Chapter 7

Is the “First-Generation Student” Term Useful for Understanding Inequality? The Role of Intersectionality in Illuminating the Implications of an Accepted—Yet Unchallenged—Term

THAI-HUY NGUYEN
Seattle University

BACH MAI DOLLY NGUYEN
Lewis & Clark College

First-generation students (FGSs) have received a great deal of attention in education research, practice, and policy. The difficulty of understanding and subsequently addressing the various and persistent configurations of inequality associated with FGSs lies with the complicated yet obscure state of the FGS term itself. Leaving the term unquestioned limits the capacity to grasp how these students’ backgrounds and identities shape their decisions and relationships to others and to institutions, and risks reproducing the very inequality that education researchers wish to mitigate. This chapter begins to resolve these conflicts by offering a critical analysis and discussion—grounded by the concept of intersectionality—of the empirical literature on FGSs. We identify and discuss the dominant and problematic manner in which the FGS term has been operationalized in research and discuss the implications of their findings. We end with a discussion on emerging topics that extends the consideration of research on FGSs beyond the imaginary, traditional boundaries of college campuses.

Google “first-generation students.” The result is 74,400 news articles. American higher education as well as the American public have been fascinated with this population of students—broadly conceived as those first in their family to attend college—in part because they symbolize the social inequality that colleges and universities are perceived to help stamp out. But, in fact, institutions have been accused for doing the exact opposite. As of late, major news outlets like the New York Times (Harris, 2017;
Pappano, 2015), The Washington Post (Banks-Santilli, 2015; Cardoza, 2016), The Boston Globe (Foster, 2015), and The Atlantic (Kahlenberg, 2016; Young, 2016) have pointed out this wrongdoing by featuring the plight of first-generation college students (FGSs) and the challenges and conflicts they encounter and contend with as they seek a life beyond their current status. From feelings of alienation as they transition to an unfamiliar space, including the uncertainty of navigating accepted social decorum, to the persistent fear of homelessness and starvation between academic terms, the status of being an FGS reveals policies, norms, and cultural processes of institutions that privilege the experiences and knowledge of “traditional” students, whose parents attended college (Dumais & Ward, 2010; London, 1989). As such, institutions reinforce the inequality of opportunity that facilitate “the unequal distribution of desirable life outcomes” (Carter & Reardon, 2014, p. 3; see also Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008). The difficulty, however, of understanding and subsequently addressing the various, and persistent, configurations of inequality associated with FGSs lies with the complicated, yet obscure state of the FGS term itself, a term used superfluously and without question.

First-generation students can make up 22% to 77% of the undergraduate enrollment and their 6-year graduation rates can range from 10.9% to 50.2% (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011; Núñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2011; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, in press; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Why such drastic ranges? Since the term was originally defined by Fuji Adachi in 1979 to refer to students who do not have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree, researchers have shifted the criteria for inclusion up and down a wide spectrum of parental educational attainment (Auclair et al., 2008; Toutkoushian et al., in press). Toutkoushian et al. (in press) argued that how FGSs are counted is largely determined by how they are defined. Using the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, they demonstrated how differences in definition, or levels of parental education, significantly affected student behavior (i.e., taking the Scholastic Assessment Test/American College Testing) and enrollment in 2- or 4-year institutions. This critical distinction, however, is rarely made in research or popular media, which opens up claims about the FGS population to significant critique, as differences in its definition have theoretical, empirical, and policy implications. Assumptions undergirding the term are linked to their parents’ level of education, where the “effect”—the type, amount, and quality of resources imparted on students by their parents’ education—of being an FGS shapes their level of confidence, degree of comfort in college, and possession of privileged knowledge. Given that this may lead to hugely diverse realities for students who are grouped together into a single FGS category, it begs the following questions: Are the experiences and outcomes of students with parents with only a high school diploma similar to students with one college-educated parent? Are the resources and knowledge similarly passed on? When the definition is inconsistent, as is evident by drastic ranges in enrollment and graduation, how we make sense of this effect is problematic and leads to a muddled understanding of the actualized inequality facing FGSs.
The FGS term, then, simultaneously seeks *and* fails to capture the richness and complexity of students’ lives. This point is affirmed by the wide demographic variation within this population. FGSs, depending on the inclusion criteria, are more likely to be female (60.2%) and to come from homes with a family income of less than $25,000 (50.3%; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Within racial groups, Hispanic students are more likely to be an FGS (53% at 2-year institutions, 38.2% at 4-year institutions) than their peers, with Black and Native American students following closely behind (40% to 45% at 2-year institutions, 16% to 23% at 4-year institutions; Nomi, 2005; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Despite these characteristics, studies often use the FGS term to lay claim to students’ challenges and educational outcomes, ignoring the possibility that other dimensions of their lives and identities may overlap or play a larger role than the FGS status alone (Billson & Terry, 1982). Studies also assume that being an FGS has an effect that is unique from gender, race, social class, and other salient categories of analysis, and thus, dismiss the fact that parental education (i.e., how the FGS term is defined) is already an outcome of structural circumstances related to those same social forces. Moving beyond parental education “invites us to characterize as fully as possible the conditions and circumstances of early life” (Hout, 2015, p. 28). Efforts to better understand students who are considered first-generation, however, are challenged by the confounding nature and use of the FGS term, for it masks their differences across multiple dimensions of social life. And because those dimensions cannot be precisely identified, how we make sense of the mechanisms that maintain our highly stratified system of education is hindered. The FGS term is a conceptual conundrum. Leaving it unquestioned limits the capacity to grasp how students’ backgrounds and identities shape their decisions and relationships to others and to institutions, and risks reproducing the very inequality that education researchers wish to mitigate. This chapter begins to resolve these conflicts by offering a critical analysis and discussion—grounded by the concept of intersectionality—of the empirical literature on FGSs (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Intersectionality captures “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Because of its intent to complicate the characterization of individuals and reveal sources of power and oppression, intersectionality offers a path to critique the manner in which categories of analysis, such as the FGS status, are operationalized in broad strokes without recognizing the granular dynamics between a student’s background, their institution, and their experience and outcomes. In this chapter, we suggest that FGS status must be understood by their relationships to other identities and to institutions and that those associations cannot be captured by their marginalized status alone. Instead, an intersectional approach pushes us to examine who FGSs are *underneath* this broad term and, thus, uncover the structural forces attached to categorization that drives unequal relationships. An excerpt from *The Atlantic* (Young, 2016) captures the essence of this idea:
In this chapter, we do not offer a definitive response to “how many labels are necessary to understand first-generation students’ needs,” but we contend that it is more than the single and simple dominant narrative that the FGS term currently offers. By employing intersectionality to guide the analysis, this review of research makes two primary contributions. First, we demonstrate the quandary of using the FGS term so profusely without the distinct acknowledgment of the inconsistent nature of the category, and thus highlight the obscure state of our understanding of this undefined population. Second, we bring attention to the limited capacity of the FGS term to demonstrate differential outcomes and experiences of students, which are conditional on who these students are and the extent by which they are valued by their institutions. In utilizing intersectionality, we point out that the effect and influence of the FGS category is exceptionally difficult to isolate, and contend that the explicit examination of relationships between categories of analysis can better disentangle the education field’s ambiguous conceptualizations of FGSs. In short, we seek to answer the following question: Should the FGS term continue to be used as a category for understanding and addressing inequality in higher education? We argue, yes. The FGS term brings consequential attention to many students who struggle. However, to ensure that attention is translated to effective practice and scholarship, the process of how the FGS term is used—the capacity to unveil the who, what, and where—must be discussed and evaluated. Refraining from doing so promotes misunderstanding, casting a wide shadow that blinds us from the forces that maintain inequality.

