubted why I was here and that maybe law school was not the place for me” (Participant 3, personal communication).

One participant decided that in an effort to build his network and experience base, he would apply for teams and other opportunities within the law school and the legal community. During competitions, he would receive positive, successful feedback, but each time was not selected for the final team. He made multiple attempts and received multiple rejections for boards/teams which exacerbated imposter syndrome. “I got a lot of

good feedback and encouragement from judges during the competitions, but in the end, I never made it. I never got chosen and I really got down on myself because it was rejection after rejection” (Participant 3, personal communication). This exacerbation also impacted his job search and eventually resulted in him considering other graduate programs after law school instead of entering the workforce because he has not been able to find a job. “I am hoping that the grad school program I have applied to pans out because otherwise I don’t have a job. I wasn’t top of my class so nobody really wanted to interview me at OCIs or anything” (Participant 3, personal communication).

Isolation as a Barrier

Whether it was isolation from family, a feeling of otherness, or inability to connect with faculty and classmates, isolation was a barrier expressed by each participant. For Participant 1, combining the factors of being non-traditional, first-generation, a non-native English speaker, and being a transfer student, the environment was initially isolating, including with professors. She experienced professors who did not seem approachable and did not seem to adjust their interaction from younger, traditional law students to older students with prior professional experience which caused additional isolation and a perceived lack of value toward experienced students. “I felt that some of the professors did not appreciate the fact that I am an adult with bills to pay, aging parents to care for, and left a career to pursue law school. When I draw on my experiences to make a comment, don’t treat me the same as a kid who has never had a job and has no real responsibilities and is speaking because they’re the gunner in the room” (Participant 1, personal communication).

Two of the participants found the adjustment difficult and felt isolated because, as a reasonably intelligent individual, family and friends expect you to do well and do not give a lot of credence to worries about grades and success because they do not understand the differences in law school and other programs. The support that was offered from friends in other post-undergraduate programs was not from other law students so “It almost felt superficial. You’re smart. You’ll do fine. You always do” (Participant 2, personal communication.)

Participant 4 moved away from his entire family for the first time. He did not start with a local group of friends, and it was isolating trying to share his experiences with his family when it took so much time to explain context and they did not understand. There was a growing chasm between him and his family as he began to experience a feeling of otherness from his family. “I love my family, but I got so tired of trying to explain the background of everything to them that I pretty much quit calling home” (Participant 4, personal communication).

Participant 6 relocated to Oxford from the Eastern United States. He knew no one and had never visited Mississippi prior to the first day of Orientation. His family did not understand why, as an African American male, he chose a law school in Mississippi. “They thought I was crazy and kept asking me why I would decide to move to Mississippi” (Participant 6, personal communication). He said his family were ultimately encouraging even though they did not understand much of his law school experience. Being one of only a few African American males in the law school, it took him almost a full academic year to find an organization to join to establish connections and develop a

friend group, which made that first year isolating. “It was hard. I spent almost my whole 1L year trying to find friends and an organization to join. Finally, I found BLSA and that is where most of my friends and connections start” (Participant 6, personal communication).

Participant 3 did not know anyone when he moved to Oxford so he was lacking an academic as well as social network. “I didn’t know anyone and didn’t really know much about law school so I didn’t really connect with anyone. I didn’t really feel like I could just go talk to my professors” (Participant 3 personal communication). He felt isolated and did not easily connect with faculty. His parents were valuable for verbal support from a distance. However, they did not understand the rigors and demands of law school. Furthermore, they were of the belief that a JD means someone is financially set for life. “They seriously said that I was going to be set for life because I was going to law school and that’s just not how it works. They don’t understand” (Participant 3, personal communication). Participant 3’s family was not the only family to perceive a JD as a financial success guarantee. Another participant had a parent ask her to co-sign on a home. “My mom said you’re a lawyer now so you can co-sign for us. We can finally get a home” (Participant 1, personal communication). “They don’t understand that I am not a lawyer yet and there are no guarantees. I am not physically there providing for them as I have always been. I could not have stayed and kept doing all that I did and been able to go to law school. I had to make a choice to move away, to a place where I did not know anyone and be far enough away from my family to pursue my own dream” (Participant 1, personal communication). As each of these participants increased their academic

experience, they discussed a feeling of otherness from long distance family members as well as local significant others.

Lack of Legal Mentor as a Barrier.

Each participant mentioned a lack of legal mentor as a barrier. While some had a former academic advisor that had previously practiced law, none felt they really had a consistent legal mentor they could approach for guidance. None of the participants understood the rigors of law school or knew what to expect prior to beginning law school. “Law seemed interesting and I thought I could do it. I didn’t really know much about what lawyers do” (Participant 4, personal communication). “I like to read and write, so I thought I could go to law school and then get a job sitting in a cubicle and writing contracts. It sounded like good, stable employment and didn’t include going to court” (Participant 3, personal communication). They did not know much about selecting a law school other than by cost, so they ended up at the University of Mississippi School of Law simply because of the post-graduation debt comparison with other law schools. “Ole Miss gave me a good scholarship so that’s why I am here. I didn’t really think about needing connections to get a job back at home after graduation” (Participant 4, personal communication). Only two participants mentioned clinics or other experiential opportunities as a consideration when selecting a law school. These participants did not know about networks with upperclassmen for outlines as important course study materials, about on campus interviews (OCIs), about how to apply for and assess internship opportunities, or about the connections one should consider between a law school and a future career and its locale. “I didn’t even know what they were talking

about when they said outlines. I can write an outline so I just assumed I was good. I was wrong” (Participant 4, personal communication).

The participants mentioned not knowing who to ask for advice and one even said, “I didn’t even know what questions to ask because I didn’t know how much I didn’t know” (Participant 4, personal conversation). Each participant mentioned that they felt a connection with some of the staff at the law school, but only one felt a strong connection with their law faculty. Only one of the participants reported ever having sat down with a law professor for a conversation or for guidance during their three years. There was a general consensus amongst five of these participants that their law professors were inaccessible and not anyone they felt comfortable approaching for advice. “They were all nice, but I did not click with any of them to feel comfortable going in their office and sitting down to talk” (Participant 3, personal communication).

Figure 2 Internal Components for Success



Tenacity, Perseverance, and Self-Efficacy for Success.

Some traits that emerged in each of the participants was that they were determined to make it through and successfully complete law school. Participant 1 is a tenacious young woman who is determined to succeed. She is also cognizant of the environment around her and seeks to educate others to the differences of identity. She is

very open and frank in her comments and assessments. “When I see an opportunity to educate others about instances of microaggressions, I do it. I can’t just let it pass by when it happens repeatedly” (Participant 1, personal communication). “If I can educate someone and save someone else from that experience, it is what I should do” (Participant 1, personal communication).

