

SUPPORTING THE SUCCESS OF ETHIOPIAN  
FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY

TSEGAI BEKELE

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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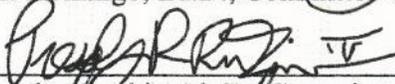
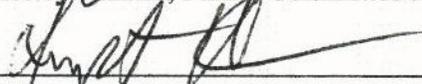
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## SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation has been examined and approved.

	6-14-21
Joel Domingo, Ed.D., Committee Chair	Date
	6-14-21
Pressley Rankin, Ph.D., Committee Member	Date
	6-14-21
T. Hampton Hopkins, Ed.D., Committee Member	Date
	7/20/21
Vicki Butler, Ed.D., Dean	Date

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## **ABSTRACT**

The increase in first-generation college students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is a challenge for higher education as student support programs and services do not always consider the unique needs of this population. For African immigrant students, receiving culturally competent student support services can help them retain and appreciate their unique cultural identity while connecting with the social cultures of the institution. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of 13 Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students who are attending or have attended a two- or four-year college. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling using the snowball technique. The researcher applied a qualitative phenomenological design using purposive sampling and data were collected from interviews, observations, and field notes, and manually analyzed using a modified Van Kaam method. From the analysis four themes emerged, which were: systemic communication gaps persisting, financial struggles and work-school balance, accessibility to culturally responsive services, and the diversity of staff is important. Recommendations include developing culturally specific workshops for staff as well as delivering timely orientation programs for these students. By understanding the impact of culturally competent practices used by student support service professionals, higher education leaders can develop and provide effective programs for this population. Future researchers should consider exploring the needs of other sub-Saharan African first-generation students as well those from other culturally diverse groups, which will ultimately help in better servicing their academic, social, and cultural needs.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

First-generation college students represent a sizeable portion of the total college student population in higher education. According to a study from the National Center for Education Statistics, 24% of all postsecondary enrollment in the United States consisted of first-generation college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Irlbeck et al. (2014) explored the motivation of college students and found that with the increase in first-generation college students comes the need to ensure they experience various supports, both academic and non-academic, which aid their success. For these students, such experiences of support are important because they set the foundation for future student engagement, enhance a sense of belonging to the institution, and help students manage the various challenges they face throughout their time in school.

Additionally, support for first-generation college students is critical because the support helps build student confidence and improves academic success and persistence. Bui (2002), in a study of first-generation college students, found that support services in higher education institutions play a role by offering specific or unique services that help the student beyond just academics. By providing additional services such as counselors, career services, and other forms of socio-emotional support, students can make the adjustment to college life less challenging.

Often, these services are implemented in collaboration with families of first-generation college students, especially those students who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Irlbeck et al., 2014). In one study from Bradbury and Mather (2009) conducted with first-time, first-generation college students, the authors concluded

that these support services play a critical role for first generation students' educational success by addressing the challenges of assimilating to a new environment, which is an issue faced by many students when adapting to a new institutional culture.

### **Study Background**

The increase in first-generation college students, especially those who are more recent immigrants, or come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, poses challenges for higher education institutions. Kim (2014), who explored the experiences of African immigrant students, found that supporting these students must take into consideration specific cultural and language issues when addressing their needs. Similarly, Hailu and Ku (2014) noted that student support services play a role in advancing social relationships and enhance a sense of belonging, emotional support, information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback, all of which can assist these students in succeeding. The importance of providing guidance and the provision of timely, pertinent information in addressing challenges or problems faced by first-generation diverse students was also noted (Hailu & Ku, 2014).

### **Current State of the Field in which the Problem Exists**

Student service professionals play a supportive role to these students in several ways. The first way is by partnering with families. Family support can also be an essential factor in facilitating change as first-generation diverse and immigrant college students adjust to a new environment (Bradbury & Maher, 2009). Bradbury and Maher also found that these college students preferred to be within proximity to family members

so that they can connect, receive advice, and receive support and encouragement, all of which influence students to excel and achieve success.

Another role that student service professionals play is bringing awareness of their services to these students. Winograd and Rust (2014), in exploring the factors that hinder underrepresented first-generation students from accessing services, found that college support services personnel need to bring a greater awareness of their services to these students early in the academic career. By improving communication and awareness of available student support services, underrepresented first-generation college students can access various student support services, faculty, and advisors to enhance their learning experience. Awareness of communication campaigns should be an ongoing activity by advisors to remind students of the available resources to improve their learning experience and academic success (Winograd & Rust, 2014). In a related manner, Muses and Neville (2012) found that faculty can also impact college students' experiences, especially those students of color, by validating their particular culture, language, and showing interest and concern for their experiences and outcomes.

Student career advising is another aspect of supporting diverse first-generation students. In his research on the role of faculty, counselors, and support programs on Latino/a community college students' success and intent to persist, Tovar (2015) noted the importance of institutional counselors who address not just general support issues but also psychological and developmental issues as well as students' career interests. Tovar also noted that advisors should approach their counseling process in a systemic and culturally competent fashion in assessing students' needs as well as identify the available

resources that can be accessed and used to enhance the overall experience and academic success.

By understanding the impact of culturally competent practices used by student support service professionals, specifically for first-generation immigrant and diverse college students, higher education leaders can develop and provide effective student support services for this population. In their exploration of undergraduate international students' everyday cross-cultural experiences, Burkhardt and Bennett (2015) found that higher education institutions play an essential role in an increasingly global world by recruiting and enrolling international students, which can ultimately promote cultural exchanges within the school community and enhance diversity and understanding among different cultures.

### **Historical Background**

The effects of not receiving culturally competent student support services creates challenges for these students. Some of these challenges may stem from students simply having a different cultural background and having a difficult time with transitioning to college (Irlbeck et al., 2014). For first-generation immigrant college students, they are generally less prepared to make informed decisions about institutions and involvement that could potentially maximize their educational development. Irlbeck et al. (2014) also noted that first-generation immigrant students lack essential study and time management skills, thus adversely affecting their academic performance. Moreover, Irlbeck et al. (2014) highlighted the fact that first-generation immigrant students are more than twice

as likely as non-first-generation non-immigrant students to leave four-year institutions before the second year and are less likely to complete a degree in five years.

Therefore, developing relationships with university support staff (faculty, advisors, counselors, and mentors) becomes beneficial for these students to get necessary information and support services that enhance their college experiences and academic success. Bradbury and Mather (2009) stated that for these diverse first-generation students, their college experience included the challenge of developing a sense of belonging on campus while feeling uncomfortable and isolated as compared with their non-first-generation, non-diverse peers. Bradbury and Mather also noted these students' college experience is affected by being away from home for the first time, feeling homesick, feeling alone, and lacking family support. The challenge of academic adjustment, lacking familiarity with the academic environment, and not knowing expectations intensified their feeling of insecurity, which ultimately adversely impacted their academic performance.

### ***The Horn of Africa***

The Horn of Africa is a sub-region of East Africa that includes Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. This sub-region has been a conflict-ridden and unstable region for a considerable time and has also been a source of refugees and immigrants who have migrated to the United States starting in the late 1970s (Hailu & Ku, 2014). Among these immigrants are Ethiopian first-generation college students who wish to pursue their education. Even though these immigrant students come with a lot of hope and motivation to improve their lives, including the desire to pursue a college

education, they face various issues and challenges related to the language barrier and cultural dislocation (Hailu & Ku, 2014).

Groups from East Africa comprise a substantial portion of the overall immigrant population from Sub-Saharan Africa. In researching Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States, Zong and Batalova (2017) found that of the 1.7 million Sub-Saharan African immigrants living in the United States in 2015, those from East Africa accounted for 613,000 of the immigrants, and approximately 229,000 of those immigrants are Ethiopians. Zong and Batalova also noted that Sub-Saharan immigrants have much higher educational attainment compared to other foreign and native-born populations. Nigerians and South Africans had the most educational attainment, each with 57% of the population holding a bachelor's degree. Of the remaining countries, Kenyans were at 44%, Ghanaians at 40%, Liberians at 32%, Ethiopians at 29%, and Somalis at 11% (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

Ethiopia is a country in sub-Saharan Africa with the population of 108 million people and is the second most populous country in Africa. The country's economy is based on agriculture, and about 80% of the population live in rural areas. Poverty, political repression, and instability have driven the country's internal and external migration since the 1960s. After the 1974 revolution and the repressive and brutal Derg military regime came to power, thousands of Ethiopians fled the country as refugees (CIA World Factbook, 2019). In terms of education and educational opportunities, specifically to higher education, Ethiopia has a very low higher education participation rate, resulting in a shortage of skilled manpower (Yizengaw, 2007).

For many of the immigrants who from this region, access to college is challenging due to a combination of factors that include diverse learning styles, background, culture, and linguistic differences. Though these first-generation immigrant students bring high levels of educational aspiration and commitment to be successful. They also face various pitfalls that would hinder them from attending college or completing on the same schedule as non-immigrant students (Hailu & Ku, 2014). In a study of ethnic differences and family influences on academic motivations, George et al. (2017) noted that these immigrant students face challenges of college access due to inadequate educational preparation and financial difficulties. The authors also noted that these students possess intangible qualities, such as hard work, persistence, effort, morality, success, and college-going behaviors that help strengthen their college motivations and aspirations. Despite all these qualities along with the support of their families, college and university student services staff can improve these students' college experience and their academic success by considering culturally competent practices when helping students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.

For African immigrant students, receiving culturally competent student support services is critical. In a study conducted with school counselors supporting African immigrant students' career development, Watkins and Hersi (2014) found that these immigrant students struggle to succeed and graduate in many schools because of underperformance on standardized achievement tests. The authors also noted that these students can face or experience racism and discrimination, which may also undermine their educational success. To address the challenge these students face, there is a

growing interest within the school counseling literature in identifying culturally competent ways that higher education advisors and counselors can support immigrant students and others, which can result in enhancing their learning and educational success (Watkins & Hersi, 2014).

Culturally competent methods are critical, especially for African students. In one study conducted with the bicultural socialization of black immigrant students attending a predominantly white institution, Kim (2014) found that African immigrant students felt that it was important to retain and appreciate their unique cultural identities while connecting with the academic and social cultures of the institution. Kim also noted that immigrant parents, peers, and institutional support staff must play critical roles as socializing agents and provide pertinent information guidance to these students as they navigate a foreign institutional culture. One example of culturally competent support that Kim suggested is a training or workshop for faculty to help them understand immigrant students' unique histories, cultural values, and ethnic backgrounds to enhance their awareness and sensitivity in the classroom.

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

The role that student services professionals play is critical, especially for linguistically and culturally diverse first-generation college students. With the demographics of students in higher education becoming more diverse, including those students who come from immigrant backgrounds, understanding the nuances of a particular background and culture are helpful. According to Burkhardt and Bennett (2015), higher education institutions place more of an emphasis on structural diversity

than other forms of diversity. Structural diversity focuses on broad aspects of difference, and one example of structural diversity is the makeup of the student body. The makeup of the student body does not ensure campus integration and robust cross-cultural interactions for both international and domestic students. Burkhardt and Bennett noted that there is an opportunity to address the gap between what higher education institutions leaders think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and international students' actual experiences.

By exploring and learning more about diverse students' experiences beyond the formal diversity programs, institutions can play a more proactive role in developing and providing culturally competent services to students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Although research exists on the experience and outcomes of first-generation college students, there is limited research specific to first-generation students, especially those who are immigrants that come from linguistically or culturally diverse backgrounds. There is an opportunity to explore culturally competent support services in higher education, especially for Ethiopian and other Horn of Africa immigrant students.

### **Key Theories**

Cultural intelligence or cultural quotient (CQ) is a concept related to cultural competence, which is learned and developed over time. CQ assists in helping to measure a person's intercultural capabilities and the skills or knowledge of cultural intelligence can contribute to supporting student success. The term cultural intelligence or (CQ) was developed by Soon Ang and Lin Van Dyne (2003) as a way of measuring or predicting performance in intercultural capabilities. Similarly, other researchers applied the concept

of CQ in their research studies. Earley and Ang (2003) defined cultural intelligence (CQ) as the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings or being able to perform effectively across cultures. Moodian (2009) argued that culture influences human behavior, which, in turn, reflects cultural practices. Attaining and developing intercultural skills or competencies enhances a person's cultural intelligence and capability to perform successfully by effectively interacting and collaborating with people from different cultures as well as the ability to adapt to various multicultural situations (Moodian, 2009).

### ***Student Development Theory***

Theories of student development focus on the growth of students' social, intellectual, and cognitive development over time. Such theories serve as a general starting point for studying first-generation immigrant students. Chickering and Reisser (1993), in their article on education and identity, explored models of human development with a focus on students. They noted seven components that they called vectors, which influence the identity development of a college student. The seven vectors are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. In a similar manner, Gardner (2009) described student development as the way that a student experiences college through acquiring and mastering competencies that contribute to personal development and growth.

While these theories of student development are generally applicable to a majority of the higher education population, such development theories may not fully apply to immigrant or foreign-born populations, specifically to East African students, since many of these theories were developed based on a native-born (U.S.) student demographic, and higher education leaders have the opportunity to help immigrant students by expanding or aligning support services that specifically address immigrant student development needs, ultimately enhancing their college experience and their academic success. In their exploration of undocumented Latino college students' movement towards developing purpose, Little and Mitchell (2018) highlighted the undocumented students' ability to persevere despite various challenges and barriers to attain their intended goal of a college degree. The authors also stated that even when setbacks occurred, their persistence enabled them to overcome challenges to their academic and personal success as part of developing a greater purpose.

### ***Multicultural Leadership***

Multicultural leadership is a framework that examines differences between cultures and incorporates a collection of related ideas and concepts rather than one unified theory. Adler and Bartholomew (1992), who explored the effects of globalization, identified several competencies for leaders to effectively navigate the complexities of working with different cultures. For first-generation immigrant college students, the difference in their home and institutional culture can be vast. Bordas (2007), in a study of multicultural leadership, described multicultural leadership as an inclusive and welcoming approach to leading in a diverse context that takes in to account the

influences, practices, and values of cultures effectively and efficiently. Relatedly, Ryan (2006) articulated the importance of inclusive leadership that focuses on the mission of inclusion in its processes and outcomes for the desired goal. Enhancing the skills and capacity based on multicultural leadership may aid the delivery of effective student support services to this population.