We organize this review of research into three main sections. First, we discuss our strategy in securing and organizing the literature and introduce our theoretical approach, arguing its significance in peeling back the layers of the FGS term and clarifying the power dynamics undergirding the unequal relationship between student and institution. We draw on McCall’s (2005) and Núñez’s (2014) conceptualizations of intersectionality to guide our analysis of the literature. Second, we review and discuss the dominant and problematic manners in which the FGS term has been operationalized in research for the past 30 years and discuss the implications of their findings. Third, we provide a discussion of the effectiveness of how the FGS term has been used, highlighting its theoretical and methodological strengths and shortcomings. Additionally, we discuss emerging topics that extend this discussion beyond the imaginary, traditional boundaries and understandings of college campuses.

**INTERSECTIONALITY AND LOCATIONS OF INEQUALITY**

We maintain that mitigating inequality for FGSs requires that we render the term and how it is used suspect. This means that we must take an insular look at the term by refraining from merely establishing differences between FGSs and non-FGSs and...
using the term in ways that obscure how individuals are multiply disadvantaged. To achieve this goal, we conceive intersectionality as an analytic strategy, a “theory of marginalized subjectivity” as this allows us to seize and center the locations where colleges and universities differentially influence FGSs’ lives, as opposed to reinforcing the category as a mere analytic additive to student identities (Nash, 2008, p. 10). These locations of inequality, however, are often difficult to find and acknowledge when dominant institutions have a narrow view of students that precludes seeing individuals as multiply disadvantaged.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw presented the concept of intersectionality by citing a legal case, *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, where the court refused to acknowledge the plaintiff’s—five Black women—claim of discrimination in hiring practices. In the court’s eyes, General Motors did not violate the law because it hired Black men and White women, albeit not Black women. According to Crenshaw (1989),

Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups. Where their experiences are distinct, Black women can expect little protection as long as approaches, such as that in *DeGraffenreid*, which completely obscure problems of intersectionality prevail. (p. 143)

Twenty-seven years later at a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk, Crenshaw (2016) made the same argument about society’s refusal to acknowledge the disproportionate killings of and violence against Black women by police, “These women’s names have slipped through our consciousness because there are no frames for us to see them.” Intersectionality then is a frame to acknowledge the ways multiple social realities, structured by the dominant norms and values of institutions, converge to produce distinct, overlapping moments and experiences of disadvantage that are often rendered invisible by the majority (Crenshaw, 1989). This acknowledgment is not immediate, nor always clear. In the case of students categorized as an FGS, we draw on McCall’s (2005) and Núñez’s (2014) approaches to the study of intersectionality, which expound Crenshaw’s main premise and offer a path and direction to guide our analysis and help demonstrate the limitations of how the FGS term is used. Whereas McCall (2005) focuses on the deconstruction of categories and the relationships between categories, Núñez (2014) looks outward to consider how multiple layers of systems shape the individuals captured in those categories. Together, they allow us to critique who the FGS term captures and how it is used to explain students’ relationships with their postsecondary institutions.

McCall (2005) advances three methodological approaches to intersectionality of which we use two—anticategorical complexity and intercategorical complexity—to undermine the assumptions of the FGS term and begin complicating the differences that have been established between FGSs and their peers, which have confounded, rather than clarified, locations of inequality. The anticategorical complexity argues for the deconstruction of analytical categories, augmenting the “skepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773), which offers the opportunity to problematize the many variations of the FGS
term. McCall contends that no single category can capture the complexities of human life; thus, we can speculate about the relative usefulness of the term even if the inclusion criteria shifts from one study to the next. For the past 30 some years, research on FGSs has steadily increased, with exceptional growth of “606% between 1999 and 2013” (Wildhagen, 2015, p. 287). We have collected and organized this literature and were struck by how studies (with some rare exceptions discussed in our next section) reinforced the power of this category by reducing the complexity of self and self’s relations to others and to systems of inequality. Research and institutions are at fault for discursively constructing the FGS term by comparing these students against those with college-educated parents, thereby creating a dominant narrative that is wrought with overly vague assumptions in which to base their decisions. We have chosen to deconstruct this binary and, in doing so, deconstruct the power that maintains this narrative because “any research that is based on such categorization . . . inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). We then draw from the notion of intercategorical complexity, in which we “provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773). Although these categories alone are inclined to minimize the complexity of lives, it is the evolving and shifting nature of their relationships to each other that lie at the heart of our analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). McCall’s approaches allow us a path to critique how the FGS term is operationalized in research, thereby questioning the power of this category to obscure and confound the social forces that shape students’ lives.

We would be remiss, however, to ignore the social, political, and economic context of student marginality. Students’ marginality is not simply a point in which identities intersect but a space where “dynamics of identity, power, and history play out to shape educational experiences and outcomes in differential ways” (Núñez, 2014, p. 87). To this point, Núñez (2014) advances a three-level approach that accounts for “micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis” (p. 87). The first level examines how social categories are defined and related to each other. The second level situates the individual across “domains of power” (p. 88), including the following: “(a) organizational (e.g., positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education), (b) representational (e.g., discursive processes), and (c) intersubjective (e.g., relationships between individuals and members of groups), and (d) experiential (e.g., narrative sensemaking)” (p. 88). Both levels are then contextualized “within a broader temporal and spatial context,” or the third level, which is called historicity. Therefore, making sense of students’ experiences from this framework helps delineate—make visible—overlapping forces and contexts, bringing to light how colleges and other systems reward or penalize students by their identities and backgrounds at various moments and across various contexts. By leaning on McCall (2005) and Núñez (2014), we demonstrate and explicate limitations to how the FGS term is used. This is a first step toward providing alternative narratives that highlight the way systems of dominance manifest and endure over time.
Methodology

Using EBSCOhost and Google Scholar, we conducted a detailed search of literature on FGSs. Key words included “First-Generation Students,” “First-Generation College Students,” and “First in Family.” A total of 450 items were located, representing published research—peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, books, dissertations, policy reports, newspaper articles, and magazine articles—between 1986 and 2017. We established several criteria to narrow our focus for this review. We focused on studies that centered FGSs in their primary questions and analyses. Items that mentioned FGSs tangentially were excluded. We excluded any books, book chapters, and policy reports that did not discuss empirical data and analysis on FGSs. Some of these items, however, were used to help contextualize the purpose of our inquiry, especially if they offered key descriptive data. Non–peer-reviewed sources such as dissertations and some books and book chapters were also excluded since the peer-review process provides legitimacy to the significance of the FGS term (Lamont, 2009), which undergirds the process of classification and, ultimately, supports the claim that the complex lives of students fit neatly “into a single ‘master’ category” (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). Given that the peer-review process reinforces and legitimizes the knowledge that is put forth, we wanted to only include items that have gone through such a process since this chapter keys in on the discursive construction and use of the FGS term (Lamont, 2009). Peer-reviewed articles were excluded to the extent that they were conceptual syntheses or only offered a summary of best practices and recommendations, which typically do not require empirical data. And last, we also excluded peer-reviewed articles on FGSs that stood outside the American context. Because systems of postsecondary education vary drastically around the world, it would be beyond the scope of our inquiry to discuss and account for those differences in analyzing the FGS term (Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). The remaining 77 peer-reviewed sources that make up our selective review were primarily made up of journal articles and a handful of books. Although all 77 sources were reviewed and included in our references, our in-text citations only feature 74 sources. The remaining three sources were excluded because they did not further illustrate our argument and points (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Bui, 2005; Núñez, 2005).