Each of the participants mentioned trying, applying, and pursuing opportunities, even if they did not specifically know what opportunity was best. A couple of participants said they believe in applying to every opportunity and figuring out what is of interest and what fits. “I applied for whatever I could. I didn’t have anything to lose” (Participant 4, personal communication). Each participant sought practical, applied experience whether it was through an internship, a law school clinic, or pro bono opportunities. They were unwilling to give up. Therefore, even though there were bouts of Imposter Syndrome, each of these participants had the tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy to keep pushing forward. Two participants mentioned repeatedly requesting more opportunities including permanent jobs from an internship supervisor. In multiple instances it resulted in post-graduation employment opportunities. “I told my supervisor that I was going to bug him every single day until he hired me because I wanted to work there when I graduated. He said if a position opened it would be mine. I got a job offer from them so it worked” (Participant 5, personal communication).

Developing a Place for Yourself.

Each of these participants sought to make their own way. One even went so far as to say, “Don’t give up. Don’t wait for a seat at the table. Make a seat at the table for

yourself” (Participant 1, personal communication). Even though they were making a place for themselves with little to no official guidance or direction, each of these participants embodied tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy. Each participant discussed having been very involved during their undergraduate career. “I am an overachiever. I don’t tell people no” (Participant 5, personal communication). Each participant continued a level of extra-curricular activity during law school whether it was on law journal, competing in advocacy competitions, joining Dean’s Leadership Council, serving in a student organization, volunteering for pro bono opportunities, or working a clinic. Some of their attempts for involvement on boards was not successful, but each participant demonstrated resiliency. “I tried out and I tried out, and when it didn’t work out, I started doing pro bono work and applied for clinics. I wanted to be involved and I wanted the experience” (Participant 3, personal communication). Each participant talked about developing their own friend groups including other similarly situated first-generation law students of limited means. By developing these groups and opportunities, whether they realized it or not, they were building crucial support networks that could lead to socialization and the development of cultural capital. They were each developing a place for themselves.

Research Question Two: How did these barriers and successes affect FGCG-JD students in their academic endeavors in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law?

Financial barriers.

Each of the participants had to figure out how to balance competing priorities of maintaining successful academics while also maintaining their financial needs. This often resulted in working multiple jobs, both on and off campus. Some of these jobs impacted their ability to engage in internships, and they had to choose how to navigate the need for legal experience and the need to support themselves. “I worked on campus and in an ice cream shop, but when I got the opportunity for an internship, I had to quit working one of my jobs. I couldn’t do all three even though I really needed to” (Participant 2, personal communication). Multiple participants mentioned also providing various types of support for family, including multiple long distance trips home, which also increased the financial barriers. Even though each participant was mindful of the cost of tuition and scholarship availability, they all needed to work in order to meet basic financial needs. Each participant expressed a heightened stress about finances due to being so far from their hometowns and extended family. They each mentioned that when they were at home, they could grab a meal with family if needed. However, that was no longer an option due to geographic distance. Each of them was the sole source of any financial support outside of any scholarships received. “It is all on me. I have a partner thankfully, that helps split some bills, but ultimately it is all on me” (Participant 1, personal communication). Constant stress and worry about finances detract from the drive, attention, and time required for law school.

Cultural Barriers

In adjusting to cultural barriers, participants noted having to find and develop their own affinity groups. They began to share less with family and non-law school friends while their relationships with friends they just met at law school deepened. “My family doesn’t understand what I am going through in law school. My friends here have become closer than family” (Participant 2, personal communication). Multiple participants said they believe members of their law school friend group will be lifelong friends. “Some of these people were in my wedding. I will be in theirs. In a few years, we will be gathering for each other’s baby showers” (Participant 2, personal communication). These participants had to balance their lived experiences of culture from home and learn the new culture they were facing in law school and higher education. Their home life and experiences were extremely disconnected from the norms, values, and expectations they were facing in the law school community” (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). In addition to cultural barriers based on race or ethnicity, these participants had to adjust to the culture that is predominantly upper-middle to upper class socioeconomically, and multi-generation students. They had to figure out what resources they could use to determine what they did not know and gain the needed cultural capital to understand and work with the dominant culture. “Thankfully, I found BLSA, but it was not until my 2L year so I spent that first year not really knowing what to do” (Participant 6, personal communication). Facing these cultural barriers not only isolates first generation students, but it also lends to their bouts with Imposter Syndrome.

Fear and Imposter Syndrome as a Barrier

Each participant had to face fear and self-doubt. They had to recognize and try to overcome Imposter Syndrome. Multiple participants mentioned support from law school staff as well as physical exercise as ways of attempting to dispel or manage fear and self-doubt. “I ran. When I was worrying and feeling like I don’t belong in law school, I ran until I was too tired to worry” (Participant 2, personal communication). Unfortunately, the participants mostly indicated that they did not connect with faculty, a valuable source of cultural capital in the legal arena. This lack of connection, which could very well have been influenced by Imposter Syndrome, lessened the rate at which many of the participants found internship and employment opportunities. Participants were fearful of appearing unintelligent and did not want to admit that they knew less than their classmates, so they did not go to their professors for assistance. It certainly impacted the lack of understanding and ability to build far-reaching networks, especially those needed by participants who planned to work outside of the Southeastern United States after graduation. “I didn’t really know that I needed to think about my law school with regards to the area I want to work after graduation. I just thought I want to practice in the south, so I will go to some school in the south” (Participant 6, personal communication).

Isolation as a Barrier

Each participant discussed their law school friend group, which is completely comprised of individuals previously unknown prior to law school. Each participant noted that their friend group is small, but their support is powerful. With the widening chasm from their families due to their increasing knowledge base and exposure, these affinity

groups became a lifeline for multiple participants. Isolation from non-law family and friends was palpable. Geographic distance served to enhance the isolation from emotional support that family could offer as many participants were several hundred miles from their families for the first time in their lives. Each participant depended heavily on their newly established friend group. Prior to establishing these friend groups, multiple participants were isolated and spent much of their time trying to figure out law school and how to be successful on their own without even a sounding board.

Lack of Legal Mentor as a Barrier.