### ***Cultural Dimensions Theory***

Cultural dimensions theory is a framework that focuses on cross-cultural communication used to explore differences between cultures and their impact on communication, values, and behavior. Hofstede (1984), who was a foundational researcher in this area, stated in his work on cultural dimensions, the nature of management skills, and cultural differences need to be considered prior to being applied for appropriateness in another culture. Hofstede highlighted a need among international managers and management theorists for a much deeper understanding of the range of culture-determined value systems that exist among countries and a need for cultural differences to be considered when transferring ideas or information. Hofstede also highlighted the importance of understanding the way one's mind can be programmed by different life experiences, such as the patterns and modes of behavior between different people or family members, friends, professionals, and authorities (Hofstede, 1984).

### **Problem Statement**

First-generation college students represent a substantial portion of the total college student population in higher education (NCES, 2017). Irlbeck et al. (2014) highlighted that the number of first-generation college students enrolling at colleges and

universities is on the rise, and Bui (2002) stated that higher education institution support services staff can play a role in enhancing student success, specifically for first-generation students. Though much has been done to improve the overall student experience for first-generation students, the general problem is that most first-generation student support systems do not consider the unique needs of diverse immigrant students, especially those who immigrate from countries without a tradition of higher education. By understanding the impact of cultural relevance in the delivery of support services, higher education leaders can develop student support programs that could enhance the experience of these specific first-generation college students and, ultimately, support their academic success.

Andrade, Evans, and Hartshorn (2014) found inconsistencies in institutional practices with identifying, supporting, and tracking non-native English speakers. Additionally, a study by Suh (2016) on immigrant students learning English as a second language (ESL) found that they had limited awareness of resources such as advisors, the writing center, and financial aid services. These gaps further highlighted the need for institutions to consider practices that are culturally relevant for these students.

### **Specific Leadership Problem**

Higher education leaders face challenges as student populations become more diverse. Such challenges are also seen locally in the state of Washington. According to a Washington State Education Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee report (2017), the lack of proportional representation that reflects the racial and ethnic demographics of the student population compared to the demographics of the teacher

population in Washington State may contribute to the achievement gap that is prevalent among high-need populations. Simply put, the students' racial identities and cultural backgrounds differ from the backgrounds and ethnic identities and backgrounds of instructors and student support services professionals. This disproportionality creates a challenge for educational institutions to support students from diverse backgrounds.

Given the changing demographics of higher education in the United States, and with the influx of first-generation immigrant students from East Africa, the specific problem is that leaders of student support services in higher education do not use culturally competent practices in providing adequate support services to first-generation Ethiopian immigrant college students. By understanding the specific challenges or experiences on the part of those students who have received culturally competent services, higher education leaders can develop college support service programs and practices that enhance the student college experience and academic success, especially for Ethiopian first-generation college students.

### **Audience**

Higher education leaders, first-generation college students, student advisors, counselors, mentors, financial aid professionals, student support services leaders, and the educational community at large can benefit from the findings of this study. Additionally, Washington State education leaders, government agencies, and legislators may benefit from the findings of this study. The study can also improve their awareness of the needs and challenges of a diverse student population and help them to be culturally competent in their work.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region. Understanding the lived experience of these students and the impact of the culturally competent services they received will help enhance future development and delivery of effective student support services to college students with different cultures and backgrounds. The findings of this study can help contribute to the body of knowledge for future researchers as well as strengthen institutional student support services delivered in a culturally competent manner.

### **Methodology Overview**

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used for this research study. Semistructured and open-ended interview questions were applied to help me explore college student support services experiences regarding use, access, and delivery or practices, as well as cultural awareness and competency. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological research studies help researchers understand the common meaning or experiences among individuals experiencing the same phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) said that phenomenological research studies seek meanings from appearance and arrives at essences of phenomenon through reflection and individual lived experiences. In crafting phenomenological research, Vagle (2014) described phenomenology as an encounter, a craft, and a way of living; phenomenological research study articulates the common meanings of lived experiences of a phenomenon for individuals.

Additionally, Husserl (1999) concluded that the assumptions of a person towards the world and in questioning a person's belief and how this belief system affects research is the foundation for phenomenological reduction by suspending judgement (bracketing) to get the essence of experiences or phenomena. Finally, according to Patton (2015), a phenomenological research study describes the individual lived experiences, and through the lens of these experiences, also describes a certain phenomenon. This strategy focuses on understanding the essence of a phenomenon by examining the perceptions or views of individuals who have shared experiences of a phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

There are three overarching central questions that the research study seeks to answer.

1. What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation college students in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?
2. What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation college students face when attempting to access college student support services or programs?
3. What do Ethiopian first-generation college students perceive to be effective and helpful student support services or programs?

### **Study Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this study include time and resource constraints, as the research was completed in the late fall of 2020 as well as the potential for researcher bias and using purposeful sampling for reaching out to participants. Participants were recruited via

personal contacts and through internal networking. As a result, the researcher has varying degrees of familiarity with a small total number of the participants. Another limitation might be the cultural differences and expectations of the participants. Hailu and Ku (2014) highlighted that English language proficiency was a significant challenge for first-generation immigrant college students from the Horn of Africa. Thus, language fluency by the participants of the study can be a limitation, since English is not their native language. As part of the data collection process the researcher will engage in member checking. Also, bracketing was used to limit researcher bias.

Some of the delimitations are that only first-generation Ethiopian college students were invited to participate in the research study. The choice of the specific participant population was due to the scope of potential research and data available on the topic. Another delimitation is that this distinct population will focus on only their college experiences, challenges, and successes, as there may other aspects of their lives that could be explored. Finally, the scope of the research study is limited to a specific geographical region, and institutions located in the Pacific northwest region of the United States. Therefore, the findings and results of this study may not necessarily general to other subjects, locations, or future time periods.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following key terms and definitions are used for the purpose of this research study.

*Student success.* A college student who is academically successful as well as a full participant in the student life of the college or university. Student success can be

enhanced by creating a welcoming and supportive college environment by providing a continuous assessment of their academic performance and provision of frequent feedback as well as support services that address student challenges and adjustment to college life (Tinto, 2012).

*College experience.* A college student campus life experiences by taking part in social, academic, contact with other students and instructors, and student support services, as well as participation in various student activities such as career exploration, student government and athletics (Chung-JU et al., 2016).

*Ethiopian first-generation college student.* A college student who was born in Ethiopia and emigrated to the United States and enrolled in college or university. First-generation students tend to come from lower economic status families with a disadvantage regarding their level of family support as well as college preparation and persistence (Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

*Cultural competence:* Having cross-cultural awareness, knowledge, diverse perspectives, and skills as well as the capability to understand different cultures and being able to communicate, respond, and deliver services to students with diverse cultural backgrounds (Rice, 2007).

*Student support services:* College services that are provided by institutions of higher education to support the college student experience and academic success. Student support services encompass programs that meet student needs such as academic advising, career advising, campus events, clubs, and other services (Arnold, 2018).

*Perception:* Refers to the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information to make sense of the different stimuli we are presented with. It refers to the process by which people utilize external sensory information in combination with other internal conscious and unconscious workings of the brain to make sense of the world (Barry, 2002).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region of the United States. The study findings will help educational leaders, especially those in student support roles, apply culturally competent practices in supporting first-generation college students from Ethiopia. Further, the findings from the study will help to advance future research and knowledge on improving and enhancing culturally appropriate student support services in colleges and universities, which can contribute to student success.

Chapter One included the introduction to the background of the study, highlighting the current state of the field, where the problem exists. A problem statement, and target audience, as well as specific leadership problem, was discussed. An overview of methodology and design for the study as well as the purpose of the study and three research questionnaires were discussed as well. This chapter concluded with a discussion on the limitations of the study and definitions of key terms.

Chapter Two will include a review of the literature along with the historical backgrounds of first-generation immigrant college students from Ethiopia as well as the

roles of student support services such as academic advising, career advising, and financial support. The chapter will include literature on multicultural competency and the impacts of culturally competent services in supporting first-generation immigrant college students. The chapter will conclude with a description of gaps in the literature.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region. This chapter includes a review of the literature on the major topics related to higher education student support services for first-generation college students with diverse cultural and language backgrounds, specifically Ethiopian first-generation college students. By understanding the impact of culturally competent practices in student support for college students from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, higher education leaders can develop student support programs that enhance success, specifically for Ethiopian first-generation college students.

Higher education support services staff play a role in enhancing student success. They help address first-generation college students' concerns by offering unique services that support their education (Bui, 2002). These support services include counselors, academic advisors, and other support services and programs that specifically address the challenges that first-generation college students experience as part of their adjustment to college life. Irlbeck et al. (2014), in their work on student support services, argued the need for higher education institutions to provide necessary support services to enhance student success in collaboration with families of first-generation college students. Bradbury and Mather (2009) noted that support services staff help first-generation college students adjust to social and cultural programming such as student organizations and activities. Bradbury and Mather also emphasized the importance of providing

services that serve students from diverse cultural and backgrounds, especially for those students who may share a common language and culture.

First-generation college students represent a substantial portion of the total student population in higher education. Irlbeck et al. (2014) stated that the number of first-generation college students enrolling in colleges and universities continues to rise. Furthermore, of these first-generation college students, many come from diverse cultural and immigrant backgrounds. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 8-10 percent of the total undergraduate population in the United States is comprised of immigrant students (NCES, 2017), and these students bring with them a unique set of qualities and needs. A sense of fitting in is one type of need, and a research study by Stebleton et al. (2014) showed that campus climate influences immigrant students' sense of belonging on campus. The study also found that faculty and peer interactions greatly affect these students' sense of belonging as well as their persistence (Stebleton, et al., 2014; Hailu & Ku, 2014).

### **Roles of Student Support**

Student support services professionals play a crucial role in helping students make a smoother college transition. McCoy (2014), in his research study on understanding underrepresented first-generation students of color in a predominantly white institution, found that these students' high family expectations along with overcoming the challenges of transition due to an unfamiliar culture and environment resulted in feelings of helplessness and cultural shock. The student experiences showed the need for educational institutions to help students by developing culturally competent student support services,

competent programs to make a smoother college transition enhancing students' college experiences, and academic success.

For first-generation immigrant college students, student support is critical. Hailu and Ku (2014) highlighted several factors that mitigated against racial disparities, including academic support, guidance, encouragement, and positive college experience. Hailu and Ku also noted that support services play a role in advancing social relationships that enhance a sense of belonging, emotional support, information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback. Additionally, the authors articulated the importance of providing advice and timely information to help first-generation immigrant students face their adjustment to college life.

Family support is crucial in facilitating change as first-generation college students adjust to a new environment in attending college. Bradbury and Mather (2009) and Roscoe (2015) found that first-generation college students liked to be close to family members for easy access to connect and get advice as well as support and encouragement, which influences students to achieve success. Similarly, Roscoe (2015) articulated the importance of engaging families in the advising process and supporting students to build relationships and integrate into college life to enhance their college experiences and academic success.

### **Academic Advising**

Academic advising is a vital element for first-generation immigrant college students in advancing their education. Winograd and Rust (2014) emphasized the need to improve awareness of available student support services including accessing faculty

office hours using various communication tools early in the academic semester. Such communication helps first-generation college students' awareness of academic support services, access to faculty, and advisors to enhance their learning and academic success. Winograd and Rust also noted that an awareness communication campaign should be an ongoing activity to remind students of their learning experience and success.

Institutional agents play a crucial role in creating a positive impact on the experiences of college students. Muses and Nevile (2012) and Tovar (2015) highlighted the importance of institutional agents, especially faculty, which can have a positive impact on the experiences of college students of color. Having educators recognize the cultural backgrounds of students and by showing interest and concern in providing support can enhance the students' college experiences and academic success. Additionally, Tovar (2015) stated that institutional agents, advisors, and faculty could influence students' social activities and participation as well as the level of exposure to resources supporting their success. Tovar also noted that as protective agents, the student support services staff serve as resources for college-related information to help students enhance their college experiences and academic success.

A recent survey of U.S. higher education institutions showed the average first-year retention rate was 75.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The survey result indicates the loss of a great number of first-year college students. This loss also represents a significant challenge for colleges and universities in finding solutions to improve student retention. Similarly, Swecker et al. (2013) who conducted a research study on student retention regarding academic advising and first-generation college

students, found that each additional meeting with an academic advisor increases the likelihood of being in school and enhancing retention. Sweeker also highlighted that academic advising as part of student support services plays a key role in supporting student success and improving student retention.

The number of minority and diverse college student population will continue to increase significantly over the coming years. Roscoe (2015) articulated that higher education academic advisors need to enhance their support delivery services and awareness of the unique challenges faced by minority and diverse student populations. Additionally, the author noted that student support services staff provide specific interventions to assist the students in enhancing their college experience and academic success.

Quality academic advising plays a significant role in supporting first-generation college students in enhancing their college experience and achieve academic success. Tinto (1975, 2007) highlighted that students persist and are successful in their academic performance provided clear and consistent information on academic requirements and institutional expectations. Similarly, Lotkowski et al. (2004) highlighted a survey conducted by the American College Testing (ACT) that indicated many postsecondary institutions do not effectively utilize the benefits of quality advising to improve student achievement.

### **Career Advising**

Student career advising can play a critical role in supporting first-generation immigrant students. Tovar (2015), in his research study on advising, found the

importance of having institutional counselors address not only academic issues but also developmental issues as well, such as students' career interests and the level of these interests. Tovar also noted that advisors should approach their advising process in a systematic fashion in assessing students' needs and identifying available resources that can be accessed and used to enhance their college experience and academic success.

Higher education institutions can play a vital role in providing career services and awareness programs. Onyenekwu (2017) argued the need for host institutions to improve job placement and career services for diverse immigrant or international students. The author also highlighted a survey research study on international black African collegians in higher education who showed participant frustration with job fairs on campus. Additionally, the author noted that higher education institutions lacked awareness and resources to support ethnically diverse immigrant or international college students to enhance their college experience and student success.

Higher education's existing institutional support services structures are not meeting the needs of immigrant students. Sinacore and Lerner (2013) and Onyenekwu (2017) found that even though immigrant student participants received career services support from higher education institutions, some of them expressed that their needs as immigrant students were not met by the existing institutional support services structures. The additional areas requested for further assistance included language, cultural adaptation, and social support or mentoring programs that enhance immigrant students' awareness of various services as well as social networks. Additionally, a research study by Sinacore and Lerner found that immigrant students faced multiple challenges,

including societal and psychosocial barriers that may undermine their academic success. The challenge of language combined with adjusting to living, studying, and socializing in a new country result in societal barriers that can adversely impact immigrant students in feeling isolated and not belonging, thus hindering their academic success. Higher education leaders can develop and provide effective student support services to this population to enhance their college experience and academic success.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring programs help students feel connected with the college community and enhance their college experience. Roscoe (2015) highlighted the importance of a mentoring program to help students, especially first-generation underserved minority college students, feel connected with the college experience and enhance their academic success. Swecker and et al (2013) and Roscoe (2015) also articulated that when students connect or develop relationships with other students, advisors, faculty, and other support staff, these connections result in improving the chances to graduate.