RENDERING THE FGS TERM SUSPECT AND LOOKING WITHIN

Intersectionality channels our attention to how institutions are constructed to “shape the multiple dimensions” of students’ experiences (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). For those considered an FGS, we struggle to understand and identify how this phenomenon occurs and where it takes place. This problem emerges from the power of the FGS term, so narrowly and inconsistently defined, to transpose a single narrative of inequality on a heterogeneous population of students—a process that is reified by the very scholarship aimed to clarify students’ experiences and outcomes. We
contend, that left unaddressed, how the FGS term is currently used in research can lead to precarious implications for both theory and practice. In this section, McCall’s (2005) and Núñez’s (2014) approaches to intersectionality guide our review and analytical critique of how the FGS term is used in research. These insights are organized around two points, in which we call attention to the issues with how the term is currently operationalized, discuss the consequences of that operationalization, and offer promising model(s) as alternatives. In doing so, the organization of literature also fell along unintended methodological lines. Nonetheless, this emergence allowed us to illustrate the multiple implications of the FGS term in research. In the section, “Masking Social Realities,” we review quantitative research on FGSs to discuss how the term informs or how it hides the inequality of student outcomes when used as a variable of analysis. In “Locations of Inequality,” we question how the use of the FGS term in primarily qualitative studies anchors our capacity to more precisely understand how institutions are structured to differentially shape the experiences of students. As a result of this inquiry, intersectionality allows us to pose critical questions and to highlight conflicting views, a fundamental step to developing a wider frame, one “that allows us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group,” (Crenshaw, 2016) for students considered first-generation.

Masking Social Realities

The FGS term is equally simple and complex—the former because current usage of the term has conflated an entire population under a single category and the latter because beneath that category is a wide diversity of individuals representing a spectrum of experiences, histories, and contexts. Given the dichotomous disposition of the term, it is useful to examine research on the FGS population through McCall’s (2005) approach to intersectionality, which offers a lens to both “render suspect” (p. 1777) simplicity, and uncover social realities within complexity. Influenced by McCall’s anticategorical and intercategorical approaches, this section begins with an analysis of quantitative research on FGSs, pointing out two primary concerns with how the FGS term has been utilized—inconsistent and unrepresentative study samples, and failure to acknowledge that FGS status is a circumstance born from other social forces. We then discuss why these matters have implications for both understanding FGSs’ social realities and also for addressing the persistent forms of inequality that are masked by these methodological practices. We conclude this section with promising examples for how quantitative scholars may examine this population of students more comprehensively.

Ironically, we use the singular phrase “the FGS term” when in our review, 18 different definitions of FGSs were used by researchers to determine their sample of students. In fact, articles published in one single journal—selected as an example—offered four different variations of how FGS is defined (Fischer, 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Although the variation in definition is not an issue, nor is the fact that the populations may fluctuate, the concern is that the
population of FGSs is considered the same, and the narrative about their experiences is singular, when, in fact, they are different. This approach confounds who the FGS population actually includes and, at other times, excludes. Thus, the issue of study samples is our first methodological concern. The lack of clarity in defining who is counted is not only problematic because it can misrepresent the population, it also inhibits our ability to make sense of the comparison between FGSs against non-FGSs, which is the prevalent approach for distilling the academic barriers of FGSs. In other words, the group contrast that research on FGSs relies on is a false binary, as it is rooted in an inconsistently defined sample population. Analyzing seven different studies (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2012; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017; Strayhorn, 2006; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010) on the disparity between FGSs and non-FGSs in grade point average (GPA), for example, seven different variations of who counted as an FGS were defined ranging as widely as neither parent earned a bachelor’s degree (Strayhorn, 2006) to “no immediate family member could have attended any college, two-year or four-year, with or without having earned a degree” (Inman & Mayes, 1999, p. 6). In the former study, Strayhorn (2006) found that FGS status had an effect on cumulative GPA, accounting for 22% of the variance between FGSs and non-FGSs. Counter to that conclusion, other studies found that there were no significant differences in the GPA of FGSs and non-FGSs, and that FGS status had no effect on GPA (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). Compared with Strayhorn’s use of bachelor’s degrees as the distinction for FGS status, the latter studies relied on samples based on neither parent attending schooling past high school and neither parent earning more than a high school diploma, respectively. Recognizing that differing results may be a by-product of the unique parameters of each study or the methodology employed, the inconsistent definitions call attention to the problematic way in which study samples for research on FGSs is being determined to understand disparities in academic performance. The bifurcated understanding of FGSs versus non-FGSs, then, is only as valuable as the line that separates those two groups, which is one that remains considerably blurry given the operationalization of the FGS term in existing research.

In addition to the issue of inconsistency in defining FGSs, there is also concern regarding the representativeness of sample populations used in research. Despite the fluctuating boundaries for constructing this student population, it is collectively affirmed by scholars that FGSs are more likely to be low-income, racial/ethnic minorities, female, and older (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Toutkoushian et al., in press). Even so, a number of studies proceed with samples that are exceedingly unrepresentative, with many samples that are made up of between 50% and 90% White students and almost entirely between 18 and 24 years of age (Francis & Miller, 2007; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008; W. Smith & Zhang, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). In a study on the unique
characteristics of FGSs in community colleges, for example, the sample is 91.6% White and the median age is 19 years (Inman & Mayes, 1999). In the context of community college students, in particular, this presents a considerable drawback to the study, as it severely counters the characterizations of both FGSs and of community college students, who are even more likely than their 4-year counterparts to be racial and ethnic minorities and older (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). In this way, while the demographics in the study provide a general overview of the FGS community college population, it can conclude little with regard to outcomes because the sample is unrepresentative of FGSs. What makes this problematic is the proclivity of these studies to draw conclusions about a widely heterogeneous population (Choy, 2001) based on samples that are unrepresentative of that heterogeneity.

McCall's anticategorical approach was helpful in identifying concerns related to study samples in quantitative research on FGSs because it offered the opportunity to be skeptical of the category of FGS itself. In critiquing how the term is defined and operationalized, we could uncover that the decisions made to construct the category are a mechanism to mark difference and disparity, and yet the uncritical attention to that construction have perpetuated, rather than addressed those disparities. Insofar as quantitative research on FGSs goes, there are a number of remaining questions regarding who FGSs are, what barriers they face, and how to address those obstacles, which are left unanswered when using inconsistent and unrepresentative approaches for representing the population.