Each participant mentioned a lack of legal mentor as a barrier. While some had former advisors or faculty that are attorneys, they did not have a close enough connection to feel comfortable being frank with them or even really knowing what questions to ask. “My undergrad advisor was an attorney and I bugged her with some questions during the application process, but there was a lot I didn’t ask because I didn’t want to look dumb” (Participant 4, personal communication). Therefore, many of these participants relied on themselves and their own tenacity to replace the absence of a legal mentor. The lack of a legal mentor made their progress, application strategies, job search, and possibly even their in-school experience and career trajectory different than it may have been otherwise. Without a mentor making an individual aware of opportunities or where they exist, those missed experiences can be significant. In a field like law, that is so heavily reliant on networking and prior experience, first generation students can be severely disadvantaged as compared to their multi-generational classmates who come from affluent families that

contain lawyers or have connections to them. Without a legal mentor, the needed applied skills and experiential learning opportunities can be elusive.

Tenacity, Perseverance, and Self-Efficacy for Success.

Each participant demonstrated tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy. Each of them chose to move away from their families and uproot their previous life to attend law school. Each participant undertook and successfully completed their legal studies. Even unequipped with mentors or a basic understanding of law school and legal practice, they assumed the rigors of a law school education. “I didn’t know what I didn’t know, but I figured as long as I worked harder than other people, it would all turn out okay” (Participant 4, personal communication). These participants persevered. They faced obstacles and overcame them. They adjusted to new cultural norms, learned how to navigate law school, and all graduated within their three year period. Completing a program such as law school without support or assistance is particularly impactful for first generation college graduates.

Developing a Place for Yourself.

One participant noted that during her tenure at the law school, she identified a lack of resources available to incoming non-traditional and first-generation students. Therefore, she developed and shared resources. “I didn’t really understand why there weren’t resources for the basics like what dentist to use or better places to live without a bunch of undergrads. When I asked, I was told to look online. Now, when first-gens come in, I share my lists with them” (Participant 1, personal communication). In order to give back to the greater community, she is active in legal clinics for under-represented

minorities. “When all of the ICE raids happened, I knew I could help because I speak Spanish, so I went and volunteered. I figured I would be helping and if I gained some legal exposure along the way, that would be good, too” (Participant 1, personal communication). She is also extremely involved in advocacy work within the law school. She worked to develop a place for herself within the community.

Participant 5 prioritized applying to multiple opportunities and trying to be involved to gain as much hands-on experience as possible through internships. Through learning skills, Participant 5 sought to develop a place that would provide long term impacts. One of these internships has developed into an opportunity for a legal career post-graduation.

Participant 3 was unable to find an internship, so he began volunteering for as many pro bono opportunities as possible as well as working with one of the law school clinics. “I constantly felt the struggle to make a place for myself because I don’t really fit in with many of the other students” (Participant 3, personal communication). Therefore, he perceived pro bono work and the gaining of skills as a way to establish his place within the community.

Participant 2 not only established a friend group within the law school of similarly situated students that became her support system, but she also applied for multiple internships, so she has worked on campus as well as in multiple legal internships to gain experience. She worked to create opportunities and a place for herself. This work was successful in that Participant 2 has a six-month contract for research work after

graduation. However, she is not sure what she will do when that contract ends, so she is still trying to make a place for herself.

Participant 6 prioritized gaining as much hands-on experience as possible through clinics and internships. He values the experiential learning opportunities he was able to complete and through learning applied legal skills, Participant 6 sought to develop a place that would provide long term opportunities post-graduation in his home state and other locations. One of these internships developed into an opportunity for a legal career post-graduation in yet another new locale.

Research Question Three: What recommendations do FGCG-JD students propose to assist success to other first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program?

Participant 5 encouraged FGCG-JDs to keep trying. “Students need to keep applying to opportunities and not take hiring personally” (Participant 5, personal communication). Many employers that offer on campus interviews (OCIs) are perceived to be opportunities only for students at the very top of the class or only available to those that are politically or socially well connected. Participant 5 encouraged students to give themselves grace in their studies. She explained that it is okay to change studying methods or to use different methods than other students. She experimented with various study methods due to never having had to study prior to law school. Participant 5 also wanted other FGCG-JDs to not doubt themselves. “You are in law school through hard work and perseverance, and even if you feel like you don’t belong, you do” (Participant 5, personal communication).

Participant 4 encouraged FGCG-JDs to think outside of the box for resources. “I found resources in unexpected places including during this research interview” (Participant 4, personal communication). Participant 4 said a lesson he learned was to not worry about or be fearful of sounding dumb. “Go ahead and ask the questions. Work hard because what you put in significantly impacts what you get out of an experience particularly law school” (Participant 4, personal communication).

Participant 2 indicated a need for attorney mentors to be assigned to first generation law students, so they have a built-in network to help acquaint FGCG-JDs with resources that they are not even aware that they need. She perceived a structured mentor program as being a way to make significant impacts to improve access to opportunities for the first generation community within the law school.

Participant 1 said she was reminded quite often that because of her minority status there would be barriers. Yet, there were not resources available to reduce those barriers. Therefore, she performed research, developed resources, and shared them with other first-generation students. She also expressed disappointment in the resources that did exist because they did not serve to reduce barriers. “When pairing incoming students with upperclassman mentors, if it is based solely on ethnic background instead of areas of interest or position in life, they may not have any commonalities and not have the most productive mentor-mentee relationship” (Participant 1, personal communication). Furthermore, they may not expand their understanding or cultural capital if they are only exposed to other students that are ethnically similarly situated. Therefore, Participant 1 encouraged FGCG-JDs to become resources for other FGCG-JDs. “Share the knowledge

gained from your individual path, so others may find the resources they need. Advocate for others so the barriers may be reduced” (Participant 1, personal communication).

Participant 6 said that the law school needs to have better access to boards. He found board participation to be very important to prospective employers, but noted that if students had not had previous exposure during high school or their undergraduate program, their chances of gaining a spot on a board would be slim to none. He described his board participation as lucky due to his lack of prior exposure. Participant 6 also encouraged other first generation students to “Find people and ask as many questions as you have” (Participant 6, personal communication). He said whether a student needed to find a professor, a staff member, or a student organization with upperclassmen, go there and find those people. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Making a self-directed path, “First generation students must imbed themselves in conversations and organizations” (Participant 6, personal communication).

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER II

First generation students are a significant population of students in higher education and face multiple barriers that put them at greater risk of not persisting or not successfully completing a degree. This manuscript discusses the data gathered from six interviews with first generation college graduates in their third year of law school. The themes that emerged and served to guide the discussion were barriers related to finances, culture, fear and Imposter Syndrome, isolation, and lack of a legal mentor. The themes contributing to the success of the respondents were personal attributes including tenacity,

perseverance, and self-efficacy which led to each participant working to create a place for themselves.