Reducing the effect of stigma on accessing support services is also important. In a research study by Winograd and Rust (2014), the authors showed the need to reduce self-stigma as academic programs or support services are being rolled out by using phrases that are uplifting. By using phrases that strengthen learning such as educational or capacity building during delivery of these services encourages students who need help to seek assistance. The authors also noted that sharing experiences of seeking help by student mentors can benefit those students seeking student services support by

diminishing the effect of stigma. Colleges can help students easily and effectively access student support services to enhance their college experience and student success.

### **Student Engagement**

Students can be successful in their college experience and academic performance by becoming engaged in a collaborative and educational activity that supports and enhances student success (Roscoe, 2015). According to Wasley (2006), being engaged on or off campus results in greater benefits for students from minority or underserved ethnic backgrounds compared to the general student population. Additionally, Roscoe's (2015) research showed that student engagement had a positive effect or advantage on academic performance and can result in staying in college, especially for underserved diverse minority students. Wasley also noted that student support staff not only need to support students with course schedules and academic goals but should also support them with their college experiences as well. Student support services can play a big role in enhancing opportunities for students to be engaged in various student activities inside and outside the campus. Student support staff can help students improve their college experience by providing information and guidance on various activities, organizations, and clubs that are available on campus for students to participate and be engaged.

Student engagement enhances students' adjustment to college life and academic success. Griffin and McIntosh (2015) highlighted the importance of student participation in campus activities resulting in positive educational outcomes in enhancing critical thinking as well as cognitive development. Also, student engagement in student activities promotes connection to campus communities and enhances confidence and a feeling of

acceptance and belonging. The authors also noted that black immigrants expressed a desire to form social connections or bonds with other black students based on a shared understanding and racial identities such as international student club, student government, and East African student organization. Relatedly, Dalton and Crosby (2014) highlighted the challenges of engaging first-generation or new students quickly by providing various student support services designed to integrate new students into the college. The authors also noted that a sustained effort by student support services professionals could play an essential role in actively fostering student engagement. Student support services staff can help diverse immigrant college students enhance their college experiences and academic success by providing student activities that create opportunities for student engagement, taking into consideration the diversity of culture, background, and interest among immigrant students on campus.

Higher education leaders have understood that student involvement on campus, inside and outside of the classroom, enhances cognitive and social development as well as improves the level of persistence (Astin, 1999). Additionally, working in an on-campus job enhances the opportunities of interacting with faculty (Astin, 1999). Relatedly, Kuh (2009) highlighted that research on student engagement showed a link to a desired or positive outcome of college. The author also noted that “engaging in educationally purposeful activities helps to level the playing field, especially for students from low-income family backgrounds and others who have been underserved” (p. 698). College support services leaders need to expand opportunities or support services for first-generation college students to participate or engage in various student activities as

well as employment opportunities that enhance their college experience and academic success.

### **Financial Challenges**

A key challenge affecting the academic performance of first-generation college students is the capacity to pay for college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). For first-generation immigrant college students, financial support may be even more critical. Dalton and Crosby (2014) articulated the importance of demonstrating a commitment to the success of new students, including the need for a sustained effort in providing financial resources for first-generation college students to achieve student success. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that having adequate financial resources allows choices in terms of college selection and allows students to focus on their academic and social activities supporting persistence and success. Additionally, Pascarella et al. (2004) articulated that the current state and federal financial aid policies do not fully support low-income students, causing them to seek additional resources outside the campus. College leaders can help students by providing adequate financial support such as work study, grants, scholarships, and other resources that enhance student success.

College students not having adequate financial resources to pay for college can lead to a financial hardship that can harm their academic success. Bennett et al. (2015), exploring the impact of financial stress on academic performance in college economics courses, found a link between financial stress and academic performance by highlighting that students who worried about paying for college had lower grades than those who did not. Bennett et al. (2015) and Pascarella et al. (2004) also noted that a higher portion of

students with lower grades were first-generation college students, minorities, and women. The authors also noted that the effect of lower grades could result in a long time to complete an education program making it less likely these students will complete the program.

Scarce public funding had created a strategy of cost-sharing. Vossensteyn's (2009) research on student financing found that the high growth in enrollment in higher education with scarce public funding has created a major change in higher education institutions globally, resulting in a strategy of cost-sharing that assigns an increasing portion of the cost to be paid by the students and their families. The author noted that tuition, student loans, and family contribution had become key in financing higher education. The author also stated the importance of clear and well-streamlined communication about student financing programs to students and their families.

One of the top reasons that college students drop out from continuing their education is not being able to pay for college. Onyenekwu (2017) stated that many colleges and universities have financial wellness centers, and that student support staff have a clear or specific understanding of the financial needs and challenges of immigrant students with diverse cultural, social, economic, and language backgrounds. Relatedly, Obadare and Adebani (2009) highlighted that research literature shows that African students send money to help their families while abroad, and student support services professionals need to understand the financial challenges faced by students to support them effectively to enhance their educational opportunities and student success. Additionally, Olbrecht et al. (2016) found that finances are one of the top reasons

students drop out from continuing their education. Colleges can help students by providing student focused financial aid services to alleviate or enhance student retention.

### **The Significance of Multicultural Competency**

Culturally competent student support practices can play a significant role in supporting first-generation immigrant and diverse college students in advancing their education. Burkhardt and Bennett (2015) argued that higher education institutions play an essential role in an increasingly global world. The authors also noted that some colleges recruit and enroll international students with the intention of promoting cultural exchanges that benefit both foreign and domestic students, with the community at large to interact and share experiences (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015). Institutional leaders can help students by reflecting on the diverse population and by providing culturally competent services to enhance immigrant students' college experience and academic success.

The need for student service professionals to demonstrate cultural awareness and competency to better support a diverse student population cannot be overstated. Roscoe (2015) stated that advisors need to understand the importance of their role and the responsibility to be sensitive to the role that culture and background play in affecting a student's college experience and academic success. Roscoe also noted that by utilizing cultural strategies, academic advisors could effectively demonstrate cultural awareness and competency to support diverse groups of the student population successfully and enhance student success. Relatedly, Duncan (2015) stated the importance of looking inward for individuals or other support staff to reflect or assess their cultural competence as educators or student support professionals. The author also noted that once the

shortfall or deficit are known, they should seek to enhance their skills and capabilities as professionals to support the diverse student population with different cultures and languages to be successful.

A research study on developing multicultural competence in historically black colleges for student support services professionals found the importance of developing a course where professionals can learn and upgrade their skills to support a diverse student population (Mitchell & Westbrook, 2016). The authors also noted that similar courses or programs could be developed for various student support competencies to enhance the student college experience and student academic success.

### **General Challenges**

For first-generation college students, student support services are critical in helping them adjust to college life and enhance learning. Irlbeck et al. (2014) stated that first-generation college students attending college have a different cultural experience as they have more difficult time with the transition to college than their peers (non-first-generation college students). The authors also noted that first-generation college students are usually less prepared to make informed decisions about institutions and involvement that could potentially maximize their educational development. The authors also noted that first-generation students lack essential study and time management skills, adversely affecting their academic performance. Irlbeck et al. (2014) also stated that first-generation students are more than twice as likely as non-first-generation students to leave four-year institutions before the second year and are less likely to complete a degree in five years. The authors further stated that developing relationships with university student

support staff (faculty, advisors, counselors, and mentors) becomes beneficial to first-generation college students to get the pertinent information and needed support services to enhance their college experience and academic success.

Being away or separating from family is also a challenge. Bradbury and Mather (2009) highlighted first-generation college students' college experiences include the challenge of developing a sense of belonging on campus and, easily integrating into college, feeling uncomfortable and alone compared with their peers. The authors also noted that first-generation college students' college experiences are highlighted by factors of separation such as feeling homesick, feeling alone, and lack of family support. Colleges can help first-generation college students face their adjustment to college life and enhance their learning.

For many of these students, the challenge of academic adjustment is an issue where students are intimidated by faculty, lacking familiarity with the educational environment, and not understanding expectations. These challenges can intensify their feelings of insecurity or lack of self-confidence and adversely impact their academic performance. Further, the authors noted that first-generation college students' college experience also includes the challenges of having adequate resources to pay for college or addressing financial concerns as they navigate their college adjustment and success (Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

### **Impacts of Culturally Competent Services**

For diverse and immigrant first-generation college students, student support services professionals who are culturally competent play an important role, and there are

a multitude of issues and impacts that occur as a result. Onyenekwu (2017) showed, based on a research study on ethnically diverse black college students' experiences on college campuses, a need for diverse cultural knowledgeable or competent student service providers to support student college experiences and academic success. The author noted the significance of timely professional training on culture and diverse immigrant population backgrounds and experiences. The author also stated timely professional training helps examine misconceptions, avoid biases to strengthen student support staff cultural competency and effectively support diverse immigrant college students to enhance their college experiences and academic success. Relatedly, Cuyjet and Duncan (2013) highlighted the importance of becoming a skilled multicultural professional in order to positively influence the moral and personal development of the ethnically diverse first-generation college students. The authors also argued that one should be open to new and different experiences from diverse cultural perspectives as well as have the willingness to learn and appreciate diverse perspectives related to moral behavior and values.

### **Multicultural Leadership**

The importance of multicultural leadership is an important consideration when addressing the needs of diverse first-generation immigrant college students. Drawing from several areas, multicultural leadership is a framework that addresses cultural differences and leadership performance. Applied to a higher education setting, Bordas (2007) described the value of multicultural leadership that can support and encourage student support staff and faculty as well as students in bringing out the best in each of the

diverse groups to create and develop communities. The author also noted that multicultural leadership encourages inclusiveness and adaptability to change so that learning environments can be made to welcome and support ethnically diverse student populations to enhance their college experience and academic success.

Student support services leaders can enhance their professional development by advancing their multicultural competence and knowledge (Pope et al., 2004). The authors also noted that multicultural knowledge includes learning or collecting information about higher education and its history. The authors also stated that multicultural knowledge includes realizing its limitations of applying widely accepted student development theories to students of ethnically diverse backgrounds, understanding the student populations' experience and cultures of the student population enrolled in college. The authors also stated that student support services leaders should not only have an awareness and knowledge of those who are culturally different from themselves but also have multicultural skills to work with ethnically diverse students from different cultural communities or groups.

Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015) stated that "cultural competence is a best practice for transition educators who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students" (p. 319), highlighting the importance of cultural competence in providing student support services to first-generation immigrant students with ethnically diverse cultural and language background to be successful in their college experience and academic success. The authors also noted that "cultural competence is about continually developing and refining a skill set and worldview that are useful across different situations, not about

acquiring discrete bits of knowledge that are results of overgeneralization” (p. 320).

Higher education institutions can help students by developing programs and student services that are delivered by professionals who apply culturally competent practices can help guide and support ethnically diverse student populations.

Cultural sensitivity and awareness training has also been shown to help student service professionals support diverse first-generation students. Wehbe-Alamah and Fry (2014) highlighted the significance of creating or developing an environment that is culturally sensitive and welcoming academic environment for culturally diverse students, faculty, and support staff that maximizes students’ college and learning experiences. The authors also stated that culturally sensitive and welcoming academic environment entails a process that includes student-centeredness; ongoing cultural assessment and evaluation of students, support staff, faculty, and the academic environment; educational and curricular adaptation as well as accommodation; ongoing cultural competence training; and programmatic adaptation, accommodation, and revision (Wehbe-Alamah & Fry, 2014). Higher education institutions can help students by developing an environment that is culturally sensitive and welcoming, which supports ethnically diverse student populations.

The competencies of professionals who work with diverse first-generation students is also an important consideration. Harding (2011), in his work on students of color, described guidelines for culturally effective interaction with students. He concluded that advisors need to be willing to learn, to be advocates, to establish good relationships, to consider differences in help-seeking and behaviors, to remember

differences are not deficiencies, to examine and evaluate their own cultural baggage, to consider their own possible cultural privilege, and finally to consider the level of cultural identity development, degree of interest, avoid stereotypes, and adopting a monolithic perspective in regards to culturally diverse students (Harding, 2011).

### **Additional Impacts and Considerations**

For first-generation college students, the first-year college experience can be a challenge. In a research study by Jehangir (2009) on first-generation college students, the author found that the experience during the first year for low-income college students showed isolation and marginalization, resulting in adverse impact hindering their persistence to continue their education. The author also noted that a multicultural learning approach with a diverse group could enhance their college experience and academic success and improve their persistence. College student support services leaders can help first-year students face the adjustment to college life and improve their college experience.

For many diverse first-year college students, a culturally engaging campus environment helps students to feel welcome and enhances their adjustment to college life. Museus et al. (2017) described the impact of a culturally engaging campus environment and a sense of belonging in improving student persistence and degree completion. A research study by Museus et al. (2017) conducted with a culturally engaging campus environment found a sense of belonging positively enhances the student college experience and academic success. Higher education institutions can help students by

developing culturally engaging environment that can support the ethnically diverse student population to enhance their college experiences and academic success.

First-generation immigrant students have a higher level of educational aspiration and commitment to succeed while at the same time, they face various pitfalls that would hinder them from attending college, let alone completing their studies. Hailu and Ku (2014), in their exploration of the Horn of Africa region, found that for many immigrants' access to college is a challenge, and once enrolled, they often face many obstacles such as having different learning styles and backgrounds compared to the general student population. Relatedly, Watkins and Hersi (2014) found that immigrant students struggle to succeed in many schools by underperforming in achievement tests and graduation rates. These Immigrant students also face or experience racism and discrimination, which can undermine their educational success. Watkins and Hersi (2014) articulated that this experience has created a growing interest in identifying culturally competent ways in which advisors and counselors can support immigrant students to enhance their learning and academic success.

For these students, retaining and appreciating their cultural identity while in school is important. Kim (2014) highlighted the importance of African immigrant students needing to maintain their cultural identity while in college and examined support mechanisms that help these students connect with the overall academic and social cultures of the community. Kim stated that immigrant parents, peers, or institutional support staff play key roles as socializing agents and must provide pertinent information and guidance to immigrant students as they navigate within a predominantly white

institution. The author further noted the importance of providing training to help faculty understand immigrant students' unique histories, cultural values, and ethnic and racial backgrounds to enhance awareness and sensitivity to strengthen the cultural awareness of college staff in providing competent student support services to immigrant college students.