A second, and compounded methodological, concern with the FGS term is in how it is currently utilized in quantitative studies as a category independent of other social forces. Although sample populations include some characteristics—primarily race, gender, and social class—the explicit examination of how those categories interact with FGS status is not a methodological approach that has been undertaken in most studies (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Giancola, Munz, & Triares, 2008; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Ishitani, 2003; Majer, 2009; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010; Westbrook & Scott, 2012). This point is affirmed when reviewing the results of Ishitani's (2006) study on FGS persistence and graduation, which provides reports of students by FGS status, race, gender, and income in isolation from one another. As such, while Ishitani concludes that there is variance between groups when it comes to each of these categories separately, it falls short in investigating how these factors may interweave to result in the inequitable outcomes of FGSs who represent a spectrum of those social realities. Likewise, Soria and Stebleton's (2012) study, which found lower odds of FGSs' persistence, academic engagement, and sense of belonging, used gender and race as control variables. However, those categories were not included in the discussion, failing to acknowledge that FGS status is a circumstance born from the social forces related to gender and race.
McCall’s (2005) intercategorical approach pushes researchers to observe relationships of inequality across social groups and to center these relationships in their analyses. To this point, several studies do call attention to this very issue; however, it has been relegated to limitations sections or concluding thoughts for future research. For instance, Hahs-Vaughn (2004) closes the article on differences between FGSs and non-FGSs by stating, “Continued future research in this line of study is needed as are studies that further delve into background characteristics (e.g., minority vs. nonminority first generation students)” (p. 498). Similarly, Dumais and Ward’s (2010) study on cultural capital and FGS success suggests, “Dummy variables for sex and race/ethnicity were included in the analyses, but future research should consider how sex and race/ethnicity interact with first-generation status and cultural capital for the different educational outcomes” (p. 263). Although the acknowledgment of the need to investigate the relationships between social categories is an important first step, there are too few examples of such practices to confirm that future research on FGSs is committed to this important methodological endeavor. As McCall (2005) theorizes, “Relationships of inequality among social groups do not enter as background or contextual or discursive or ideological factors, [. . . ], but as the focus of the analysis itself” (pp. 1785–1786), which is particularly relevant for research on FGSs who embody interwoven forms of inequality, given their multiple marginal identities.

Taking the intercategorical approach to examine quantitative studies, it becomes apparent that there must be greater intentionality in how the FGS term is used methodologically to uncover the precise social realities students in this population face, unique from the inequalities defined by other social forces alone. As McCall states, “It is not the intersection of race, class, and gender in a single social group that is of interest but the relationships among the social groups defined by the entire set of groups constituting each category” (p. 1787). Put together with anticategorical intersectionality, then, research must be more cognizant to avoid inconsistent and unrepresentative constructions of the FGS population and more aware of how to account for relationships of inequality. As it stands now, the heart of the issue is that quantitative research on this population relies on broad generalizations without careful attention to precisely identifying the mechanisms that actually produce disparities.

As recommendations for how to mitigate these issues, we offer a few promising examples for how quantitative research may be more comprehensively approached. For the issue of inconsistent definitions of the FGS population, we highlight the foundational study on cognitive development of FGSs by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) and the follow-up study by Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012). Both studies found that FGSs are significantly disadvantaged in cognitive and psychosocial measures as compared with non-FGSs and point to factors that benefit FGSs’ development, such as experiencing academically challenging interactions with peers (Padgett et al., 2012) and studying more hours (Terezini et al., 1996). Most important, both studies used models with the same varying levels of parental education defined as neither parent has any college experience, parents
with some college experience, one parent has a bachelor’s degree, both parents have bachelor’s degrees, and one parent has master’s degree or above. These studies present a compelling example for consistency in defining the FGS population and demonstrate how findings are more useful for affirming or contradicting former studies when definitions are matched (see also Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). To the second sampling concern, we urge scholars to be more mindful of their study populations, as Gibbons and Borders (2010) were in their research on college-going expectations of FGS and non-FGS middle schoolers. In their methods, they point out the careful selection of schools based on high proportions of low-income and minority student populations, as they are characteristics of FGSs. Intentionality and a commitment to accurate representation are central to addressing the current issues with FGS samples.

Regarding the use of FGS status independent from other social forces, we highlight a few examples. First, a study on the influence of psychological, personal, and institutional factors on college choice process of FGSs (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008) used omnibus interaction effects in their multivariate analysis to examine the relationships between social categories. In so doing, the authors were able to make explicit conclusions about which of those categories functioned together to generate disparities such as “Latino first-generation students perceived [campus racial/ethnic climate] as significantly more important than their non-first-generation peers and all Asian and White students” (Cho et al., 2008, p. 100). Furthermore, the scholars advanced three-way interactions that allowed for an even deeper investigation of relationships between categorized identities, which produced findings such as “Compared to other groups, first-generation females, African American in particular, considered the academic scale more important in their choice of college” (Cho et al., 2008, p. 101). Taking a slightly different approach, but with equal attention to relationships, Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) study on persistence of FGSs used composite variables in logistic regressions, grouping background characteristics such as gender, race, income, and marital status together. Using this approach, the scholars could conclude that “being a Hispanic, first-generation student, a lower income first-generation student, or a female first-generation student, made first-to-second year persistence more problematic” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 418). These approaches and other examples are further highlighted in Schudde’s (2018) chapter in this volume titled “Heterogeneous Effects in Education: The Promise and Challenge of Incorporating Intersectionality Into Quantitative Methodological Approaches,” which further addresses how to insert intersectionality into quantitative methodologies (see also Próspero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012). In taking an intersectional approach, whether it is through interaction terms or another statistical measure, future quantitative research on FGSs must supersede the notion that FGS status, alone, explains disparities in education. Instead, research should methodologically affirm FGSs’ standing at the crossroads of several marginalized identities to unmask their social realities, which perpetuate inequality.
Locations of Inequality

In Crenshaw’s (1991) seminal article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” she argued that oppression of Black women does not come from being Black women, but from the extent in which institutions are structured to acknowledge and value these mutually constitutive identities. Núñez (2014) explicates this point by advancing a framework that accommodates and explains how various levels across space and time shape the experiences of students. It is challenging, however, to locate the points in which inequality occurs because the FGS term is often conflated with another category of analysis, dismissing the ways in which institutions are mutually constructed from all dominant forms of capital, including race, gender, social class, or others markers of inequality to marginalize students. Moreover, when research uses the FGS term, it is remiss in considering how an institution’s influence on a student’s perceptions and experiences is conditioned by their unique background that often cannot be captured by quantitative measures. To address the challenges associated with students included in this population, those issues must be taken into account. In this section, by drawing on Núñez’s (2014) multilevel intersectionality, we analyze and critique primarily qualitative studies that characterize student successes and challenges along a single dimension of inequality, as well as discuss the consequences of doing so. Given multilevel intersectionality’s focus on the locations of inequality as they emerge between student and institutional context, the studies explored in this section highlight students’ experiences in college as they relate to the concept of belongingness or cultural match, which explicates FGSs’ relationships with college campuses (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012). We then move on to discuss studies that exemplifies Núñez’s (2014) framework in which multiple and mutually reinforcing social forces and layers are shown to shape moments of oppression.