The third and final manuscript will use the themes that emerged from the research that I have discussed in manuscript two. Based on these themes, manuscript three will contain proposed solutions to the barriers to success for first-generation college graduates enrolled in a juris doctor program (FGCG-JD) at the University of Mississippi School of Law. Manuscript three will also present recommendations for future research related to supporting first-generation college graduates enrolled in a juris doctor program (FGCG-JD) at the University of Mississippi School of Law in their efforts to overcome barriers to success.

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CHAPTER III: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students that have earned a doctorate constitute about 3.2% of the population in the United States (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). Even though first generation students comprise a significant portion of higher education, an extremely small number are earning advanced degrees such as doctorates. Because many do not continue on to graduate degrees, they still do not have the opportunities of other graduates. We live in a world where advanced education beyond a bachelor's degree is necessary for social and economic mobility. However, by not comprehensively supporting first generation students, we are missing a significant portion of the population that could earn these advanced degrees and reinvest in their communities as members of an educated populace (Labaree, 1997).

First generation students are entering higher education without the necessary cultural capital from their families. Therefore, as the data in this qualitative study showed, they are either having to self-direct or develop and operationalize resources for capital outside of their families. This lack of capital and resources for developing it can leave a significant populace isolated and unable to achieve the goals and skills necessary to become mentors for other first generation or at-risk individuals.

This dissertation is comprised of three manuscripts which use qualitative method to explore barriers to success for first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) at the University of Mississippi. The first manuscript discusses the

barriers experienced by first-generation students as well as the multitude of factors that increase their standing as an at-risk population. It contains my positionality personally and professionally on the problem of practice. Manuscript one also contains the CPED connection, the conceptual framework, the research questions, and the methodology utilized. Manuscript two contains the presentation of data that emerged from the three research questions. Manuscript three includes a detailed analysis of the findings of the study as well as limitations and recommendations for future research and recommendations for practical implementation.

FINDINGS

This section of manuscript three presents the findings that evolved from the analysis of three research questions related to the barriers to success for first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program. This manuscript includes findings presented as the answer to research questions, discusses limitations, and concludes with recommendations for future practice and research. As Gardner (2013) noted, first-generation students in doctoral programs tend to be drawn to applied fields. The practice of law is an applied field that is important for both the future practitioner as well as society at large. Therefore, we must reduce the barriers these first generation students experience.

Research Question One Findings: Perceptions of first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program (FGCG-JD) regarding barriers and successes related to their academic success in professional, applied degree graduate education

Financial barriers.

This group of participants was atypical from many other first generation students in that they were able to obtain sizeable scholarships for both their undergraduate education and for law school to reduce financial barriers with regard to tuition. However, each participant expressed the need to work, often multiple jobs, during the course of law school in order to meet minimum financial responsibilities for themselves and others they help support. More than a third of first generation students that receive their doctorate rely solely on their own financial resources during enrollment (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Because of this, the post-graduation debt load of most first generation students is considerably higher than that of multigeneration students. All participants interviewed mentioned the lower tuition cost at the University of Mississippi School of Law as a considerable factor in their final school decision. First generation students as a whole do not have the knowledge base or guidance to know the nuances of financial aid and how to manage debt loads when considering their law degree. “A four-year degree is now held to be essential for access to employment paying a living wage” (MacLachlan, 2017). First generation students enrolling in law school want to earn more than a living wage. Oftentimes they have seen their families struggle and want to do everything within their control to live differently. They want greater opportunities and increased job security (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

The data revealed that this group of participants, like many other first generation students worked multiple jobs to cover basic expenses. Each of them worked and were very involved during their undergraduate career while maintaining all As. However,

working, maintaining high grades, and being very involved are more difficult once in law school, particularly when balancing a field-related internship with a non-field-related paying job. Many of these students were living away from their hometowns and families for the first time, so they could not access even minimal support from family if their finances were short. They were their sole source of support. The students that provided some level of financial assistance for their family members felt increased stress from that financial responsibility. Leaving a fulltime career to return to school was a significant impact on one participant. The inability to financially contribute to family while balancing academics and trying to meet their own basic needs was definitely a barrier. Families who were used to receiving support did not understand the decrease and many seemed to perceive being in law school as a state of already having attained status and financial security.

Cultural Barriers

First generation students are often older, non-traditional students from minority backgrounds. Some first generation students may be non-native English speakers that live in a locale ripe with individuals sharing their same cultural heritage. However, when moving to the deep South as a non-native English speaker, there can be significant cultural barriers. Others may not understand your accent or vice versa. Professors, in an attempt to say a name correctly, may draw more discomfort and attention than is necessary which in turn emphasizes the cultural barrier instead of making a student feel comfortable or valued. “A professor isn’t going to spend five minutes trying to correctly pronounce Brittany. By repeatedly saying my name, class is interrupted and I feel more

isolated and otherized” (Participant 1, personal communication). Transfer students that have learned the culture of one school and then move to another have a steep learning curve as they enter late and have to start anew as it seems like others are three steps ahead. This situation can enhance feelings of marginalization. There is a lack of student diversity in programs such as law school (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Furthermore, first generation students face more discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic background, and gender (Vasil & McCall, 2018). Other participants in this study felt the shift moving from a hometown where they were in the minority to moving to a locale where they were the cultural majority. The data gleaned from this qualitative analysis showed that being unable to break into the new culture and feel comfortable was a barrier as they sought comforts such as different ethnic foods and worship opportunities. In addition to these different cultural barriers, the fact of being first generation or from “uneducated families” has a significant impact on being able to operationalize support systems to gain cultural and social capital needed to lower the cultural barriers (MacLachlan, 2017).

Fear and Imposter Syndrome as a Barrier

Esposito (2017) referred to Imposter Syndrome as being the evil twins of perfectionism and doubt. Each of these participants expressed having previously set high standards for themselves which was supported by their prior academic successes. They continued these high standards upon entering law school. However, once they received their grades at the end of their first semester of law school, doubt set in and those perfectionist tendencies wavered. Multiple participants mentioned feeling out of place or lacking in comparison to other classmates. They wondered if they would measure up and

be able to be as confident and successful as their classmates appeared. Some of them talked about putting on a brave face and pushing forward despite their self-doubt. Esposito (2017) likened this scenario to playing a part and wearing a mask. Not only are these students facing cultural barriers in the new environment of law school and having to adjust there, but they are also having to adjust to the expectations of their families, so in many instances they may feel like they are wearing two masks. They are living the differences between their two worlds which can increase fear and Imposter Syndrome.