For first-generation immigrant college student's awareness is key in accessing the available student support services to enhance their college experience. Pope et al. (2004) highlighted the description of the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to become a multiculturally competent professional as "communicating effectively across cultures, expanding one's cross-cultural interactions, developing campus programs and policies that are culturally sensitive and appropriate. Rebounding from inevitable cultural mistakes and incorporating new and previous learning in new situations" (p. 216) as part of the skills and abilities needed to create and maintain a multicultural environment. The authors noted that skills also include assessing one's level of multicultural competence and challenging and supporting others regarding issues of oppression to the best intervention possible; that can also be applied to moral development and the appreciation of diverse perspectives on values. College student support services leaders can help the ethnically diverse first-generation immigrant student population by providing effective and culturally competent services that enhance student college experience and student learning.

As the number of first-generation immigrant college student enrollment continues to increase, these students come from varying ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.

According to the Department of Education, there are about 4.4 million public school students whose first language is not English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The number of non-native English-speaking students highlights the challenge for higher education institutions to create programs and develop multiculturally competent student support services as well as create more inclusive learning environments that enhance first generation immigrant student college experience and academic success (Yu, 2015).

For first-generation immigrant college students, culturally competent student support services play a crucial role in their college experience and success. Kim's (2014) research on black immigrant students' socialization experience showed the influence that student support services leaders, like academic advisors and career counselors, have had on the changes students made in their academic performance, interest in the major, and persistence in college. Kim also noted the benefit of connecting ethnically diverse immigrant students with advisors and counselors that can play a mediating role as cultural mediators by providing instructive information and student support to strengthen immigrant students' connections on campus, enhancing their college experience and academic success. Higher education leaders can help students who are ethnically diverse by developing and providing culturally competent services and creating a learning environment that enhances students' overall college experience and academic success.

The dynamics of race are an interesting aspect of diverse, first-generation students. A study conducted by Burt et al. (2017) with the racial experience of foreign-born and ethnically diverse black male engineering graduate students found that students

had difficulty adjusting to a new environment. The authors highlighted racialization as an ongoing transition as well as challenges to adapting to new cultural norms in place of their cultural norms and values to reconcile the differences. The authors also noted the problem of feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, contributing to a lack of confidence adversely impacting the students' sense of belonging in the new cultural environment. In addition to race, faculty and instructor interactions also played an important role in supporting these students' overall success. A research study conducted by Stebleton et al. (2017) on foreign-born immigrant undergraduate college students' interactions with faculty and student support professionals found that students faced many challenges that made their educational experiences difficult, requiring various actions to create the supportive environment and sense of belonging necessary for success. Stebleton et al. (2017) also highlighted that the result of the interactions of immigrant students and college professionals to focus on improving or enhancing in navigating the higher education system, equal access or opportunity, and building authentic relationships. Higher education institutions can help students by developing a culturally inclusive and welcoming environment that enhances immigrant students' campus engagement and enhances their educational experiences and academic success.

### **Historical Context**

The Horn of Africa, a sub-region in East Africa, has historically been a conflict-ridden and unstable region. This region is also a source of many refugees and immigrants who have migrated to the United States beginning in the late 1970s. Hailu and Ku (2014), in their study of this region, found that among these immigrants are Ethiopian first-

generation college students wanting to continue their education and improve their lives. Though immigrant students come with a lot of hope and ambition to improve their lives, they face various issues and challenges related to language and culture.

The sub-Saharan African immigrant population in the United States roughly doubled every decade between 1980 and 2010. Zong and Batalova (2017) found that of the 1.7 million Sub-Saharan African immigrants living in the United States, East Africa accounted for 613,000 of the immigrants, with approximately 229,000 of these immigrants being Ethiopians. Zong and Batalova highlighted that Sub-Saharan immigrants have much higher educational attainment as compared to the overall foreign population. The authors also noted that Nigerians and South African immigrants had the most educational attainment, both with 57% of their population holding a bachelor's degree. Of the remaining countries, Kenyans were at 44%, Ghanaian at 40%, Liberians at 32%, Ethiopians at 29%, and Somalis at 11%. Since the research study focus group were Ethiopian first-generation college students, an introduction to the country and its populations is described below.

Ethiopia is a country in sub-Saharan Africa with a population of 108 million people and Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. The country's economy is based on agriculture. About 80% of the population lives in rural areas. Poverty, political repression and instability have driven the country's internal and external migration since the 1960s. After the 1974 revolution and the repressive and brutal Derg military regime came to power, thousands fled the country as refugees (CIA World Factbook, 2019). Ethiopia is one of the poor and less developed countries in the

region with limited resources and limited access to higher education. Ethiopia has a very low higher education participation, resulting in a shortage of skilled manpower (Yizengaw, 2007).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

While researchers have focused more of their efforts to understand first-generation students through aspects related to structural diversity, specifically the general composition and demographics of students, there are some opportunities to address how culturally specific services impact first-generation immigrant college students' educational goals. In one study, Burkhardt and Bennett (2015) highlighted that higher education institutions focus more on understanding the makeup of the student body, even though this understanding does nothing to ensure campus integration and robust cross-cultural interactions for both international and domestic students. Burkhardt and Bennett also noted that little literature addresses the gap between what higher education institutions leaders think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and international students' actual experiences, even though such knowledge is important for bridging the divide.

Additionally, the cultural understanding of student services staff is an area of interest. Although there is limited literature regarding the cultural competence of student support service staff and the delivery of student support services, specifically for first-generation immigrant college students, some have addressed related issues such as religious beliefs and practices as they relate to the student experience. Wehbe-Alamah and Fry's (2014) research study on Muslim cultural and religious beliefs and practices and institutional support services revealed the diverse backgrounds of staff and faculty in

need of learning and further exploration in relation to Muslim cultural and religious beliefs and practices as well as their knowledge of stereotypes with the Muslim culture. Wehbe-Alamah and Fry also noted the importance of creating an environment that is culturally sensitive and welcoming and that encourages the development of culturally competent student support services. As a result, institutions of higher education can expand programs that enhance cultural competence skills and capabilities through ongoing training and commitment to providing culturally responsive student support services to students with diverse cultural backgrounds that enhance student success.

While there is some research that is beginning to emerge on the topic of first-generation African students, there is still limited research specifically that addresses Ethiopian first-generation college students' college experience and academic success. Moreover, specifically regarding those Ethiopian students who attend colleges and universities in the greater Seattle/Puget Sound area in Washington State.

### **Summary**

The literature review in this chapter included four main topics relevant to this research study, including issues such as the roles of student support services, the significance of multicultural competency, and the impact of culturally competent services. Also described are gaps in the literature such as lack of data relevant to the impact of cultural competence in the delivery of support services to immigrant students with ethnically diverse culture and background in the greater Seattle area colleges. This literature review chapter concluded with a discussion on the lack of research or a gap in literature specifically addressing Ethiopian first-generation college students' college

experience and academic success as well as their perspective on the delivery of support services and the role of student support staff in higher education.

Chapter Three includes a description of the setting for the study, a qualitative method using phenomenological design, and instruments of data collection, as well as the participants' selection process and the methods for data analysis.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region. The study focused on examining how these first-generation college students have responded to the challenges of adjusting to the U.S. college education system. The researcher sought to understand students' perceptions of student support services they received that helped them overcome any obstacles they faced while in school and can help expand the limited research on the challenges and experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the United States. The findings from this study will also help higher education leaders and student support staff strengthen and enhance the development of student programs that are effective and competent in the delivery of student support services specifically for diverse first-generation college students. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation college students in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?
2. What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation college students face when attempting to accessing college student support services or programs?
3. What do Ethiopian first-generation college students perceive to be effective and helpful student support services or programs?

## **Research Methods**

Qualitative research focuses on interpreting phenomena in their natural setting to understand the unique interactions in particular situations and how meaning is constructed, and the primary goal of qualitative research study is to uncover and interpret meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative inquiry is being used for this study because a problem or issue was explored and will focus on understanding the essence of an experience by examining the perceptions or views of individual participants. This approach differs from quantitative methods that tests theories using numeric data and statistical analysis (Creswell, 2013).

## **Research Design and Instruments**

A phenomenological research design is the approach that was used. Phenomenology emphasizes a focus on the lived experiences of participants by posing questions or inquiring about what each participant has experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students. According to Vagle (2014), a phenomenological research study articulates the common meanings of lived experiences of a phenomenon for individuals. Phenomenological research describes the individual lived experiences through the lens of those individuals experiencing a certain phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Moustakas (1994) described that phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at a

phenomenon through individual lived experiences and reflection. Husserl (1999) further stated that the assumptions of a person towards the world and in questioning a person's belief and how this belief system affects research is the foundation for phenomenological reduction by suspending judgment to get the essence of experiences or phenomena.

This strategy focuses on understanding the essence of a phenomenon by examining the perceptions or views of individuals who have shared experiences of a phenomenon. For this study, a phenomenological research design was appropriate for the study topic rather than other research designs, since the focus of the research design is understanding the lived experiences of individual participants. Other designs, such as a case study, were considered. However, a case study approach only describes what happened, while phenomenological approach describes the individual's lived experience of a phenomenon. Additionally, a grounded theory was ruled out as because the emphasis is on understanding individual experience rather than developing a theory regarding Ethiopian first-generation students.

The research study will utilize individual interviews to understand how college student support services personnel integrate cultural awareness and competency. The primary data collection instrument was semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. Secondary sources include researcher field notes. The face-to-face, telephone, Skype, and Zoom interviews will focus on general and open-ended questions to generate a detailed participant experience and viewpoint. The participant interviews were recorded and transcribed. The planned interview sessions will last approximately an hour and a

half. If necessary, arrangements were made for a follow-up interview either to finish asking any remaining questions or clarification as needed.

### **Participants**

The target participants for this study were Ethiopian first-generation college students over the age of 18 who are attending or have attended either a two-year or four-year college in the greater Puget Sound region within the past five years. The sample size for this research study was 13 participants. The participants included six females and seven males. Six of them were under 30, and seven were over 40 years old. Creswell (2013) articulated that in qualitative research studies the value is collecting extensive detail about each subject or individual studied. In addressing the sample size for a phenomenological study, it can range from one to as many, as necessary. Dukes (1984) recommended studying three to 10 subjects.

Participation was voluntary. The sampling method was purposive, using the snowball sampling technique. The goal is to get 8 to 13 participants. Creswell (2013) described the concept of purposeful sampling use in qualitative research that enables a researcher to purposefully inform and select participants to elicit or collect detailed data from each participant. Patton (2002) stated that small, purposeful samples allow the researcher to understand the phenomenon in depth. Data saturation was reached when the researcher begins to hear the same comments again and again or when new data become redundant. If the researcher was unable to obtain the necessary number of participants, widening the scope of the geography or region of the study beyond the Puget Sound region helped to increase the potential pool of participants.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Data analysis was based on the responses of the participants to the interview questions, observations, and field notes, resulting in themes from the emerging data that eventually will describe common experiences, meaning or viewpoint on their experiences or phenomena. Giorgi (1975) highlighted the value of having the researcher saturate themselves with the transcripts collected during the interview before beginning any data analysis. Saturation in the data provides a perspective for the materialization of codes, categories, and eventually, themes.

Moustakas (1994) noted that in phenomenological research, data analysis follows a modified Van Kaam method. The eight essential steps are for conducting the data analysis that highlights data reduction and thematic analysis. Therefore, the plan was to use the Van Kaam method and the eight steps in the data analysis of the study. The modified Van Kaam method is a qualitative methodology that values the meaning of events experienced and described by participants and explores the descriptions of the experience. The eight steps provided by Moustakas (1994) are: horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematize the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application, individual textural description, individual structural description, textural-structural description, and composite description. Conducting these steps for each participant provided a rich understanding of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon without altering their narrative, experiences, and stories.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) articulated that another aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative research is the extent to which research findings are transferable in the context other than that in which the research was conducted. Carlson (2010) highlighted that qualitative researchers used methods like reflexivity, thick and rich descriptions, and triangulation to establish trustworthiness.

Creswell (2014) articulated the importance of developing and adopting a code of ethics that can be applied in conducting a research study. Also, a researcher conducting a research study needs to comply with Institutional Review Board guidelines to protect the rights of participants and safeguard them from harm. As part of the data collections process the researcher will engage in member checking.

### **Study Limitations**

Limitations of the study include the potential for bias on behalf of the researcher, as well as time and resource constraints, as the data were collected during the fall of 2020. Participants were recruited via personal contacts and through internal networking. As a result, the researcher has varying degrees of familiarity with a small portion of the participants. Another limitation might be the cultural differences and expectations of the participants. Hailu and Ku (2019), found that English language proficiency was a significant challenge for first-generation immigrant college students from the Horn of Africa. Thus, language fluency on the part of participants of the study can be a limitation, since English is not their native language. Also, bracketing was used to limit researcher bias.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are boundary conditions that are set by the researcher. One delimitation is that the study is limited to only first-generation Ethiopian college students. The choice of the specific participant population was due to the scope of potential research and data available on the topic and to gain new knowledge about this population regarding to their college experiences, challenges, and successes. The scope of the research study is limited to first-generation college students from Ethiopia over the age of 18 who are currently attending or have attended either a two-year or four-year colleges and universities in the Pacific northwest region of the United States. Therefore, the findings and results of this study may not necessarily generalize to other subjects, locations, or future time periods.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in higher education institutions in the greater Puget Sound region. The research study was guided by three central questions. The research method was a qualitative phenomenological research design that focuses on the lived experiences of the participants. The primary data collection instrument was a semi structured and open-ended interview questionnaire as well as field notes.

The participants were solicited from two-year and four-year colleges in the greater Puget Sound region. The sample size for the study was 8-10 participants. Each

participant was an Ethiopian first-generation college student and over the age of 18. The selection of the participants was voluntary.

Data analysis was based on responses of the participants to the interview questionnaire, observations, and field notes, all of which were analyzed and organized by focused codes, conceptual categories, and themes that will describe common experiences, meaning, or views on their experiences or phenomena. The researcher used the Van Kaam method and the eight steps in the data analysis of the study. Trustworthiness was highlighted through the validity and reliability of the research findings as well as utilizing an independent auditor to review the process and provide feedback. The potential limitations of the research study include time, resources, access to reach out to participants, and use of different interview methods.

The research study outcomes will contribute to educating educational leaders in supporting first-generation college students with ethnically diverse cultures, languages, and values to succeed in their college experience and educational goals. Getting or receiving the support services that are culturally appropriate or practices that value diversity and cultural competency leadership in supporting college students enhances student success. Also, the findings from the study will advance future research and knowledge on improving and enhancing culturally appropriate student support services in colleges and universities that improve student success.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region. This chapter includes the results of the study based on the eight-step approach of the modified Van Kaam method advanced by Moustakas (1994). The results of the study will be discussed as follows: demographics and setting, the data analysis, a presentation of the findings including a discussion of the resulting themes, and a chapter summary. Three research questions guided this research study:

1. What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation college students in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?
2. What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation college students face when attempting to access college student support services or programs?
3. What do Ethiopian first-generation college students perceive to be effective and helpful student support services or programs?