Student belongingness captures the extent to which students find a fit or match with their institution, where they are recognized, valued, and embraced by their institution (Strayhorn, 2012). The process of this match is far from linear and is contingent on who students are, the culture of the institution, and the context of both space and time (Núñez, 2014; Orbe, 2004). Studies in our review aimed to highlight and explain this process, but their focus lead to tapered explanations of “the systems of power and oppression that shape those experiences” (Núñez, 2014, p. 85). Take, for instance, a recently developed framework by social psychologists, Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) and Stephens, Townsend, Markus, and Phillips (2012)—cultural mismatch theory. This theory makes three claims to explain the (mis)match phenomenon (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). First, American higher education is structured by independent values that encourage students “to separate and distinguish themselves from their parents and to realize their individual potential” (p. 1179). These values, the authors premise, are most commonly upheld by
middle- to upper-class families. This stands in contrast to interdependent values—“adjusting and responding to others’ needs, connecting to others, and being part of the community” (p. 1179)—which Stephens, Fryberg, et al. (2012) found are more commonly privileged by working-class communities. Second, the extent of a university culture’s influence is contingent on a student’s disposition to independent values. Therefore, students that find their university climate to be an extension of their home life, experience a cultural match “between their own norms and the norms represented in the university culture” (p. 1181). For others, the experience of college is a cultural mismatch. And third, a cultural match or mismatch can encourage or discourage, respectively, students’ performance in school. Cultural mismatch theory, therefore, is an attempt to explain achievement gaps between FGSs and non-FGSs solely on the basis of social class values and norms. This is shortsighted when institutional culture is a product of “norms, values, and practices and the historical and social circumstances in which the institutions were developed and in which they exist” related to race, gender, and social class, among others (D. Smith, 2012, p. 233). From the viewpoint of intersectionality, promoting a match along a single category of analysis only paints a partial image of how institutions, which are structured by mutually constructing dominant forms of capital and external, yet connected, “interlocking systems of power” produce, rather than eliminate, barriers (Núñez, 2014, p. 89; see also Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Emirbayer & Desmond, 2015; Sarcedo, Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2015). Continuing to characterize students by a single category misses the mark in clarifying how institutional structure and culture are products of multiple forms of social dominance and in understanding students’ struggles, especially as the FGS population is more likely to be female and working-class and proportionately more likely to be people of color.

Several studies on FGSs have explored how students experience a match or mismatch with their institutions while only focusing solely on generation status or conflating the FGS term with another category of analysis without explicating their relationship to each other. This phenomenon has occurred along several dimensions of social life, such as race and ethnicity (Benmayor, 2002; Núñez & Sansone, 2016; Orbe, 2003; Parks-Yancy, 2012), social class (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Hinz, 2016; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008), origin of upbringing (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009), and faith (Rood, 2009). Through their findings, these studies reveal little about how institutions are structured to advantage or disadvantage FGSs because they fall short in fleshing out the diversity within this category or the relationship between the FGS status and other categories of analysis and the institution. We discuss two examples to illustrate this point.

Collier and Morgan (2008) sought to explore how differences in faculty and student expectations, by generation status, explain differences in educational outcomes. They conducted eight focus groups, which included 63 FGSs and students “from more traditional, highly educated backgrounds (students with at least one college graduate parent)” (p. 431). They attributed the differences between FGSs and
non-FGSs to the former’s “lack of cultural capital and background information about higher education [which] may limit their awareness of how to ‘do the college student role’” (p. 441). Collier and Morgan’s (2008) findings reinforce a narrative by which the FGS category holds explanatory power without regard to how race, as an example, may also shape the development of cultural capital that bears on the relationships between faculty, students, and space (Carter, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005). Because Collier and Morgan’s (2008) study leaned on a unidimensional conceptualization of FGSs (i.e., neither parent is a college graduate), it is challenging to explain the mismatched expectations between students and faculty that could be rooted in inequalities related to social identities other than, or in relation to, the FGS status.

Núñez’s (2011) study pushes the conversation further by exploring the influence of Chicano Studies on 19 Latino, FGSs’ transition to college. She argued, “Chicano Studies coursework supports students in several tasks identified as being important in Latino college student development, including those of handling racism and building a support network of peers, family, and community (Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Yosso, 2006)” (p. 649). Although critical in providing insight to how curriculum can promote a student’s belongingness, her findings did not clarify how students’ challenges are related to being both an FGS and Latino, as well as the relationship between the two. In fact, her discussion conflates the two categories and ties the findings, primarily, to students’ Latino identity. Students expressed the significance of Chicano Studies to their experiences in college, demonstrating that when institutions provide curriculum that centers and reflects students’ background, students may be more likely to succeed. But what about their identity as FGSs as it relates to the institution? What does Chicano Studies have to do with the quality of FGSs’ experiences in college? We do not argue nor believe that the categories of generation status and of race be mutually exclusive, in that they have separate, direct influence on students’ experiences and outcomes. We take issue with the lack of discussion about the relationship between the two and the extent to which institutions acknowledge this intersection. This leads us to question what the FGS category is expected to capture, further confounding how we identify and make sense of inequality in higher education.

Each study (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Núñez, 2011) is a contribution to our understanding of FGSs, and yet, the narrative of the students in these studies remains incomplete because they either look at how institutions discourage students along a single dimension of social life or do not explain how generation status and other categories of analysis interact to shape students’ experiences within their given context. Collier and Morgan (2008) offered no details beyond the generation status of their student participants and a single statement describing their FGSs as diverse: “Some were returning to college as older adults while others came from immigrant backgrounds with English as a second language” (p. 431). There is no further acknowledgment of the heterogeneity within the population. Núñez’s (2011) claims are based on a sample of 19 FGS, Latino students. To note, she did collect their gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status, but they too did not play a role in clarifying
students’ perceptions as an FGS. Both studies would benefit from identifying and allowing other mutually constitutive identities an opportunity to explain the phenomenon of interest (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Núñez, 2011). Without this level of information, our ability to identify and address where and how students struggle is minimized. How can we be certain that a student’s challenges are not attributed to another identity or multiple identities, differentially shaped by context and time, as claimed by intersectionality? By tending to a wider vision of the FGS term and its relationship to other, overlapping social realities, we come closer to understanding the quality of relationships that students have with their institutions.