Isolation as a Barrier

Each of the participants discussed feeling isolated at times during their law school journey due to their first generation status. They were surrounded by a multitude of students that are multigenerational who did not have the same barriers such as having to work while in law school to meet basic needs. This situation creates isolation between classmates. “Sheer isolation” was experienced (Esposito, et. al., 2017). These participants were fortunate to have family members who encouraged them. However, because these family members do not truly understand the law school experience and the particular demands as a first generation law student, the experiences cannot be completely shared with the people that should be closest. Frustrations abound when trying to explain fear about grades, competing responsibilities, and the rigors of law school to family because family members have historically seen that individual as one who is intelligent, competent, and successful, so they expect the journey for the student to be easy. Each participant said their family was mostly supportive even when they did not understand. This is a consistent finding as discussed by Holley & Gardner (2012). Even though that

support exists, being a first generation college graduate pursuing a juris doctor is an isolating journey at times.

Lack of Legal Mentor as a Barrier.

Much of higher education and professional career fields are comprised of men of European heritage from middle to upper socioeconomic or privileged backgrounds (MacLachlan, 2017). This makes it even more difficult for individuals that do not fit those parameters to find a mentor. Individuals tend to want mentors they can connect with and have commonalities with, so to have legal academic mentors of such a standardized status, it becomes even more difficult for students to approach a potential mentor that seems so different (MacLachlan, 2017). Not having these mentors impacts the career trajectory for these students. Mentors can share ideas, career options, or segments of the legal practice previously unknown to a student. They can assist with networking and referrals as well as interview preparation or exposure in the field. Legal mentors are also valuable when undertaking the academics of law school. They have succeeded in the field and can offer the wisdom and lessons learned from experience. An additional component to the barrier of not having a mentor is not knowing who to ask to find one. Gardner (2013) noted that not only do first generations not know the questions to pose, they do not know what resource to approach. This increases the barrier to finding and utilizing a mentor.

Tenacity, Perseverance, and Self-Efficacy for Success.

First generation students are more likely to not achieve their original educational goals, or they take longer time to degree completion (Gibbons, 2019). Therefore, those

that are successful and complete their original educational goals demonstrate extreme tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy. They overcome almost insurmountable odds. While some of the literature indicates that first generation students are seen as having a lack of ambition about further education, I found the participants in this qualitative study to be extremely ambitious about furthering their education (Vasil & McCall, 2018). The data showed that they may not know the easiest or best route. However, whatever they may lack in awareness they make up for in tenacity and perseverance. Each of these participants pushed forward no matter the obstacles or self-doubt. All six will successfully graduate at their original intended date.

Developing a Place for Yourself.

Multiple participants in this qualitative study mentioned feeling that they had to fight for a place. Due to the lack of legal connections and lack of prior experiences such as mock trial, participants tried out for many boards, interviewed for many internships, and tried to find ways to build legal connections. In addition to the stress related to academics, they also had to face stress related to not being part of the mainstream, multigeneration students that had opportunities, internships, and career options waiting for them. Preparing for board try-outs such as trial advocacy with little to no experience as compared to multigenerational students from private schools that had been involved in mock trial for several years was difficult. On campus interviews were reserved for students at the top of the class, so many of these participants had to figure out avenues to gain internships and jobs on their own. They had to discover and create their own opportunities oftentimes with little to no support or background knowledge. One

participant said that she refused to accept no as an answer and she forced her way to the table to have her own place.

Research Question Two Findings: How these barriers and successes affect FGCG-JD students in their academic endeavors in the JD program at the University of Mississippi School of Law

Financial barriers.

Each of the participants have to work to meet their basic needs. Many of the jobs available are outside of the legal field due to the participants not having any prior legal experience. Therefore, FGCG-JDs have to either sacrifice opportunities to gain legal experience in order to meet basic needs or add legal internship opportunities on top of the growing list of other responsibilities being juggled. First generation students have to choose opportunities that they even have the ability to apply for because internships, particularly those in other areas, come with their own expenses of travel and additional housing. These financial barriers mean a FGCG-JD has to sacrifice time for studying and academic endeavors in order to work. Their focus is split between academics and trying to meet basic needs including housing and food. Because many FGCG-JDs are also supporting children or other family members, the financial barriers can cause the need for increased debt loads through loans. The stress that comes from an increased debt load and the pressure to perform to gain future employment also exacerbates this financial barrier as FGCG-JDs try to plan for the unforeseen during their academic journey.

Cultural Barriers

First generation students are significantly from minority backgrounds that also lack social and cultural capital. Institutions of higher education still reflect much of the culture of educating upper socioeconomic students from non-minority backgrounds (Brus, 2006). Upon entering law school, a field that has been historically dominated by white males from prominent, affluent families, first generation college graduates often experience a form of culture shock. Used to being known as an intelligent person to whom academics came easily, they are suddenly in an environment where their names or appearance or lack of social and cultural capital become apparent and set them apart. In addition to facing these differences as well as the unforeseen rigors of law school, these participants also had to assess their gaps in knowledge and exposure while simultaneously trying to fill the gaps. The cultural barriers of speaking English as a second language or coming from a community compromised significantly of a homogenous minority to joining law school where your family connections, last name, or social status grant opportunities can be quite jarring.

The participants in this qualitative study had to figure out what resources they could use to determine what they did not know and gain the needed cultural capital to understand and work with the dominant culture. These cultural barriers add another layer of obstacles and frustration to first generation students.

Fear and Imposter Syndrome as a Barrier

Fear of failing or feeling guilty are common components of the Imposter Syndrome experienced by first generation students (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Multiple

participants mentioned their fear of failure as law school was different than any other educational coursework they had previously pursued. When they did not earn all As as they previously had in other coursework, they began to feel guilty about their lower level of performance, guilty that they had left their families to pursue the coursework, and that maybe they did not belong. Multiple participants had to reassess their personal beliefs about their intellectual ability and compared themselves to multigenerational students from law families. There were instances where Imposter Syndrome impacted their mental state and caused self-isolation. Individuals that progress through life and graduate high school believing that they are intelligent and make the best grades, but then join law school only to realize they are in a highly competitive environment where they are not necessarily the most intelligent, can have a significant impact. First generation students are thrust into an environment they do not anticipate nor understand, one that is significantly different from anything they have ever experienced. Students begin to feel as if they do not belong. They do not have the experience, knowledge, or connections that their classmates have so they begin to feel as if they are lesser or a fraud that will be discovered. Imposter Syndrome plays a significant role for these students. In this competitive environment they do not share these struggles and end up experiencing bouts of self-isolation.