### **Demographics and Setting**

The participants for this student were 13 Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students from various colleges and universities in the greater Puget Sound region. Phenomenological design encourages utilizing a small sample size, which can result in a deeper understanding of the common meanings of lived experiences of a phenomenon (Vagle, 2014). The table below shows the demographics of participants sampled for the study.

Table 1

## Demographics of Ethiopian first-generation Immigrant Students

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Attending/Attended
Participant A	F	Under 30	Two-year college
Participant B	M	Under 30	Two-year college
Participant C	M	Under 30	Four-year college
Participant D	F	Under 30	Four-year college
Participant E	M	Under 30	Four-year college
Participant F	F	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant G	M	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant H	M	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant I	F	Under 30	Four-year college
Participant J	M	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant K	F	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant L	M	Over 40	Two-year college
Participant M	F	Over 40	Two-year college

*Note.* Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis was done using a modified Van Kaam method and included a review of interview transcripts, starting with the first reading of each transcript before coding, and the use of phenomenological reduction and bracketing to suspend researcher judgment about the world. Before coding the data, the transcribed interviews were each formatted into uniform and usable formats for notetaking, creating margins in the document for descriptive coding, notetaking, and subsequent conceptual categories. The researcher coded the data by hand using a whole-parts-whole process, which included a holistic reading of the entire text, and line-by-line reading and note taking as well as notation of any follow-up questions for research participants. After multiple readings, conceptual categories and statements were identified and extracted. Highlighting of the text was used to capture descriptive codes in each interview transcript, as well as focused codes that were underlined. The researcher utilized the page margins on the transcripts

for notetaking on conceptual categories and emerging themes and outlined blocks of texts, which fostered additional meaning and context to substantiate those themes.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The overall research findings are being presented in a table that is organized by themes and categories that emerged from the data. Several open-ended interview questions tied to the three research questions (located in Appendix A) guided the research. For the initial coding of raw data, the descriptive codes, and conceptual categories from each research question were compiled in individual tables. The raw data tables are located in Appendix D. The coding process involved a careful review and reduction of descriptive codes, conceptual categories, and emerging themes. Each research question was coded and analyzed individually, and then reviewed as a whole. Descriptive codes with a single occurrence in the interview transcripts were removed from the analysis and excluded from the tables and subsequent thematic analysis. The final data tables in Appendix F include a number corresponding to the frequency of descriptive codes emerging from the coding of the interview transcripts.

The main themes and concepts that surfaced from the data had substantial overlap with the three research questions, making a separation of discrete findings by research question challenging. Therefore, the descriptive and textural nature of the data led to the synthesis of the findings by emerging themes and categories, as opposed to specifically corresponding to each research question. The following table summarized the conceptual categories relative to the emerging themes from the data analysis.

Table 2

## Themes and Conceptual Categories

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>
Systemic communication gaps persisting	Language barrier and communication Familiarity with programs and services Communication and relationship Communication and misunderstandings Programs and services communication Information access and orientation
Financial struggles and work-school balance	Financial challenges and work difficulties
Accessibility to culturally responsive services	Information and access difficulties Language difficulties and tutoring access Cultural differences and awareness Multi language support services Support services and access Cultural background and misunderstandings Feeling confused
The diversity of staff is important for student engagement	Language translator and multi-language services Support services awareness of cultures Tutorial and support services diversity Diverse workforce and qualified people Student engagement and lack of participation

### **Discussion of Major Themes**

Research findings were assigned into four major themes. These themes are based on the invariant constituents (patterns that depict meanings) that emerged from the data. Along with each theme are the conceptual categories that arose from the analysis.

#### **Theme 1: Systemic Communication Gaps Persisting**

Theme 1 aligns with research questions 1, 2, and 3. Communication challenges, in their various forms, were brought up throughout the research, as most of the participants referenced language difficulties and misunderstandings as well as a lack of pertinent information that impacted their college experiences. References to the language barrier,

misunderstandings, and communication difficulties were expressed repeatedly by the participants in several areas that were specific to their challenges related to general communication and how information is communicated to them by support programs.

***Findings in the Category Language Barrier, Communication, Familiarity***

This category emerged from a great number of instances in the descriptive codes. Some of the codes most relating to this category include language barrier, information, tutoring, familiarity, difficulty, language, access, English, and translation. Participant A mentioned, “I had a problem with the language and then even it was like a different culture to me everything was new.” Participant B shared “I was really shy to meet with my advisor because I like my level of English was really less.” Participant I also shared “There was a language barrier even the culture, so it was very challenging. First I was not familiar.”

On many occasions, relative to language and communication, many participants highlighted the language challenge and its limitation of their involvement in school activities. Participant C shared about his experience with familiarity and language:

I was not that familiar that by itself is another problem that we have. As I said first language is a big thing and also like the more of you just got, we do not really involve as a teamwork or very shy to ask because of language or something like that. It was very tough for us to be involved in so many things you know.

Participant J shared about his experience with language where he felt misunderstood. “Yes, the first challenge was afraid of asking people because of the language barrier sometimes they do not understand your accent and then sometimes they consider us we are dumb. We do know nothing.”

Information and familiarity about available student support programs or services surfaced relative to the participants’ difficulty in accessing support services. Participant F

shared “In the beginning I did not know about anything the tutoring or the counseling so after a while like after a year or two, I got information from students.” Participant A also shared her experience with the challenge of getting pertinent information:

The challenge I face was like getting enough information about student resources and to have enough knowledge about it and that was the challenge I face. I try to gather more information and then keep trying to get contact with the people who are at the student resource who work at the student resource actually, but the main thing I get information from student better than the workers.

### ***Findings in the Category Programs and Services Communication, Information***

This category refers to the communication to the participants from the support programs. Most of them expressed that they lacked information on available programs and when there was information, the way in which information was communicated was not sufficient enough for them to engage further. One example of this challenge was from Participant C, who mentioned “I mean what kind of support they have we do not know a lot of them, so this is by far the challenge. We do not know if they exist or not.”

Participant H shared “The biggest challenge for me was information as I told you at the beginning, we had general information about the college, but it was not enough for me. I was not familiar with the stuff support.” Participant A also shared “I missed a lot of support I did not get like most of the support I should get by that time because of language because they do not have that much accessibility for us for immigrants.”

### **Theme 2: Financial Struggles and Work-School Balance**

Theme 2 aligns with research questions 1, 2, and 3. Financial challenges were expressed throughout the research, as most of the participants referenced some area of personal financial challenges as well as how working and going to school at the same time impacted their college experiences. References to the financial aid processes,

financial help, scholarships, grants, and work were expressed repeatedly. Most of the participants highlighted the need for the support services to address their unique financial need or challenges in this area.

***Findings in the Category Financial Challenges and Work Difficulties***

Some of the codes relating to this category included financial, financial aid, struggle, difficulty, help, work, and time. Participant B mentioned, “I mentioned to most of them (staff) the financial issue that I had-- you know all of it-- eventually I was working like 40 hours and I will pay my rent and everything.” Participant J shared “I was in and out of school because of most of the time you know when we are immigrants you feel like all the time you try to help your family. It is very challenging.” Participant K also shared “I was working part time at the same time I need financial aid. It was hard for me to do my school at the same time to work longer hours.”

On repeated occasions, many participants highlighted the challenge of balancing work and school. Participant B also shared his experience with financial difficulty and balancing work and school:

I remember I had to work late my class was 7am in the morning. Sometimes I used to work late until three in the morning, the teacher was very understanding sometimes I came five minutes ten minutes late and sometimes I did not show up at all. Because like I was going to ask my manager to change my hours, but he told me no, either you work or leave I had to work. I had talked to her. I have to choose work and she was just for this quarter you already signed course up. I do not want you to drop off so like try your best to show up.

Similarly, Participant G shared about his experience with working and going to school at the same time, and the difficulties in finding balance. “I have the financial aid and I was working fulltime. I work fulltime go to school fulltime so hard and I running family.” Participant E also shared “I wish they can provide work study for the student

that have big family. It is not easy for them to go to work fulltime and go to school fulltime.”

Financial aid process issues were also stated by some participants as a big challenge. Participant A noted “So, when I tried to apply for financial aid or for other resources there was not any translator there. So, I had to go through a lot of difficult times.” Participant C shared “When we came here, and we have to sign the paper but sometimes they need your parent to approve, and your parent do not live here.” and Participant F also shared her experience with the financial aid process and support, noting how she was treated:

Okay more financial aid is so hard to get education plus it is so hard to fill the application every time the change the app so, when you go there and do something, it is so complicated to get help. Yes, and most of the front desk working for financial aid they are not helpful. She just like she always, have attitude when you go there and ask her like I feel she is giving me the money, but she does not give you like the right treatment.

Several other participants were explicit when it came to the idea that support services should include financial support. Participant I shared “Maybe they should add a scholarship for immigrant students because as an immigrant I used to work at that time.” Participant H also shared “I recommend the college to have more grants like to get more support for students who are struggling with their financial. It can help students achieve their program.”

### **Theme 3: Accessibility to Culturally Responsive Services**

Theme 3 aligns with research questions 1 and 2. Most of the participants, despite having knowledge of the services, referenced the various challenges that arose when services were not culturally responsive to their needs. One service that this issue came up often was in tutoring in that those who received tutoring felt a cultural disconnect with

the staff, leading to misunderstanding and feelings of being stigmatized. The need for culturally responsive services also implied the need for those that deliver the support services to increase their own cultural awareness and understanding.

***Findings in the Category Information, Language, Tutoring Access Difficulties***

Some of the codes most relating to this category include information, language, tutoring, cultural differences, awareness, multilanguage services, cultural backgrounds, and misunderstandings. Participant C mentioned, “Their support, are like general support for everyone so they will treat you as an American or they will treat you like everyone else not separate for you.” Participant H shared “One of the most like the biggest challenge was information lack of information.” Participant I shared “I find myself struggling with finding to study with other people. I am not sure if it was my culture.”

On multiple occasions, regarding tutoring, many participants highlighted the cultural differences and lack of awareness limiting their engagement in school support services or activities. Participant I shared her experience with the tutoring service:

Yes, so there was this one person I think it was English center tutoring. Every time I ask a question, he used to come and judge like not knowing although I am going there to get help. I think that was my experience with that person. I try to avoid that person not knowing is not shameful. If you are helping a student, I do not think it is good to judge someone.

***Findings in the Category Cultural, Multilanguage Services, and Awareness***

This category included codes relating to culture, differences, awareness, language, multilanguage, and support services. Participant C shared “They will not understand like what kind of things that you have behind you know what I am saying so I was not involved in any kind of support.” Similarly, Participant C also shared “All employees to all students who work there should be multicultural from different culture so, they can

understand people.” Participant J mentioned feelings of being judged because of his accent and said, “My challenge is something like as I told you even now when you talk you can tell from my accent some people, they judge you right away and they do not have answer for your question. They just ignore you.” On repeated occasions, many participants expressed the need for multilanguage student support services. Participant C shared his suggestion for a service that serves everyone:

Well, create a student support service that can work for everyone. I mean everyone is an English not everyone speaks English so, something like bilingual kind of things you know who can help with the language I mean multicultural type of support is very helpful. Student support multicultural from different area you have someone there who can help you, who can understand your language, so you get the help you need.

### ***Findings in the Category Support Services, Cultural, and Misunderstanding***

Some of the codes relating to this theme include support services, access, cultural, background, feeling confused, and misunderstanding with the idea that a lack of cultural responsiveness ultimately leads towards misunderstanding. Participant D shared “The counseling was very helpful, but it was very difficult to get like an appointment. It takes like two three four weeks there was not like a drop in or anything so that was difficult.” Participant J mentioned, “If they have more departments open sometimes some of the departments they do not have and then some of the labs very limited time. It is very hard to go and practice down the lab.” On many occasions, relative to cultural backgrounds and misunderstandings, many participants expressed that culture and lack of awareness can create misunderstandings and confusion. Participant D shared her experience with a student support counselor:

The first counselor I had I felt I was how do I say it that she looked at me that like I am not going to make it. I am not going to graduate like that did not help at all like I am already having so much doubts so that did not help. Having that

language barrier like her saying you can do this you cannot go to computer sciences. The first counselor I had that experience emotionally was not good at all like it was very I felt I did not belong. I was not like smart enough like based on like the things I was hearing so that took me to a place I do not want to be at, and I did not want to question myself.

Participant L also shared his experience with a student support advisor and instructor:

I remember she gave me a very hard time because of my accent. She, try to make fun of me at the same time she is my advisor so I cannot talk about this issue so it, make me stronger and made me to study hard time forgive she is going to punish me if I make, a mistake she made me to study hard and make me stronger so to beat the class with a 4.0 yes, I had that kind of experience with my advisor.

#### **Theme 4: The Diversity of Staff is Important for Student Engagement**

Theme 4 aligns with research questions 1 and 3. Diversity and student engagement challenges were brought up throughout the research, as most of the participants often expressed ideas about the need for a diverse workforce, having a language translator, and a general lack of cultural awareness from staff that had impacted their college experiences.

##### ***Findings in the Category Language Translator, Multilanguage Services and Support Services Cultural Awareness***

Some of the codes relating to this category include translator, diversity, multicultural, multilanguage, engagement, and support services. Participant E shared “I remember there were friends who struggle with language, so you know I wish they had, a translator or I wish they had like you know a counselor from similar background.”

Participant J mentioned, “Yes, I wish if there, is a diverse culture or people from different country can serve the student center.”

On many occasions, participants expressed the need for multilanguage student support services. Participant L shared his suggestion for a multilanguage services:

Yes, I think if they do their program based on student individual you know instead of students, general students, they have for individual that will be nice. One thing they can do is get someone who speak the same language get more activities and do a lot of stuff for me. The first thing they should do is laid it out in different language for different type of student so they can understand. Have people who can speak different languages for different people that way it will help students to come back and access services for instead of runaway.

Similar to the sentiment expressed by many others Participant M shared “What I think is they diversity the department work on those services from different backgrounds so then people they will understand the challenges.”

***Findings in the Category Diverse Workforce, Qualified Staff, Engagement and Support Services Diversity***

Some of the codes relating to this category include diverse workforce, qualified staff, support service diversity, and student engagement and pointed to the benefits of having staff who themselves come from a diverse background. Participant L shared “Put people from different language all in the office, just hire lets’ say a person who speaks Amharic you hire him he will work with students who speak Amharic.” Participant D mentioned, “I think hiring people from different cultural background is important.”