Developing clearer insight in how institutions influence students’ belonging and achievement requires that we move away from seeing FGSs as a single status, unique or void of influences from other categories of analysis. Altering the class conditions, for instance, of institutional culture, as suggested by cultural mismatch theory, does little but promote “blanket programming aimed at helping lower-income undergraduates adjust to college” (Jack, 2014, p. 471). This can also be said about efforts solely addressing issues of race or gender. Given that American higher education was built for and by elite, White, and heteronormative men, and that institutions continue to be steeped and wrapped in dominant values (DiAngelo, 2006; Karabel, 2005), research on FGSs must reflect that history because, together, they shape and influence how students behave, including their choices and how they present themselves on campus. In our review, there were studies among a few scholars on FGSs that exemplify this viewpoint across multiple categories of analysis (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Kouyoumdjian, Guzmán, García, & Távarez-Bustillos, 2017; Orbe, 2004; Sarcedo et al., 2015; Stuber, 2011b) and contexts, such as the transition to college (Wilkins, 2014), participation in a TRiO program (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012), doctoral education (Holley & Gardner, 2012), and elite universities (Jack, 2014, 2016; Stuber, 2011a). We describe three of these studies in length to best illustrate how overlapping social categories are shaped by their location across several domains of relationships with institutions, others and themselves, and ultimately influenced by the context of time and space (Núñez, 2014). We contend that pursuing this line of inquiry—to take a multilevel intersectionality approach to the study of FGSs—keeps the obscurity, which emerges from how the FGS term is used, at bay.

Stuber (2011b) sought out to explore the diverse experiences of White FGSs, and, rare among studies on this population, grounded her inquiry and analysis in intersectionality. Setting aside dominant narratives that so often homogenize White students, Stuber’s (2011b) findings help render the FGS term suspect:

[. . . ] generalizations have been made about students who are on the margins not just in terms of social class and parental education but also in terms of race and ethnicity, age, and enrollment status (full-part-time). Little effort has been made to disentangle the ways in which social class, parental education, and race differently impact students’ adjustment to college. (p. 120)

Drawing on interview data from 28 White, FGSs (15 females and 13 males) between a private and a public 4-year institution, Stuber found that a little more than half of
the students adjusted relatively well to social life on campus, while others expressed feelings of marginality. Findings demonstrated how race and social class interacted to explain these differences in student experiences. One male participant considered his college, “home,” even going as far as sharing his preference for college over life at home. These experiences of seamless navigation may be partly due to their racial identity, where Whiteness operates “as an asset for their collegiate adjustment” (Stuber, 2011b, p. 125). Given that both campuses in her study are predominately White, students’ Whiteness discouraged feelings of alienation, in part because Whiteness becomes the default in which middle- and upper-class values are defined (DiAngelo, 2006). As many of her participants stem from racially homogenous communities, the racial similarity between home life and campus life “drown[ed] out the ‘noise’ of social class” (Stuber, 2011b, p. 132). For another White male student, the majority White student body and the emphasis on the Greek system affected him unfavorably, promoting a sense of loneliness and alienation. He found it difficult to engage with other students and “framed his struggles in terms of race (even though he is white), urbanicity, and family background” (Stuber, 2011b, p. 127). In this case, being White was a liability because it concealed how social class shaped his perceptions and circumstances on campus. When studies demonstrate how mutually constitutive forces across different domains shape students’ experience, they offer institutions an opportunity to question their own logic about FGSs and gain knowledge that is possibly situated beyond their purview. Stuber’s study is evidence that not all students considered FGSs’ struggle and achieve equally, a narrative that can be hard to come by when the FGS term is used to cast such a wide net.

In “Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality,” Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) conducted a 5-year case study where they interviewed and observed several White women from various social class backgrounds, including six FGSs from working-class families, at a single, public 4-year university. Broadly speaking, they argued that the institution maintains inequality among students because it privileges social activities and spaces—the Party Pathway, structured by the large, Greek system—for which mainly upper-class students are able to fully participate in without risk to their success during and after college. The price of admission into the Greek system is quite high and tends to exclude those students without the economic and cultural resources to meet its inextricably tied classed and gendered standards. For those women from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds who chose to engage with the Greek system, Armstrong and Hamilton observed how they were continually disadvantaged because they were unaware of the standards of femininity that regulated the stratified system, nor did they have the financial resources to achieve or maintain physical appearances (i.e., clothes, makeup) that would mark them as respectable, dateable women. In this case, femininity is defined by the dispositions and tastes of the elite. This in turn weakened their ability to develop quality social ties for which women from upper-class backgrounds were able to fully take advantage of after college. Parents, at times, intervened with messages of encouragement and support (Wang, 2012), but their unequal knowledge of navigating campus
social settings made it further unlikely that their daughters would be the beneficiaries of the dominant culture (Hamilton, 2016). In other words, the institution’s emphasis on the Greek system meant that it endorsed values, norms, and standards for which women from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds would then struggle to acknowledge or meet, leading them to disengage or to leave college altogether. These findings offer a rare glimpse into how institutions are complicit in maintaining systems and practices that regulate and sort students by the quality of capital they possess, marginalizing them in multiple and overlapping ways. Marginalization then is not a product of being working-class or a woman, but it is a process by which an individual is devalued to the extent that their whole being violates or remains hidden to the standards and values defined by the spaces and the relationships they may wish to occupy and develop, respectively. It is those standards and values and the practices and individuals that enforce and maintain them that are of ultimate interest to those taking an intersectionality approach to addressing inequality.

To further demonstrate the degree in which students are marginalized, Núñez (2014) points out that we must locate “social categories, associated concrete relations, and arenas of practice within a broader temporal and spatial context” (p. 89). Research on FGSs must also look to their histories and backgrounds that can help inform students’ relationship to their institutions in order to more accurately map out locations of inequality on campus. Jack (2014) argued that “class marginality and culture shock are contingent on the social and cultural dissimilarity between an individual’s life before college and her life therein” (p. 455). Interviewing 35 Black FGSs (13 male and 22 female), he captured their experiences at a single, elite institution, grouping them into one of two categories: Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged. Although they are similar in demographics and came from poor neighborhoods, each group experienced the transition to college differently. The former reported a more seamless transition to the institution because they possessed a higher stock of cultural capital that they cultivated early on in their elite secondary education, whereas the latter expressed uncertainty around the cultural norms of the institution and difficulty in finding a sense of community (Carter, 2003). These extremes are attributed to differences in educational background in which the Privileged Poor had a head start in acclimating to elite spaces by attending highly selective boarding academies and cultivating forms of cultural capital that are valued by their university. The Doubly Disadvantaged attended poor, local high schools, making their adjustment to college a greater challenge. While race played a role across both groups, their initial responses to racist interactions were conditioned by their precollege experiences. Whereas a Doubly Disadvantaged student had to hold back her “aggressive demeanor, a dominant form of capital back home,” the Privileged Poor student saw these events as “manageable moments” in which public displays of anger were left behind in high school. Indeed, “Not all lower-income, black undergraduates experience the strangeness, unfamiliarity, and isolation that entering elite colleges bring” (Jack, 2014, p. 470). Jack’s findings advance our stance in problematizing how we study FGSs, for prior research fails in capturing the differential consequences of social inequality in higher education that are contingent on students’ prior
experiences. These prior experiences are an outcome of broader economic, political, and social challenges and opportunities that in turn reveals more about how FGSs will experience college than their identities alone. According to Jack (2014),

Grouping lower-income undergraduates together biases estimates of the effect of class background on college outcomes given that the social inequalities manifesting themselves in everyday experiences in neighborhoods and schools do not fall evenly on all lower-income students. (p. 472)

Marginality of FGSs is not a singular experience, but it is a function of a much deeper relationship of students’ histories that either strengthen or weaken their capacity to succeed in higher education.