Isolation as a Barrier

When first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program experience isolation as a barrier, they further hinder their ability to develop the social and cultural capital needed. Not clicking with their faculty members enhances isolation as a barrier

because the students isolate from potential mentors that could assist with their social and cultural capital development. The academic and developmental rigors of law school are such that students that isolate end up even further behind in their development.

When students isolate from faculty, they jeopardize being able to find a mentor as well as their exposure to opportunities to learn more about various facets of the legal field. This can cause a decrease in networking opportunities and academic struggles can be greater. Academic struggles can turn into a cycle of academic underperformance and isolation wherein students that are not performing academically well and do not seek help can appear disengaged from their coursework or lacking the ability to perform, which further reduces a faculty member's willingness to intervene or share opportunities for exposure. This situation will impact the student and possibly increase their isolation.

First generation students have a tendency to isolate from non-law school friends and family because they do not understand what the student is enduring. Without walking the path through law school, it is impossible to truly explain the journey, expectations, and feelings a first generation college graduate in a juris doctor program experiences. Furthermore, until they have law friends that are similarly situated, first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program may even feel isolation from classmates who do not have the same experiences of having to work, balance outside responsibilities, and manage a family. First generation students may often times push through and make it appear as if everything is copacetic. However, they are dealing with a system that can isolate some students while elevating other students over the first generation college graduate in a juris doctor program (Weiston-Serdan, 2009).

Lack of Legal Mentor as a Barrier.

First generation college graduates in a juris doctor program often do not initially understand the importance of networking with faculty as well as other students. Multigenerational students from law families can provide as much exposure to the needed professional network as professors. Because these first generation students are not aware of that, it may be beneficial for faculty to intercede and help these first generation students connect (Howard, 2017). Faculty that were not first generation students may not understand the positionality of a student that either is not aware of the importance of networking and involvement or has to sacrifice networking and involvement to meet other responsibilities outside of school. Some professors may see the lack of knowledge or involvement as disinterest or lack of engagement and ambition in the field. This could result in a “chilly climate” which makes it even more difficult for first generation students to connect to the faculty they need as legal mentors (Brus, 2006).

Tenacity, Perseverance, and Self-Efficacy for Success.

As is typical of first generation students, these participants took significant risks to continue their education and overcame obstacles. Many sacrificed time with their families, opportunities for additional income, and even personal time to pursue their goal of a law school education. They experienced setbacks in family struggles and in their grades as they adjusted to the law school curve. A couple of participants mentioned missing class or much-needed study time to travel back home multiple times to assist with family issues. These sacrifices in combination with balancing academics, family responsibilities, work, and internships all demonstrate high levels of tenacity,

perseverance, and self-efficacy in these participants. These first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program used these attributes to continue moving forward on a path to successful law school completion. Their grades may not have been straight As, but they all reported completing their coursework with grades that are above average.

Developing a Place for Yourself.

Each of these participants worked to develop a place for themselves within this new law school environment. In working to develop a place for herself, one participant evaluated the gap in supportive resources for first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program, so she developed resources that she could share with other FGCG-JDs. She used her organizational and communication skills to volunteer with clinics working on emergent issues in the minority community. She advocated for other minority students and set the example on handling microaggressions. She made a place for herself through her volunteer and advocacy opportunities which enhanced her academic experience in applying skills.

Each of the participants spoke of working in clinics, volunteering for pro bono cases, applying for board and other advocacy opportunities, as well as working internships. They all had the drive to not only gain opportunities to apply what they were learning in the classroom in a tangible way, they all saw contributing to other underrepresented communities as a chance to develop a place for themselves. They each demonstrated their dedication to giving back as an integral part of establishing their person in the law school space.

Research Question Three Findings: Recommendations FGCG-JD students propose to assist success to other first-generation college graduates enrolled in a JD program

Each participant had obviously thought about and also implemented some self-developed solutions to help support other first generation college graduates in the juris doctor program. Even though these participants had faced adversity, they were all willing to help other similarly situated students. Labaree discussed the importance of democratizing benefits of an educated populace. These first generation college graduates were already unknowingly living those ideals and bestowing benefits as they reached out to assist others.

The participants discussed tenacity and continued attempts to gain the knowledge and experience they felt they needed. They did not give up, and used their own experiences to advise other similarly situated students who were considering law school. They all demonstrated working hard and the determination to overcome adversity. Where they identified gaps, they performed research, developed resources, and shared them with other first-generation students. They became mentors while they were still trying to find their own way.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This section aims to identify and discuss some limitations of the study as well as produce recommendations for future research. This research began in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the results and perceptions of students that completed law school in its entirety prior to the pandemic or those that complete law school in its entirety post-pandemic may have very different experiences and the data may differ from

this qualitative study. Due to COVID-19 and the move to virtual or web-based classes, first generation students that regularly report isolation as a facet of the first generation experience may feel even more isolated or disconnected. Findings from this qualitative study support other reports that mental health issues have increased in students during the pandemic and have impacted first generation students enrolled in law school.

First generation students are typically older students that are married. The participants of this study were primarily traditional age law students. Therefore, that could have impacted their connection with their professors. Older students may feel more connected to professors due to the closer ages or professional career experience. I would think an appropriate study going forward would be to look at the experiences of younger first generation students as opposed to older first generation students as we seek to better understand this particular population of first generation students involved in graduate-level work. Do the differences in life experience that come with age impact their higher education journey differently?

The participants of this qualitative study were all primarily academically prepared. They came from sufficiently performing high schools or supplemented their high school experience with dual enrollment classes. They all earned undergraduate degrees in rigorous programs such as finance and political science. However, the data showed that each of them lacked cultural capital and their undergraduate experience did not provide the much-needed exposure that would have better prepared them for the environment of law school.

The participant group that responded to this qualitative study was less than ten students that are primarily traditional law school ages. Each of these students except one alluded to battling Imposter Syndrome. The one student that did not reference Imposter Syndrome was over 30 years of age and previously worked a full-time professional career prior to coming to law school. Did her age and life experience play a factor in not mentioning that she experienced any bouts of Imposter Syndrome? Due to the size of the group and homogeneity of age I would not generalize this study broadly without additional research participants of a broader age range.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

First generation students have more at stake and generally risk more in their professional and personal lives to pursue advanced education (Vasil & McCall 2018). Therefore, we must ensure their access to information, networks, and support to increase their opportunities for success. Gardner (2013) asserted that if all students were given access to the same information and resources, then there would not be privileged information for only select groups of students. The data from this qualitative study indicated that ensuring that all students have the same access to the information prior to beginning law school could reduce at least some barriers experienced by first generation students. I will discuss some programmatic opportunities to address the needs of FGCG-JD that could potentially reduce barriers described by the participants.