Participant J also shared “Yes, as I told you earlier if they add more people from different culture different language that will make convenient for everyone.” Participant H mentioned, “Tutoring the math and different science classes tutoring, I recommend having more qualified people in here.”

On several occasions, participants stated the connection between having a diverse support services staff and the difference it would make in helping students become more engaged in school activities. Participant A shared “The student club makes me more engaged with school because like I said everybody is from different country. We got

different experiences and you know when we join, together we make a difference.”

Participant K also shared “We have to understand so we need extra time to understand the tutoring was the one that helps me to be engaged in that service.” Participant D shared her experience in regards to support services and diversity:

Having people like coming in to like career service centers like that look like you just having to like, see yourself within that is important. Because mostly like when I used to go to the career center a lot of just whenever guest speakers, come and it is always people that do not look like me. So even during like the black history month or anything it is always people that do not look like me teaching me like about me.

The most pointed statement on the need for a diverse staff came from Participant E who shared “I wish they can bring more people from different backgrounds.”

### **Textural Descriptions for All Participants**

According to Moustakas (1994), one of the steps of the modified Van Kaam analysis method requires the researcher to employ the construction of individual textural descriptions. These are descriptions that utilize data taken directly from the transcriptions of the interview or quotes from the participant that help in understanding the phenomenon being studied. The following are a summary of each participant’s textural description.

Participant A described her experience that language was a problem and the different culture was new to her. She also faced challenges in getting enough information about available student resources. She mentioned that when she was trying to apply for financial aid or other resources there was not any language translator, so she had to go through a lot of difficult times. Participant B stated that language was a barrier, and he described his experience as being shy to meet his advisor due to his low level of English fluency. He shared that he was working late even though his class was at 7 o’clock in the

morning, which created a schedule challenge resulting in his showing up five minutes or ten minutes late, and sometimes he did not show up at all.

Participant C pointed out that he was not familiar with available student support services and stated that it was a problem. He further highlighted that language is a big thing that limits involvement in teamwork. He also stated that the support services were too general and did not meet the unique need of immigrant students with language and cultural difficulties. Participant D shared that she did not know anyone and the language. She mentioned her experience in tutoring support and counseling services. She shared that the counseling was very helpful. However, it was difficult to get an appointment. She highlighted her experience with the first counselor that emotionally it was not good at all and she felt she did not belong.

Participant E highlighted his experience by sharing that he was struggling to balance family and work obligations with school, leading to financial difficulties. Additionally, because he had many family members to take care of, more financial support should be considered. He also pointed out the need for diversity in student support services. He shared that there were a lot of people who came from Africa who struggle with language and cultural difficulties and having translators and counselors from different backgrounds could help immigrant students. Participant F stated that in the beginning she did not know anything about the tutoring or counseling until a year or two later she got information from students. She stated that financial aid is difficult to obtain and the application process itself was challenging. She also shared that most of the front desk financial aid staff were not helpful.

Participant G described his experience working full-time and going to school full-time as well as running a family. He stated it was hard balancing work and school and appreciated the support he received. He also suggested that having a diversity enhances communication since more people speak different languages and understand different cultures that in turn helps students with their communication or language difficulties. Participant H described his experience that his biggest challenge was getting enough information. He also shared that he was not familiar with student support services.

Participant I shared that her biggest challenge in college was in general, moving here and learning the language. She pointed out that there was a language barrier and a cultural challenge. She stated that at first, she was not familiar with student support services. Participant J described his experience that he was afraid of asking people for help because of the language barrier. He shared that sometimes they do not understand his accent. He stated that it is very challenging going to school and working fulltime. He described his experience about his language difficulties. He shared that from his accent some people judge him right away. He also stated they do not have answers for his questions as well as he felt they just ignore him.

Participant K described her experience about working and trying to go to school. She shared that it was hard for her to do her school at the same time to work longer hours and support herself and her family and in that regard, she needed financial help. She further stated that schools can do better in engaging students and deliver services that addresses their unique needs. Participant L described his experience about being an immigrant and the difficulties with language. He shared that it was not that easy to access any kind of service as an immigrant and especially the first thing they will see is his skin

color, and accent. He also shared that he felt his advisor gave him a hard time because of his accent and tried to make fun of him.

Participant M described her experience in student clubs. She shared that she was more involved in clubs that had a lot of people from different backgrounds and that environment helped her to be engaged. She also stated that having diverse people with different backgrounds working in various student support departments can them to understand the challenges of immigrant students and help those students with their problems. She suggested that colleges need to have a diverse and qualified staff to better support students.

### **Structural Descriptions for All Participants**

In applying the modified Van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994), the researcher employed the development of individual structural description that highlights a vivid account of the participants experience. A summary of each structural description from participants is presented.

Participant A stated that she experienced problems with the English language and she had difficulties in accessing support services. Participant A also mentioned that she faced financial difficulties. Participant B admitted that he had difficulty with language, and he expressed that he was scared to meet his advisor and he wished that there was a translator to help him with his problems. Participant B also shared he had financial challenges and he must work full time to cover expenses and support himself.

Participant C revealed that he faced financial difficulties and he experienced challenges applying for financial aid. Participant C stated that language is a big challenge and limited his involvement in teamwork or activities. Finally, Participant C noted that

getting enough information was a challenge. Participant D revealed that she had difficulty with language. Participant D also stated that her experience with her first counselor was not good and shared that she was confused. Participant E shared his experience that people were struggling with financial difficulties. Participant E also stated difficulties with language and communication. Participant F stated that she experienced problems with the English language, and she had challenges in accessing student support services. Participant F also mentioned that she faced financial difficulties.

Participant G stated that he faced financial difficulties and he has to work full time to support himself and his family while at the same time going to school. Participant G also shared that his experience with student support services was good and he was appreciative. Participant H stated that he did not know additional forms of financial support in addition to financial aid early enough to benefit from them. Participant H believed that one of biggest challenges was lack of information and had communication difficulties. Participant I stated that she experienced problems with English language, and she had challenges in accessing student support services. Participant I admitted that balancing work and school was hard, and it was a challenge to attend school while at the same time working, which limited her time to focus on school.

Participant J shared his experience that he was afraid of asking people for help because of language difficulties. He also shared that sometimes they do not understand his accent. Participant J pointed out his experience about his language difficulties. He shared that from his accent some people judged him right away. Participant J also faced financial challenges and he stated that he was working fulltime while going to school.

Participant K stated that her experience about working and trying to go to school was challenging. She shared that it was hard for her to do her school at the same time work longer hours and support herself and her family. She needed financial help. Participant K pointed out that her experience with accessing student support services was limited. Finally, Participant K suggested that the schools can do better engaging students and deliver services that address their unique needs.

Participant L stated that he experienced difficulties with language. He also shared that it was not that easy to access any kind of service as an immigrant student. Participant L also shared that he felt his advisor gave him a hard time because of his accent and tried to make fun of him. Participant L also stated that he had financial difficulties and he revealed he was working fulltime and going to school at the same time. Participant M admitted that she had challenges with the English language, and she had difficulties in accessing student support services. Participant M also mentioned she faced financial difficulties. Participant M expressed that lack of information was one of her challenges and she suggested for additional or ongoing orientation so that student can be informed on available services to help them with their school. Finally, Participant M shared her involvement in student club that had people from different cultures and language helped her to be engaged in school activities.

### **Summary of Composite Structural Descriptions**

This stage in the analysis involved developing a composite structural description that represent the essences and meaning of all participants in the study based on the research question that guided the study. Additionally, there is an examination of the emotional and cultural connections of participant experiences across all the participants

and analysis in this step involves grouping statements into overall theme categories. The three research questions revealed the first and the second major themes from all the participants. The themes include issues of language difficulties, communication and information gaps, financial difficulties, and the participants' struggle with work and school simultaneously. The first and the second research questions revealed the third major theme. The theme includes the issue of accessing student support services, culturally responsive services, and multilanguage support services. The first and the third research questions revealed the fourth major theme. The theme includes the issue of diversity, diverse workforce, qualified support staff, and student engagement.

Participant A expressed she had difficulties with the English language and revealed she needed a translator to help her apply for financial aid. Participant B also expressed his challenge with language, and he stated he was scared to meet his advisor. Participant C disclosed that language was a barrier and limited his involvement in school activities. Participant D revealed that she had difficulty with language. Participant E expressed difficulties with language and communication. Participant F also stated difficulty with language. Participant G expressed language was a problem. Participant H also revealed that he had difficulty with language, and he also shared that he had a hard time communicating with instructors.

Participant I revealed that she had difficulty with language. Participant J expressed concern about his language difficulties. He also shared that from his accent some people judged him right away. Participant K revealed that she had difficulty with the English language, and she shared that it took her a longer amount of time to finish her paper than other people. Participant L expressed about his language difficulties. He also

shared that he felt his advisor gave him a hard time because of his accent and tried to make fun of him. Participant M revealed that she had difficulties with the English language.

The second major theme revealed issues pertaining to financial struggles and work-school balance. Twelve participants acknowledged that they struggled with financial difficulties. Participant A expressed she had financial difficulties. Participant B also expressed he had financial difficulties and he must work full time to support himself. He also shared he had a challenge balancing work and school. Similarly, Participants C, D, F, G, and H, all disclosed that financial difficulties impacted them. Participant G specifically expressed the challenges of working full time to support himself and his family along with balancing school responsibilities. Participant I like many others also revealed that she had financial difficulties and specifically called out the difficulty balancing work and school and Participant K revealed that she felt it was quite hard to do her school while at the same time working longer hours to support herself and her family.

The first two research questions helped uncover the third major theme, which was the idea that culturally responsive services are critical for these students. Participant A expressed she had difficulties in accessing other student resources or services due to limited information and due to lack of language translator. Participant B also expressed he had difficulties in accessing other student support services due to limited available time as well as a lack of a language translator. Participant C disclosed that he was not familiar with available student support services which limited his ability to access various student support services. Participant D revealed that she had difficulty in accessing various student support services due to limited-service hours. She shared that she had

difficulty in accessing the counseling service due to limited services. Participant E expressed he had difficulties in accessing student support services due to a lack of language translator. Both participants F and H stated they both had difficulty in accessing student support services due to a lack of information and not being familiar with any type of services designed to help students.

Participant I revealed that she had difficulty in accessing student support services due to lack of familiarity on available student support services. Participant J expressed he had difficulty in accessing student support services. He also shared that he was afraid of asking people for help due to communication difficulties. Participant K revealed that she had difficulty in accessing student support services due to limited available time. She shared that it took her longer time to finish her paper than other people. Participant L expressed he had difficulty in accessing student support services due to communication difficulties. Participant M revealed that she had difficulties in accessing student support services due to lack of information or awareness of available resources.

The first and third research question helped to uncover the fourth major theme. In the fourth major theme, participants expressed how important it was to have a diverse student support service staff, and how it could help student engagement. Participant A expressed she had engagement with school activities. She shared that the student club made her more engaged with school. Participant D mentioned her experience with the career center. She also shared that when she used to go to the career center, she noticed that whenever guest speakers came, it was always people that do not look like her.

Participant E expressed the need for diversity in student support services. He shared that when he used to go to the tutoring center there was only one habesha

(Ethiopian) tutor and wished there were a lot more. Participant G revealed that diversity helps students with different backgrounds and languages as well as cultures. Participant H expressed the importance of providing more qualified people to help students struggling with math and science classes. Participant J shared his feelings about his experience about the student center and diversity. He shared that he wished there were a diverse culture or people from different countries that can serve the student center.

Participant K expressed about her experience with tutoring. She shared that tutoring was the one activity that helped her to be engaged in that service. Participant L discussed his experience about student support services. He shared that the student support services should be based on individual student need instead of general students. Participant M expressed about her experience in student clubs. She shared that she was more involved in clubs that had a lot of people from different backgrounds and that this diverse environment helped her to be engaged.

### **Summary**

This chapter covered the themes derived from the analysis of data provided from 13 immigrant college students who were Ethiopian natives. This was an interpretive phenomenological study with the aim of exploring the meaningfulness and essence of the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students.

Using the Van Kaam Method of qualitative analysis by Moustakas (1994), through employing the textural description and the structural description of all participants, four major themes emerged that served as foundation for answering the three research questions. The next chapter presents a discussion of the implications and

limitations of the findings, the application of the findings to leadership, and finally, based on the data, recommendations for both action and future research.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of 13 Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students in the greater Puget Sound region. Semistructured interviews were used, and data were analyzed using a modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter builds upon the findings and includes a broader discussion and implications, along with implications for leadership and recommendations for both action and future research. The three research questions that guided this research study were:

1. What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation college students in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?
2. What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation college students face when attempting to access college student support services or programs?
3. What do Ethiopian first-generation college students perceive to be effective and helpful student support services or programs?

### **Discussion of Research Questions and Findings**

The interview process involved a series of individual open-ended questions designed to provide insight for each research question. Data were analyzed and coded, using a modified Van Kaam analysis, leading to the emergence of conceptual categories and themes. The themes, though distinct, helped create context and served as a foundation for discussion of each research question, and provided further insight into serving Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students.

**RQ1: What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?**

The first research question aligned with questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 in the interview protocol (Appendix A). The intent of the question was to explore and understand students' experiences, specific to how they both discover and access college student support programs. This question was intended to examine levels of familiarity and exposure to discovering and accessing college student programs and support services. There were different levels of description in how participants explained and defined their experiences in accessing and using student programs and services. There was also little variability among participants in their familiarity with college student support programs and services. Many of the participants also struggled to define college support programs and services, and their impact on their college experiences.

***Describing Experiences Using Student Support Services.***

Participants in this study had a variety of experiences in both discovering and using student support services. Some of the participants shared a general dissatisfaction, while others expressed how that general dissatisfaction negatively impacted them. The roots of such dissatisfaction can be attributed to many factors such as encountering rapid cultural change. As these students found themselves to be in a new environment and needing to adapt not just to the academic rigor, but also to new cultural norms, such a fast change can contribute to their hesitancy to engage in various aspects of student life. This aversion towards engagement affirms the notion explored by Tas (2013), who pointed out that international students experience difficulties due to the challenges of adapting to a

new environment. Tas also noted that the perception of their college experience is not as satisfactory as that of those students who may be more culturally assimilated and comfortable with a new environment.