Locating inequality is the first step toward addressing it. Mapping the margins, to echo Crenshaw’s (1991) language, requires that we not only acknowledge the unequal relationship between students and institutions, but that we pry it open to understand the underlying mechanisms that shape FGSs’ diverse experiences. Núñez’s (2014) multilevel approach to intersectionality holds research accountable to these efforts, to maintain fidelity to the process of drawing out how individuals’ relationships to others, institutions, and systems work in tandem to create spaces and moments of oppression that can often go hidden if we choose to see social categories as one dimensional and mutually exclusive. Studies by Stuber (2011b), Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), and Jack (2014) are examples of how a multilevel intersectional approach offers a wider frame to locating inequality for FGSs. The design of their studies allowed them to compare differences between and among students and institutions, thereby bringing to light the interlocking relationships between race, social class, and/or gender.

In the end, reimagining a frame—so that fewer students are left behind and more students are understood—requires that we question how the FGS term is defined and used in order to gain clearer insight on how institutions of higher education are constructed to shape those spaces and moments where students experience anything less than acceptance. We offer three points, then, that researchers must address to improve how we study and make sense of FGSs: (a) who we include in the FGS term matters, as it fashions what we look for and compare with in addressing inequality; (b) the FGS term is used to capture inequality, but its explanatory power is limited when studies do not account for other social realities and, to that point; (c) for any one student, the degree of mismatch they experience with their institution can occur along several and overlapping dimensions of social life. Using the FGS term as a proxy for social class or conflating it with another category of analysis not only diminishes the complicated nature of social inequality (Wildhagen, 2015), it also wipes away the multiple, intricately tied paths of other categories of analysis that operate across time and space, hindering the opportunity to effectively address students’ challenges. Furthermore, given that many samples are derived from institutions with whom researchers have partnerships or access, we urge scholars to consider opportunities for collecting categories of analysis that better capture dimensions of students’ lives that can more clearly reveal relationships and locations of inequality.
BEYOND THE IMAGINARY, TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES OF FGS RESEARCH

Higher education research expresses a desire to improve the conditions of colleges and universities that will facilitate the achievement of all students, especially those living at the margins. The details behind the extent, circumstances, and effect of those margins remains largely at bay because institutions and researchers continue to utilize and rely on labels and categories to accomplish more than they, in practice, actually can. Reified by popular media, research, and institutional policies and practices, the FGS term represents this ambiguous, shifting cluster that has made it hard to understand who students are, what students need, and what institutions can do to provide for them. Problematizing how the FGS term is used through the concept of intersectionality, we were able to take pause and reflect critically on its purpose and implications for social inequality. In doing so, we see intersectionality—the ability to render categories suspect, to deconstruct categories, to further uncover the power and oppression that emerge from unequal relations between provisional categories of analysis, and to contextualize intersecting points of marginalization—as a critical tool to assess a term, as well as the research behind it, that has no theoretical basis, and yet, has gained undue legitimacy and popularity within the discourse on higher education (McCall, 2005; Núñez, 2014; Wildhagen, 2015). By critiquing how FGS has been conceptualized and used in research, we offer researchers, practitioners, and educators the opportunity to reimagine a frame—to echo Crenshaw’s call—that more precisely identifies how students struggle and achieve in college.

In this critical review, we demonstrated multiple ways that the FGS term has been conceptualized and used to make claims about the experiences and outcomes of students. We have highlighted examples of research that limit, instead of expand, and confuse, instead of clarify, how students should be conceived in respect to the institutions and systems in which they find themselves. To be clear, our critique is not against the FGS term itself, but with its canon of research that showcase inconsistency in criteria, poses questions of representation in sampling, and does not take into account the many, overlapping ways students are influenced by their institutions. Given the issues raised in the current operationalization of the FGS term, we call on scholars to be more critical of and attentive to the construction and representativeness of study samples, the use of the category in statistical methods, and the consideration of its overlapping realities in qualitative research within the unique contexts of students’ lives and histories.

Intersectionality: Strengths and Possibilities

For the purposes of discussing the strengths of intersectionality and the possibilities it holds for monitoring and understanding trends and patterns in student experiences and outcomes, we will remark specifically on the approaches employed by McCall (2005) and Núñez (2014). The strengths, which we have commented on extensively throughout this chapter, emerge in the “new” knowledge that comes forth
when examining the intersections of identity, or in the case of FGSs, the heterogeneity of marginality. McCall’s (2005) anticategorical approach to intersectionality challenges us to rethink and reframe our understanding of individuals by pushing us to be skeptical of taken-for-granted categorizations of identity. It reminds us that there is more beneath the surface. Furthermore, intercategorical complexity anchors research within complex realities by centralizing the multiple marginalized identities that many students face, disallowing studies to ignore the diversity of experiences that exist on college campuses. McCall’s approaches allows us to be critical of current conceptualizations of inequality, in order to seek more accurate depictions of real and lived inequality endured by students through more intentional quantitative methodologies (see Schudde, 2018, this volume).

Intersectionality can also help pry open the importance of understanding the role of colleges and university in hindering their students. As Núñez (2014) critically asserts, there must be less focus “on the ‘additive’ (Collins, 2007) descriptions of how individuals experience holding multiple social identities and to focus more on the constitutive dynamics of power in institutions that perpetuate social reproduction of inequalities (Anthias, 2013; Collins, 2007, 2009)” (p. 86). In our review, it becomes apparent that organizations, through its independent culture or unspoken rules of engagement (Yee, 2016), are differentiated sources of oppression and inequality. Grounding our analysis in the concept of intersectionality increases our resolve for future lines of inquiry to design qualitative studies that center the relationships between students and institutions, for they are far more revealing of the heterogeneity within the FGS population and the hidden and overlapping mechanisms that facilitate “power relations and social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 3). For our purpose, the concept of intersectionality unveiled the hidden aspects—social forces, forms of inequality, and unclear boundaries—of the FGS population that would continue to be obscured when not viewed through this conceptual lens.

Our review of the literature showcases the inability of, mainly quantitative, studies to theorize the assumptions undergirding their research design, thereby discouraging their findings from offering points of clarity about students grouped under the FGS category. While research presently may include varying markers of identity in a regression model, or choose to control for particular identities to isolate the effect of the FGS status, there are still questions regarding what is the best, or the most appropriate, way to capture the broader contextual factors that Núñez (2014) offers are important for identifying locations of inequality. Although intersectionality offers a useful framing for considering research design, how to achieve both detailed and multilevel studies on FGSs is unresolved and demands further exploration. We offer that the inquiry should begin with (a) greater attention and partnerships with institutions to collect data categories that represent a multilevel design or (b) merge cohorts of data (e.g., county or district) to create a statewide sample that may provide a response to small sample size concerns. In taking an intersectional approach to designing studies, researchers will be able to achieve a fuller construction of the multiple, overlapping identities that produce inequality...
and the locations where that inequality emerges. This will allow for conclusions about FGSs to be drawn based on more authentic recognition of their complex lives, pushing findings outside singular categories that reveal too little about FGSs’ struggles. We also urge researchers to review Schudde’s (2018) chapter in this volume for additional strategies.