Implications for Equity, Ethics, and Social Justice

Based on the data from this qualitative study, FGCG-JDs are a population of students that require varying options for support to help them be academically successful.

In fulfilling the needs of FGCG-JDs, we must develop programs that are equitable and meet students where they are in order to develop their diverse talents in the pursuit of academic success. Ethics must be an integral part of the fabric of higher education. FGCG-JDs are learning new ideas and skills they have not been exposed to before. Also, non-FGCG-JDs are being exposed to students with diverse ideas, backgrounds, and experiences. To support the diversity of these students while promoting inclusion and fair treatment, truth and integrity must be incorporated into coursework and promoted with all students. In considering social justice in the distribution of wealth or opportunities, FGCG-JDs lacking cultural capital and coming from low SES families will have more difficulty developing the networks and identifying opportunities they need for skill development. The lack of networks and skill-building opportunities can significantly alter an individual's career without a proper social justice program implemented to assist with these barriers. The disparity between FGCG-JDs and non FGCG-JDs must be bridged.

Center for First Generation Success

In order to reduce the barriers for first generation college graduates pursuing a JD identified in this qualitative study, we must identify the barriers they encounter and implement plans to fill the gap. A center for first generation success could be housed on campus in the Lott Leadership Institute. This center would be equipped with resources specifically for first generation students.

The initial program would be multi-faceted to meet the varying needs of first-generation students. When a first generation student expresses an interest in law school, faculty and staff could direct them to the Center for First Generation Success. The Center

for First Generation Success will have partnerships with other programs that support first generation, low income, and under-represented student populations such as the McNair Scholars program, The Council on Legal Education Opportunity, Inc. (CLEO), and AccessLex. Partnerships with each of these programs will enable students to gain access to these resources through the Center for First Generation Success.

The McNair Scholars Program serves undergraduate first generation, low income students, and students from under-represented groups in their graduate studies (McNair Scholars, 2021). McNair provides counseling, research opportunities, stipends, fee waivers, and fellowship opportunities. In partnering with the McNair Scholars program, the Center for First Generation Success would expand the same types of programmatic support to include JD students instead of solely students pursuing a PhD. (McNair Scholars, 2021)

The Council on Legal Education Opportunity, Inc. (CLEO) offers a pre-law summer institute for underrepresented students as well as Saturday classes for law school prospectives to develop reading comprehension, logical reasoning and writing skills (CLEO, Inc, 2021). These skills are all crucial to LSAT and law school success. In partnering with CLEO, the Center for First Generation Success would house a pre-law summer institute as well as needed skills training opportunities.

AccessLex was developed as a non-profit to create a pipeline for expanding diversity in the law school student population (AccessLex, 2021). They provide financial counseling including scholarship opportunities and loan guidance for their students as well as bar exam preparation opportunities. In partnering with AccessLex, the Center for

First Generation Success would provide access to law school financial counseling, scholarship opportunity awareness, and access to bar preparation programs.

At the Center for First Generation Success, students could meet with other first generation college graduates, including faculty and staff, who have already paved this path. They would have access to resume review, guidance, and counseling about law school as a first generation student. They would receive guidance on experiences needed prior to law school, taking the LSAT, the application process, and guidance on how to analyze schools and considerations in deciding where to apply. These opportunities would exist during regular hours as well as provide supplemental office hours one evening or Saturday each month to promote access for all students needing the services.

There could be a law school experience class wherein first generation students interested in law school would have the opportunity to spend time with specially trained law staff and faculty, learning about the law school experience and understanding barriers they may face as first generation college graduates. It will be important that the faculty and staff are either first generation college graduates themselves or have been specifically trained about identifying and navigating the barriers for first generation and other at-risk populations. Students will have the opportunity to be matched with a mentor. These mentor relationships will begin as soon as a student decides to begin the law school application process and will involve matching a potential law student with a 2L, 3L, or practicing attorney that will continue with them throughout their educational culmination at the University of Mississippi. After their 1L year and continuing through their 3L year, first generation college graduates in the juris doctor program will be matched with

opportunities for advocacy, experiential learning, and skill implementation. They will be presented opportunities to invest in underrepresented communities in Mississippi both during law school and post-graduation. The experiential learning opportunities during law school would be supported by an endowment for experiential learning so these students could afford to serve in the Mississippi regions where they are most needed. These activities will be monitored and guided by the Center for First Generation Success.

A comprehensive, multi-faceted program such as this requires substantial financial contributions, so through the previously mentioned partnerships as well as interested donors we can design and implement this Center. Once a successful platform is implemented for first generation college graduates enrolling in a juris doctor program, the platform could be expanded in a thoughtful, controlled manner to cover additional degree and career fields. The initial population to be served by the Center for First Generation Success would be juris doctor students, but then the Center could grow in a way to ensure quality and appropriate levels of support as well as proper staffing to reach and assist a broader first generation student population across the University system.

CONCLUSION

There is unequal access to higher education across the United States and first generation students are significantly impacted. First generation students are a large, growing at-risk population that faces multiple barriers to completing a degree. Individuals must have a degree to earn a living wage, and higher education has become a prerequisite to obtaining professional employment. Without reducing the barriers for first generation students, this population will not grow proportionately in academic programs and be

unable to fill the potential roles in the professional field that would allow them to become community investors and leaders in the form of a more educated populace.

This qualitative dissertation examined the experiences of six successful first generation college students in the juris doctor program at the University of Mississippi School of Law. These participants discussed their perceptions about barriers to academic success and a few themes emerged. The participants discussed financial barriers, cultural barriers, fear and imposter syndrome, isolation, and lack of a legal mentor as barriers they experienced. They combatted these barriers by using their own tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy, and finally, developing their own place in order to successfully navigate their course to successful law school completion.

The interviews and data gleaned from this qualitative study revealed that there are significant gaps in support for first generation college graduates enrolled in the juris doctor program at the University of Mississippi School of Law. There needs to be solutions and formalized structures in place to guide first generation college graduates in a juris doctor program in a way that affords them the tools to reduce financial barriers, lessen the cultural barriers, teach them how to address fear and Imposter Syndrome, reduce feelings of isolation, and also find an appropriate legal mentor. By capitalizing on the tenacity, perseverance, and self-efficacy of these students in their drive to make a place for themselves, we can assist them in reducing barriers to success for their law degree.