### ***Familiarity with Student Support Services***

Most of the participants expressed their level of familiarity with student support services was minimal or non-existent. They expressed that they had limited information or no information about the availability of student support services. The participants' various unfamiliarity levels combined with the lack of information navigating the college system made it even more complex and challenging. Researchers such as Stebleton et al. (2017) highlighted that immigrant students faced many challenges that made their educational experience difficult. However, when immigrant students and support services professionals focused their support on more basic elements such as navigating the college system and building authentic relationships, a stronger sense of belonging to the university by these students began to emerge. Additionally, these students began to understand the purposes of student support, though there was wide variation regarding a specific definition. Some of the participants highlighted the specific services they have used, like the tutoring center, as being very helpful in their learning process. Also, the front desk support, advising, and the college website were mentioned as helpful resources in navigating and accessing available support services.

Regardless of the variations in definitions, all the participants expressed their understanding that these services help students with their education. Irlbeck et al. (2014), in their work on student support services, argued the need for colleges to provide necessary support services to enhance student success and, Bradbury and Mather (2009)

noted that support services professionals help first-generation college students adjust to social and cultural programming such as clubs and student activities. Once students found out that student support was readily available, there was more openness in not only understanding what this area of the university entailed, but also a willingness to explore the services for their own use.

### ***Personal Meaning Developed While Language Remains Difficult***

While there was variation in the ways in which participants used student support services, some derived a sense of meaning from their experience as these services helped them achieve their academic and educational goals. The idea of personal meaning is an important point to consider, as Kim (2014) noted that for many African students, having support services that are culturally relevant can not only improve academic outcomes, but can also provide a way for a richer appreciation of their own culture and background. Participants wished for a certain type of support service professional who could understand their cultural background and situation to provide them with the support they need. Some even wished for support service staff that could speak their language to help them with their language difficulties. A related but small aspect of language is in the pronunciation of student names, as Onyenekwu (2017) noted that correct name pronunciation can have a positive impact since such attempts show immigrant students that educational leaders respect and appreciate their culture.

Such examples point to the matter that immigrant students' cultural appreciation may be enhanced by providing culturally responsive support services professionals. Muse and Nevile (2012) highlighted the importance of institutional agents, especially faculty and support services professionals, which can have a positive impact on the experiences

of college students of color. Having such educators and student support staff recognize the cultural backgrounds of students, and showing interest and concern in providing support, can only enhance these students' college experience and ultimately, their academic success.

Despite these positive internal effects, one issue that remains is the language barrier and the findings are consistent with previous literature that African students studying in the United States experience language-related problems (Hailu & Ku, 2014). Additionally, a study by Kambutu and Nganga (2014) on diversity awareness in an area of globalization found that African immigrant students experience language-based difficulties as they must speak English with foreign accents contributing to misunderstandings and challenges. The consensus in the literature is that immigrant students suffer language discrimination from various people in school, adding that the issue of communications can be a major obstacle in affecting students' morale (Watkins & Harris, 2014).

One participant highlighted her experience with a counselor that emotionally it was not good at all and she felt she did not belong because of language difficulties. She also felt like she was not smart enough based on the things she was hearing from her counselor. She shared that she did not want to question herself and her ability to do things. In addition, she felt that was a hard place to be and she was confused.

**RQ2: What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students face when attempting to access college student support services or programs?**

The second research question aligned with interview questions 5, 6, 7, and 8. This research question's intent was to explore and understand challenges as students attempted

to access services. The interview questions focused on the specific ways that students had challenges in accessing support services and their experiences in doing so. There were different types of descriptions in how participants expressed their experiences.

### ***Social Stigma***

Participants noted a variety of challenges stemming from the limited information about student support services along with difficulty in communication due to the language barrier. This lack of information was due in part to not knowing what specific role that student support services play in academic life. The difficulty not only with unfamiliarity but social stigma arising from not knowing the language is an important factor to mitigate against. Yu (2015) noted that student support services can become even more effective by considering culturally responsive programming that includes understanding language needs. While researchers have explored how immigrant students access and experience support (Hailu & Ku, 2014; Onyenekwu, 2017), the findings from this study help underscore the need for services that are culturally responsive and targeted for specific student groups. Understanding the unique nuances, histories, and cultural needs of Ethiopian first-generation immigrants as distinct from other first-generation students reaffirms the idea shared by Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015), who suggested that it is critical for educators who work specifically with this cadre of students to utilize cultural competence in their work.

### ***Financial Struggles and Work-School Balance***

The data helped reveal some of the practical challenges that arose such as finances and several participants disclosed that they experienced financial difficulties which aligns with the literature on the types of challenges faced by this specific student

group. Researchers such as Hailu and Ku (2014) and Andrade (2006), in addressing how these students adjusted to higher education, found that financial difficulties were among the most difficult challenges for African college students and that they contributed to a stressful college experience. Some participants stated that they were responsible to pay for their school, to support themselves, and to help their family back home in their home country.

Participants expressed they had to work and attend school at the same time, which directly affected their academic work. Some of the participants disclosed that they were always running late to attend classes or unable to participate in student activities due to school and work schedule conflicts. They had to work because they needed the money to pay for their school, living expenses, and to help family back home. This tension between school and work aligned with what Obadare and Adebani (2009) found in that many African students send money to help their families while abroad. Thus, immigrant students by concurrently working, attending school, and attempting to address family financial obligations can face a multitude of challenges that can adversely impact their academic work.

### ***Relationship Building with Student Support Services Staff***

Despite the challenges experienced by these students, there were several who described their experiences to be positive and supportive. Developing relationships can improve student experiences and create connections with others including support staff. These relationships can help enhance students' academic success. A research study by Stebleton et al. (2014) showed that campus climate influences immigrant students' sense of belonging on campus. The study also found that faculty and peer interactions greatly

affected these students' sense of belonging as well as their persistence (Stebbleton et al., 2014; Hailu & Ku, 2014). Relationship building is one of the key elements of effective student support services and the various institutional agents ranging from faculty to support services staff all play an important part to helping students develop confidence, self-efficacy, and ultimately, academic success. The data from this study align with what Roscoe (2015) found that when students connect or develop relationships with other students, advisors, faculty, and other support staff, these connections result in improving the chances to graduate.

**RQ3: What do Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students perceive to be effective and helpful college student support services or programs?**

This research question aligned with interview questions 9, 10, 11, and 12, and the intent was to explore and understand students' perception on what would make for effective and helpful student support services. Participants in this study had shared various experiences with the type of activities that enhanced their engagement. Some highlighted that student activities like clubs that focus on international or multicultural activities encouraged them to get involved in campus life, while others stated support services like tutorial and library services encouraged them to become more involved.

***Early and Varied Approaches***

While language, finances, and environmental factors can limit these students' willingness to be engaged in school activities, Dalton and Crosby (2014) pointed to the challenge of engaging first-generation college students early on in their university experience. The authors noted that a sustained early effort by student support services professionals could play an important role in actively fostering student engagement.

Relatedly, Tas (2013), in a study on international students, concluded that can feel more isolated due to a being in a different social and cultural network, which impacts their engagement in the life of the university.

### ***Sharing Emotions While Participating***

Some participants described their emotions as positive or happy while participating in student support activities, while other participants expressed their experiences as negative or neutral. Sharing emotions while participating in student support activities played a considerable role for most of the participants since various factors such as language and adapting to a new culture were already present. This notion of emotion aligns with research from Hailu and Ku (2014), who pointed out that student support services play a role in advancing social relationships that enhance a sense of belonging, emotional support, information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback. Additionally, the authors highlighted the importance of providing advice and timely information to help first-generation immigrant students face their adjustment to college life.

### ***Towards More Effective Student Support Services***

Most of the participants expressed that their experiences in accessing effective student support services were mixed or not satisfactory. Based on the participants' experiences in using student services, most of the participants highlighted areas of support services that needed focus or improvements to enhance their effectiveness. These suggestions included having diverse staff with diverse culture and language backgrounds that can serve students and provide more tutorial help. Participant J shared "Yes, I wish if there is a diverse culture or people from different country can serve the student center for

example, I feel comfortable talking to with my language if there is student center that can speak my language.”

The difficulty with accessing and using effective student support services can be attributed to many factors, a major one being a language barrier. However, other factors, such as adaptation to a new culture and new environment, and staff empathy, and even having timely career information, can contribute to the students’ challenges as they attempt to access student support services. Sinacore and Lerner (2013) highlighted that immigrant students faced multiple challenges, including societal and psychosocial barriers that may undermine their academic success. The challenge of language combined with adjustment to living, studying, and socializing in a new country may result in barriers that can adversely impact immigrant students in feeling isolated and not belonging, thus hindering their academic success.

Recommendations for improving support services were framed from the students’ experiences in accessing and using student support services. Most of the participants expressed that student support services could have been better in its delivery of services, especially when considering all challenges that students faced. Most participants shared suggestions or recommendations to improve support services based on their experiences in accessing and using student support services. These recommendations included hiring diverse support staff who speak multiple languages and providing student orientations several times a year to improve student awareness of available student services and resources. Onyenekwu (2017) pointed out that higher education institutions lacked awareness and resources to support ethnically diverse immigrant or international students to enhance their college experiences and student success.

Finally, having a diverse staff is important for student engagement. In the study, several participants disclosed that they had a difficult time engaging with programs due to the unrelatability by staff. While institutions have tried to address disengagement in new ways such as personal coaching and learning communities, the responses are consistent with those of previous studies that explored the challenges of engaging first year and immigrant students (Dalton & Crosby, 2014; Onyenekwu, 2017). Ultimately, the responses from the participants helped reinforce the imperative that institutions must respond accordingly if they wish to reach first-generation immigrant students.

### **Application to Leadership**

The research findings provide good insight for those that lead support service programs. Since the general problem in this study is that most first-generation student support systems (student support services that depend on one-size-fits all strategies) do not consider the unique needs of diverse immigrant students, especially those who immigrate from countries without a tradition of higher education. The specific leadership problem is that the leaders of student support services in higher education do not use culturally competent practices in providing adequate support services to Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students.

Kim (2014), who explored the experiences of African immigrant students, found that the people and systems that support these students must take into consideration specific cultural and language issues when addressing their needs. Data from this study show that the language and culture barriers remain a systemic issue, and higher education leaders have a big opportunity to improve the experience for these students. Additionally, Bui (2002) concluded that support services in higher education institutions play a role by

offering specific or unique services that help the student beyond just academics. By providing additional services such as counselors, career services, and other forms of socio-emotional support, students can make the adjustment to college life less challenging. Similarly, Tovar (2015) and Hailu and Ku (2014) noted that student support services play a role in advancing social relationships and enhance a sense of belonging, emotional support, information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback, all of which can assist these students in succeeding. The importance of providing guidance and the provision of timely, pertinent information in addressing challenges or problems faced by first-generation diverse students was also noted.

The four themes that emerged from the research highlight the need for a comprehensive student support service delivery model that addresses the specific or unique needs of first-generation immigrant college students. Some noted characteristics of a model would include effective and timely communication, addressing financial support challenges, accessibility to culturally responsive services, and addressing the diversity of staff to enhance student engagement. The resulting data from this study also support similar conclusions by Winograd and Rust (2014), who explored the factors that hinder underrepresented first-generation students from accessing services. They found that college support services personnel need to bring a greater awareness of the services they offer to these students early in the academic career. By improving communication and early awareness of available student support services, underrepresented first-generation college students can access various student support services, faculty, and advisors to enhance their learning experience (Winograd & Rust, 2014).

The data highlighted the many challenges faced by Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students in accessing and using student support services and demonstrated the need for innovation in the delivery of student support services. As first-generation college student demographics continue to change and become more diverse, it is clear that higher education leaders recognize, develop, and provide effective student support services that can work for everyone.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The findings of this study confirm the need to implement a variety of remedies and practices to help Ethiopian first-generation college students. Five such recommendations are listed below and while each recommendation is unique, they all can address an underlying aspect of college support systems becoming more culturally responsive with this group.

#### **Workshops for Education Professionals**

Academic and student support personnel should establish a system that is fair and that meets the needs of all students, whether immigrant or native-born. To move forward in this regard, education professionals can benefit from professional development that specifically address the myriad of issues faced by immigrant students. Academic and student support professionals must be trained to understand the many cultural nuances that immigrant students bring. In one study on providing culturally relevant services for international black African students, Onyenekwu (2017) highlighted the importance of professional development (learning about the rich diversity of African immigrant population) by attending workshops and events put on by African-centered student organizations. It is important for academic and student support professionals to

participate in culturally-specific professional development and training to enhance their skills to support Ethiopian immigrant students and their needs.

The need for training and professional development becomes even more important as Harushimana (2007) highlighted that lack of diversity among teachers in U.S. urban schools is a major challenge that needs to be addressed. By conducting focused training and professional development education professionals may be able to enhance their multicultural skills and capacity to support diverse immigrant student populations. Finally, as Cuyjet and Duncan (2013), asserted the importance of becoming a skilled multicultural professional to positively influence the moral and personal development of the ethnically diverse first-generation college students, having workshops for these professionals can help make them more effective in their roles.

### **Early Orientation Programs**

Participants disclosed that there was lack of pertinent information. Several participants acknowledged there was no orientation provided to them either when they started college or during their stay in college, which limited their awareness in terms of available student resources as well as support services that they can access. Given the fact that they found themselves in a new environment, the need for timely and relevant information that can help Ethiopian immigrant students access student support services is worth noting. Creating a special orientation program for immigrant students can be implemented as they start college and if possible, offered on a yearly basis. Such a program can be helpful for continued engagement with campus life. In one study on understanding black immigrant students' engagement in student activities, Griffin and McIntosh (2015) highlighted that student support professionals should provide pertinent

information about the different clubs on campus to ensure students know about the various student activities available so that they are aware and can choose an activity that fits their interest. Similarly, Tas (2013) pointed out the importance of orientation to help international students adjust to the social and academic environment. Because the timing of coming into a new environment is critical for these students, it is important for academic and student support professionals to provide students, upon entering this new environment, an early orientation about college programs and services for Ethiopian immigrant students to enhance their college experience and even replicate such an orientation on a yearly basis, serving both continuing and new students.

### **Language and Social Support Programs**

Diversifying the range of student support beyond traditional academic services can be beneficial for students. The findings from this study indicate that Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students need a variety of diverse supports that help address their unique needs as well as their social needs. Clubs and activities along with more foundational supports such as language classes can all be helpful. Tovar (2015) highlighted that student support professionals have multiple roles and encouraging students to explore and participate in various social activities and program can be important for their success. Specific foundational supports like language classes can help bridge any communication difficulties that students may be experiencing. Beyond language-specific classes, university support programs can offer frequent opportunities for social interaction that can provide an easy entry point for these students to further their interaction with each other and the university.