Future Research on First-Generation College Students

Research on students considered an FGS remains highly limited to the 4-year, undergraduate experience, with little attention to community colleges and graduate studies (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Inman & Mayes, 1999). While future research should remain attuned to shifts and changes on campus, it should also expand the scope of these boundaries in order to see how changes in demographics along the educational pipeline, immigration policies under a new administration, or the workforce offer new insights to student challenges. These insights, however, must be foreshadowed by a heightened sense of the heterogeneity that exists within the FGS population to the extent that inequality is contingent on the intersecting identities that dominant institutions do or do not embrace.

Feliciano and Lanuza (2017) puts into question how research in education has conceived of the effect of parental education. With a focus on explaining the overachievement of children of immigrant parents relative to their White peers of native-born parents, they argue that “parental contextual attainment . . . captures hidden dimensions of class background that matter for the intergenerational transmission of advantage or disadvantage” (p. 232). In other words, differences in school structure and, thus, differences in educational opportunities reflect variation in social class structure. As such, earning a high school diploma in one country can be considered upper class if the majority complete only elementary school, offering similar dispositions and aspirations as someone earning a baccalaureate degree in the United States. Indeed, “U.S. immigrants originated from higher social class locations, providing them with a particular set of class-specific resources . . . that buttresses their children’s achievement” (p. 233). Their findings confirm the need to complicate the notion of parental education, to look beyond differences in attainment to their contexts (Hout, 2015). These findings also push against the notions of parental education that are traditionally tied to current conceptions of FGSs. Instead, they point out that depending on their parents’ country of origin, being the “first” to attend or earn a postsecondary degree in their family may not characterize the FGS experience we have come to know. Future studies should consider how various contexts shape the assumptions institutions—such as those related to immigration and social class—use to understand and make choices about how best to support students considered first-generation.

In a similar vein, we must also look to other contextual aspects of students’ lives that may influence how we understand their educational realities. FGSs who are undocumented, for example, occupy an ambiguous, and sometimes invisible, space in which their pathway to degree is complicated, and in some instances hindered, by federal and state policies and the growing xenophobia among the U.S. populace.
(Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz, 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013). As such, the matter of citizenship and/or immigration status is of significance for understanding this population. As institutions continue to struggle to rearrange themselves to fully support nontraditional students, so too do they struggle to care for their undocumented students (Southern, 2016). There are institutions that have publicly championed the educational opportunity of undocumented students, but few are ready to address the challenges that emerge from this sociopolitical space. Growing concerns with undocumented students’ sense safety and of belongingness underscores the importance for studies and theories on FGSs to account for how changes in immigration policy, as well as a growing nativism across the United States, refashions the capacity of institutions to address new locations of inequality for these students.

As campuses shore up their resources to support FGSs, some institutions are also witnessing a growing, collective social movement by these very students. We are concerned that these coalitions—Alliance for Low-Income First-Generation Narrative, First-Generation Student Union, 1vyG, to name a few—may elevate the struggles of some, while hiding the struggles of others. Within these organizations, students have reconstructed the FGS identity to symbolize empowerment and community (Foster, 2015; Pappano, 2015; Young, 2016), offering the possibility of disempowering a dominant narrative of disadvantage to resemble one of resilience, in which the FGS status is seen more as an asset, than a liability (1vyG, 2017; Jehangir et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2015). However, in the same way that Crenshaw questioned the capacity of “dominated antidiscrimination regimes and anti-racist and feminist discourses” (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013, p. 311) to acknowledge the plight of Black women, we ask, who remains hidden as the FGS narrative is reified by formal social organizing? We contend that future work seeking to understand this phenomenon see intersectionality as a point of departure in order to sensitize inquiries and analyses to the group conditions “of solidarity that are presumed but not realized” (Carbado et al., 2013).

Various structural barriers tied to students’ identities can continue to manifest and transverse the boundaries of their undergraduate years. Although we know little about FGSs pursuing advanced education, and the differences within, existing research aligns with the narrative on FGSs broadly—this population is more likely to delay matriculation into graduate education, to be enrolled part-time, and to be working full-time while enrolled than their non-FGS peers (Seay et al., 2008). Like the FGS population in undergraduate education, those in graduate school expressed their challenging position between home and college life, including a decline in support from family and the unfamiliarity of norms and values regulating graduate education (Gardner & Holley, 2011). In order to complicate this narrative and move beyond the limiting FGS and non-FGS dichotomy, future research should look to how graduate education is structured—by dominant forms of capital—to differentially regulate the achievement of students. Research on their pathways to graduate education, as broad as professional degrees like the masters of business administration
to research degrees like the doctor of philosophy, offers a rich opportunity to further identify new locations of inequality or observe how older locations of inequality endure overtime (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017).

For those foregoing advanced education, examining the differential relationship between those considered first-generation and their place of work can offer institutions of higher education insight into how they can better support students as they transition from student to college graduate. Disadvantage may continue into the workforce, as “there appears to be a distinct gap between the understanding of [first-generation and non-first-generation] students about the world of work they wish to enter and its actual expectations, demands, and what it takes to enter and survive there” (Hirudayaraj, 2011, p. 6). A fruitful area of research would include examining this cumulative disadvantage as upwardly mobile FGSs navigate new dominant systems (or spaces within those systems), in particular those areas that often require more nuanced cultural knowledge and experiences limited to the ruling class (Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2005). In other words, examining how students are multiply disadvantaged across different systems in society offers new insight in how higher education and the occupational structure do not operate in a vacuum, but influence and support each other in maintaining inequality.

Disadvantage for students beyond their college years also lies in the material outcome of educational debt. FGSs borrow more frequently than their non-FGS peers, borrow in larger amounts, and have higher levels of student debt (Furquim, Glasener, Oster, McCall, & DesJardins, 2017). “Students with college-educated parents may have a distinct advantage over FG students in accessing knowledge about the financial aid process and financing college” (Furquim et al., 2017, p. 87), and thus students considered FGSs may be less informed of the financial consequences of earning a college degree. Future research on educational debt must move away from framing and explaining student outcomes by the “FGS” versus “non-FGS” dichotomy for it tells us little about who financial aid systems are precisely disadvantaging. The inequality that emerges from this framing represents a vague gap that does not offer sufficient capacity to identify the overlapping mechanisms that affect student constraints and choices.

**Final Thoughts**

Inequality can manifest, morph, and operate in the most inconspicuous manner, as it is often hidden among the intertwining shifts in our social, economic, and political terrains (Shapiro, 2017). As we continue to witness the expansion of a stratified system of higher education, critiquing our conceptual and methodological tools remains key to sensitizing us to new student challenges that are veiled behind our failure to see the complexity of their lives. We conclude that it is not about keeping the FGS term or not, it is about how the FGS term is used. It must always be advanced with a careful eye to how students are grouped, what intersections exist, and what relationships it holds with institutions and power structures.
NOTES

1This search was conducted on June 12, 2017.
2We use the broad term “first generation student” (FGS) to reflect the current operationalization of the category to represent this group of students.
3The Hispanic term encompasses a broad range of Spanish-speaking communities, thereby overestimating those who identify as Latino/a. For consistency, we use this term only when the source we are citing has chosen to use it.

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