The goal of this dissertation was to analyze the experiences of first generation college graduates enrolled in the juris doctor program at the University of Mississippi

School of Law in order to glean data to develop informed solutions for reducing their barriers to success through structured programs providing needed support and guidance.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Title: EdD Dissertation Research – First Generation Law Students: Barriers to Success

Investigator

Melissa L. Jones, MBA, JD
Department of Education (Higher Ed)
106 Lott Institute
The University of Mississippi
(662) 915-3189

Advisor

Neal Hutchens, Ph.D., JD
John Holleman, EdD
Department of Education (Higher Ed)
120 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi
(662) 915-2520 (Hutchens)
(662) 801-4781 (Holleman)

I am a student pursuing an EdD in higher education. I am seeking students to participate in a research study from August 2020 through March 2021. These students will be first-generation students pursuing a JD at the University of Mississippi School of Law that are in their 3L year.

For the purposes of the study, I will conduct two to three brief one-on-one interviews with each participant to understand their experiences as a first-generation college graduate pursuing a law degree.

This research has been given IRB approval. No compensation will be provided for participation in this research. For questions or to indicate your willingness to participate, please contact Melissa Jones at melissaj@olemiss.edu.

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION SHEET

Title: EdD Dissertation Research – First Generation Law Students: Barriers to Success

Investigator

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INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ONLY IF YOU ARE COLLECTING DATA EXCLUSIVELY FROM ADULTS

By checking this box, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Description

The purpose of this research project is to determine the barriers faced by first generation law school students. I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences and perceptions about your law school journey and any potential barriers. You will not be asked for your name or any other identifying information.

Cost and Payments

There will be no payments associated with this research.

Risks and Benefits

You may feel uncomfortable looking back over some of your experiences. I do not think that there are any other risks. Your reflection about overcoming any potential barriers may actually provide a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Confidentiality

I will not record names or other information that would clearly identify participants.

Right to Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Ms. Jones or Dr. Hutchens or Dr. Holleman in person, by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the survey/interview I consent to participate in the study.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Title: EdD Dissertation Research – First Generation Law Students: Barriers to Success

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The following interview questions will guide my efforts to understand the journey of first-generation JD students and the barriers to success that they experience at the University of Mississippi.

1. Tell me about your background and your educational journey to law school?
 - a. Why did you select the University of Mississippi School of Law for your law school endeavors?
2. Tell me about your transition into law school.
3. Did you complete any bridge programs for pre-law students prior to attending law school at the University of Mississippi?
4. How was your experience in your 2L year different from your 1L year?
5. What types of challenges have you experienced in law school? Who or where do you go for support when you experience challenges?
6. Summers are important for law students. Tell me about your experiences for your 1L and 2L summers.

7. How have your law school experiences affirmed or helped you rethink your initial goals when you entered law school? How have they helped you think about your post-graduation plans?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in law school?
 - a. What advice would you give other first-generation law students?

VITA

MELISSA L. JONES

Education and Admissions

Phi Kappa Phi, 2019

eLearning Training Course (eTC)
University of Mississippi, 2018

Mississippi Bar Admission, 2014

Juris Doctor
University of Mississippi School of Law, 2013

Masters of Business Administration, Human Resources Specialization
Ellis College of New York Institute of Technology, 2009

Bachelor of Arts, English
Ellis College of New York Institute of Technology, 2006

Administrative Experience

Associate Director, Lott Leadership Institute, 2017 – Present
University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS

- Plan, coordinate, develop, and implement special programs for high school and undergraduate students.
- Counsel students on internships, graduate school endeavors, and career paths.
- Serve as liaison between the Institute and other cross-campus partners and external constituents.

Teaching Experience

Instructor (LIBA 199: Leadership Perspectives), June 2021 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct students in developing an understanding of leadership values and principles.
- Instruct students in developing informational interview plans and assist with the logistical elements of executing the interview with community, state, and national leaders.

Instructor (LA 201: Introduction to Law), January 2021 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct a class of 50 students on the development of the law in our society.
- Introduce students to legal terminology and reasoning.
- Assist students with recognizing substantive areas of the law.
- Instruct students in better understanding the legal and paralegal professions as well as the related ethical implications.

Instructor (CJ 370: Domestic Crimes and Family Law), January 2020 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct a class of 40 students on the origins of violence in the family from the administration of justice perspective.
- Assist students in developing increased critical thinking about important issues in family violence.
- Instruct on the structural forces and issues behind family violence both domestically and internationally.
- Assist students in developing increased problem-solving skills based on enhanced understanding of issues in current policy and practice.
- Guide students for enhanced communication skills and reading/research acumen as it pertains to family violence.

Instructor (LA 205: Legal Research/Writing II), January 2019 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct a class of 40 students on increased critical thinking and problem-solving skills based on enhanced development of legal evaluation, research, and demonstrated verbal and written communications.
- Guide in drafting legal documents including legal memos, correspondence, briefs, and other legal documents.

Instructor (LAW 758: Speaker's Edge), January 2019 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct a class of law, accountancy, and MBA students in leveraging the elements of a formal competition to hone their communication, coaching, and critical thinking skills.
- Present students with multiple opportunities to develop and give presentations as well as critique and coach each other in this intensive two-week program for advanced business communication.

Instructor (LA 204: Legal Research/Writing I), August 2018 – Present
University of Mississippi

- Instruct a class of 40 students on the basics of legal research, writing, and analysis.

- Guide students to increased critical thinking and problem-solving skills based on enhanced development of legal evaluation, research, and demonstrated verbal and written communications.

University and Community Service

- Develop Pathways to Leadership Program, 2021
- Co-Develop Washington, D.C. Internship Experience Program, 2020-2021
- Admissions Committee Member, LLI Summer Programs, 2018 - Present
- Staff Representative, Lott Institute Student Advisory Board, 2017-Present
- Emerging Leaders Conference, 2017 - Present
- Internship Selection Committee, UM Internship Experiences, 2017 – 2019
- Sunflower Freedom Project Fellows Committee Member, 2017-2019
- Coach for University of Mississippi's Speakers Edge Program, 2017-2018
- Assisted with Coaching, Gabrielli Family Law Moot Court Team, 2015-2017
- Judge for University of Mississippi's Speakers Edge Program, 2015-2016
- Volunteer Attorney for Mississippi Volunteer Lawyer's Program, 2014-2020
- Assisted with developing a federal criminal law text and drafted the accompanying video scripts for Wolters Kluwer, 2013-2014