### **Community Outreach Initiatives**

Since many participants noted the abrupt cultural shift to a new environment, programs to help assimilate Ethiopian students prior to attending may be helpful. Such a program could be offered during a student's high school years that would help students learn and understand the culture of higher education while they consider their choice of school. Petty (2014) articulated the importance of having colleges create bridge programs that link colleges to high schools to facilitate academic and social pathways to assist students prepare for college. By utilizing various approaches like field trips or presentations by other first-generation college students, such initiatives could help in motivating students and enhance their eventual transition to a college environment.

### **Connecting with Other First-Generation Ethiopian Immigrant Students**

While the participants represented a sample of first-generation immigrant students, specifically from Ethiopia, their responses indicated that relationship building remained a key element across the board. Additionally, with many of them noting the need for diverse forms of support, a program could be set up by the institution to match those first-generation Ethiopian immigrant students who have either attended or may be currently attending with those incoming first-generation students. Such a connection would be beneficial. Roscoe (2015) highlighted the importance of mentoring programs to help students, especially first-generation underserved minority college students who, by feeling connected with the college experience, can experience greater academic success. Additionally, Swecker, et al. (2013) and Roscoe (2015) also found that when students first-generation students have strong connections with other students and support staff, these connections help in improving student retention and the likelihood of graduating.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research study explored the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students. Three research questions were addressed, and 13 Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students were interviewed. Chapter Four detailed the findings of the study. In this final section, the researcher provides recommendations for future researchers who wish to examine this topic. Several areas for future study may include replicating the study using in-person interviews, enlarging the number of participants, conducting the study completely in the students' native language, expanding the scope of the research to other African populations, and finally, comparing the experience of foreign-born students to those of native-born students.

In this study, virtual (via Zoom) interviews were used, allowing for the collection of data. In the future, face-to-face interviews can be used to uncover additional rich and robust data or enhanced data that might have been limited due to the technical challenges of conducting the interview via the virtual method. Face-to-face interviews may provide new insights through observing and noting any non-verbal expressions that could enhance the collection of data. The number of participants were limited to a small total number. By increasing the number of the participants, wider inferences could be developed that can help in discovering additional insights into this population.

Another limitation in this study was the language fluency of the participants. Since the interviews were not conducted in the native languages of the Ethiopian immigrant students, this limitation could have impacted their ability to freely express themselves and uncover any cultural nuances arising from language. Kambutu and Nganga (2014) highlighted that African immigrant students often experience language-

based difficulties due to being uncomfortable in expressing their ideas in a different language. These interactions often contribute to misunderstandings and challenges. For future studies, researchers could conduct interviews using their participants' native language, which may help participants feel more comfortable in responding to questions, perhaps uncovering richer data to explore.

This study was limited to only Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students. Since there is limited research on college experiences of other African immigrant students, there is an opportunity for future researchers to create and expand knowledge through research related to a broader set of African immigrant college students' experiences. Future studies can be expanded to include other Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, exploring their college experiences and comparing similarities and differences between subgroups. Relatedly, the scope of the study can be expanded to include Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students in several geographical areas of the United States instead of being limited only to the greater Puget Sound region.

Finally, a study that compares the performance and experiences of foreign born, Ethiopian immigrant students to the native born, Ethiopian students could help future researchers develop more insight to identify the differences and similarities. Stebleton et al. (2017), in a study of foreign-born immigrant college students' interactions with faculty and student support professionals, found that students faced many challenges that made their educational experiences difficult, requiring various actions to create supportive environment and sense of belonging necessary for success.

### **Concluding Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students in the greater Puget Sound region. Findings in this study add to the previous literature, which concludes that African immigrant students studying in the United States have unique needs. African immigrant students have difficulties that include but are not limited to problems related to language, financial, culture, and academic (Hailu & Ku, 2014). The study utilized three research questions and explored the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students in a United States college. The modified Van Kaam method advanced by Moustakas (1994) was employed for data analysis. Finally, the researcher presented implications for practice and offered recommendations for further study.

The current research study revealed four major themes that were generated from the three research questions. The major themes are: (1) Systemic communication gaps persist, (2) Financial struggles and work-school balance, (3) Accessibility to culturally responsive services are critical, and (4) The diversity of staff is important for student engagement. The essence of the description and explanation of the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students have been meaningful in that the findings point out clearly that the experiences impact the academic goals of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students. Given the implications for practice derived from the findings of the study, more needs to be done to help Ethiopian first-generation immigrant students in college. The findings of this current study suggest that leaders of higher education and student support professionals should provide student support services that specifically address their unique needs in academic programs and student services to

enhance their college experiences and educational goals. It is crucial that the unique needs of these immigrant college students must be addressed. Given the national conversations around issues related to cultural assimilation, diversity, and inclusion, improving ways to support for this set of students, through understanding their cultural needs, is not only critical for their success, but also for the success of the overall institution, and ultimately for higher education.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students in higher education in the greater Puget Sound region

RQ1: What is the experience of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college student in accessing college student programs and using student support services or programs?

1. How would you describe your experience in using student support services?
2. How familiar are you with college student support services or programs?
3. How would you define college support services or programs?
4. Can you tell me about college student support services and what it means to you?

RQ2: What challenges do Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students face when attempting to access college student support services or programs?

5. What challenges did you face in accessing student support services?
6. What do you do when faced some difficulties in accessing student support services?
7. What does your relationship look like with student support services professionals?
8. Whom do you ask for help when you need to access student support services?

RQ3: What do Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students perceive to be effective and helpful college student support services or programs?

9. Based on your experience with student support services, what type of activities makes you feel more engaged and helpful?
10. Based on your experience, can you share about your emotions while participating in student support activities or programs?
11. What could the college or the organization do more to provide effective student support services or programs?
12. Based on your experience, what student support services improvement would you recommend?

**APPENDIX B**  
**Participant Recruitment Email**

Dear (Potential Participant)

I am contacting you to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the lived experience of Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college students. I have received approval from the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research and you were identified as a potential participant because you are an Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college student. You are receiving this solicitation because you are a personal contact of the researcher, or because you were referred as someone who may be potentially qualified and/or interested in participating. You may have also received this solicitation via email forwarded from one of your contacts.

While significant amount research has been conducted on first-generation college students' experiences and the various approaches for improving student support services, there is a limited research on first-generation immigrant college students who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This issue poses a challenge for higher education because most student support systems, do not always consider the unique needs of this population. Understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Ethiopian first-generation college students may provide insight into considerations for higher education institutions student support services strategies.

Your expression of interest does not mean you are automatically selected for this study. Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate. Participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw with, or without cause. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing. Additionally, there are no costs associated with participating. All of the information will be treated as confidential. No personally identifiable information such as names will be used in documentation arising from this research.

If you decide to participate, I will need to obtain a consent form for you prior to scheduling an interview. If you have questions, or would like more information, feel free to contact me by replying to this email.

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Tsegai Bekele  
City University of Seattle Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C  
CityU Research Participant Informed Consent



School of Education and Leadership

**CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT**

**Title of Study:**

Supporting the Success of Ethiopian First-Generation College Students

**Name and Title of Researcher(s):**

Tsegai Bekele

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Joel L. Domingo

**Department:** School of Education and Leadership/Research Institute

**Telephone:** 206-239-4770

**City U E-mail:** jdomingo@cityu.edu

**Key Information about this Research Study**

**You are being invited to participate in a research study.**

The researcher will explain this research study to you before you will be asked to participate in the study and before you sign this consent form.

- You do not have to participate in this research.
- It is your choice whether or not you want to participate in this research.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you can decide not to participate or withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or negative consequences.
- You should talk to the researcher(s) about the study and ask them as many questions you need to help you make your decision.

**What should I know about being a participant in this research study?**

This form contains important information that will help you decide whether to join the study. Take the time to carefully review this information.

You are eligible to participate in this study because you are an Ethiopian first-generation immigrant college student who is attending or attended a two-year or four-year college in the greater Puget Sound region.

You will be in this research study for approximately 6 months, beginning in the fall of 2020. The estimated date of completion of the study will March 2021.

About 8-12 individuals will participate in this study.

To make your decision, you must consider all the information below:

- The purpose of the research
- The procedures of the research. That is, what you will be asked to do.
- The risks of participating in the research.
- The benefits of participating in the research and whether participation is worth the risk.

The researcher will explain this research study to you.

- You do not have to participate in this research.
- It is your choice whether or not you want to participate in this research.
- Your participation is voluntary, and you can decide not to participate or withdraw your participation at any time without negative consequences.
- You should talk to the researchers about the study and ask them any questions you have.

If you decide to join the study, you will be asked to electronically sign this form before you can start study-related activities.

Why is this research being done?

A lot of research has been conducted on first-generation college students experiences and the various approaches for improving student support services. However, there is not a lot of research on first-generation immigrant college students who come from Ethiopia. This issue poses a challenge for higher education because most student support systems do not always consider the unique needs of this population.

By researching the impact of the culturally competent practices used by student support service professionals, higher education leaders can develop and provide effective student support services for this particular population.

Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study will be to understand the lived experiences of Ethiopian first-generation college students in the greater Puget Sound region.

**Research Participation.**

**You will be asked to participate in the following procedures:**

The researcher will interview you via videoconference and ask questions about your experience as a first-generation Ethiopian college student and the type of academic and other supports you received from the college. The questions will be opened-ended and may elaborate as much or as little as you choose. You do not have to answer any questions that might make you feel uncomfortable or upsetting. Some examples of questions could be:

*“What do you do when faced with some difficulties in accessing student support services?”*

*“Based on your experience, can you share about your emotions while participating in student support services?”*

I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (initial options below that apply):

- Interview via videoconference (Skype and/or Zoom)
- Answer written questionnaire(s); Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_
- Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, \_\_\_\_\_; Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_
- Other, specifically, \_\_\_\_\_. Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_

**Audio/Video Recording**

**The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and will be conducted via videoconference using Skype and/or Zoom. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed because the responses will be the data used for analysis. The**

**recordings will be kept in password-protected media in a secure location and accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the research, the recordings will be erased, and media wiped clean.**

You may refuse to answer any question or any item in the interview and you can stop or withdraw from any audio or visual recording at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.

**Are there any risks, stress or discomforts that I will experience as a result of being a participant in this study?**

**I/We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.**

**Will being a participant in this study benefit me in any way?**

**There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. However, there may be indirect benefits as information from this research will benefit those that work with first generation college students from diverse backgrounds.**

You will not receive any payment for participation in this study.

Your involvement is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without negative consequences, by refusing to answer any further questions or exiting from the interview entirely. You may request a copy of the final research study report. Should you request a copy, you may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

### **Confidentiality**

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means.

Steps will be taken to protect your identity, however, information collected about you can never be 100% secure. Your name and any other identifying information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from data collected as part of the research study. The results of this study will be published as a thesis and potentially published in an academic book or journal or presented at an academic conference. To protect your privacy, no information that could directly identify you will be included.

All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and computer files will be encrypted and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for 5 years. At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The

published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

### Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research study at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

**ELECTRONIC CONSENT:** Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "**agree**" button below indicates that:

- you have read and understand all of the above information, and
- you voluntarily agree to participate, and
- you are at least 18 years of age.

If you **do not wish to participate** in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "**disagree**" button.

Agree

Disagree

Thank you,

Tsegai Bekele  
Name of Researcher

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated or think that I have been harmed as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):

Dr. Joel Domingo  
Chair, Research Institute, City University of Seattle  
521 Wall St, #100  
Seattle, WA 98121  
206-239-4770  
[jdomingo@cityu.edu](mailto:jdomingo@cityu.edu)

This study has been reviewed and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of City University of Seattle. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the IRB at:  
City University of Seattle  
521 Wall Street, Suite 100.  
Seattle, WA, 98121  
IRB@Cityu.edu.

**APPENDIX D**  
**Research Question Codes and Conceptual Categories**

Codes and Conceptual Categories from Research Question #1

<b>Descriptive Code</b>	<b>#Occurrences</b>	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>
financial/financial aid	18	Language barrier and communication
Tutor/Tutoring	17	Familiarity with programs and services
Language	16	Financial challenges and work difficulties
services/support services	9	Information and access difficulties
information	9	language difficulties and tutoring access
familiarity/familiar	8	Cultural differences and awareness
different	8	
help	8	
culture/multicultural	7	
access	7	
difficult/difficulty	6	
struggle/struggling	6	
writing	5	
advisor/advising	5	
challenge/challenging	5	
barrier	4	
problem	4	
ask	4	
organized	4	
community	4	
know	4	
advertised/advertisement	3	
translator/translate	3	
diverse/diversity	3	
immigrant	3	
counseling	2	
experience	2	
appointment	2	
feel/feelings	2	
orientation	2	
discrimination	2	
understand/understanding	2	
clue	2	
guiding/guided	2	
accent	2	
enough	2	
english	2	

## Codes and Conceptual Categories from Research Question #2

<b>Codes</b>	<b>#Occurrences</b>	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>
culture/cultural	13	Cultural differences and awareness
language	11	Multi language support services
challenge/challenging	10	Support services and access
information	9	Communication and relationship
financial/financial aid	9	Information access and orientation
barrier	9	Programs and services communication
ask/asking	9	Financial challenges and work difficulties
communication/communicate	8	
advisor	8	
relationship	6	
tutor/tutoring	6	
access	4	
services	4	
difficult/difficulty	4	
help	4	
different	3	
professional	3	
respectful/respect	3	
english	2	
experience	2	
influence	2	
enough	2	
understand/understanding	2	
time	2	
accent	2	
feel/feelings	2	
struggle/struggling	2	
dumb	2	
friendly	2	
background	2	
orientation/oriented	2	

## Codes and Conceptual Categories from Research Question #3

<b>Codes</b>	<b>#Occurrences</b>	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>
different	17	Cultural differences and awareness
language	15	Language translator and multilanguage services
services/support	13	Support services awareness of cultures
feel/feeling	13	Feeling confused
culture/cultural	12	Tutorial and support services diversity
tutor/tutoring	12	Diverse workforce and qualified people
diverse/diversity	10	Financial challenges and work difficulties
club/clubs	10	Student engagement and lack of participation
people	10	Communication and misunderstandings
financial/financial aid	6	
engage/engaged	5	
information	5	
ask	5	
understand	4	
challenge	4	
background	4	
learning	4	
translator/translating	3	
safe	3	
confused/confusing	3	
work	3	
multi	3	
time	3	
immigrant	3	
experience	3	
qualified	3	
welcoming	3	
place	3	
training	2	
mental	2	
depressing	2	
parking	2	
happy	2	
shame/ashamed	2	
advertise/advertising	2	
orientation	2	
problem	2	
encouraging	2	
comfortable	2	
access	2	