Determination and Adaptability

The Importance of Mental Health and Communcaition in Completing a College Degree

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the following research questions: (1) What challenges do first-generation college students (FGCS) face when working to complete their college degree at a metropolitan university? and (2) What communication strategies do FGCS use to sustain determination and adaptability while pursuing their degree? This qualitative study uses a semi-structured interview guide to gather data from young adult participants. Interviews were coded and analyzed, leading to the identification of themes and subthemes.

Keywords: communication, self-talk, determination, adaptability, first-generation college students, low-income, persistence

Determination and Adaptability: The Importance of Communication in Completing a College Degree

Approximately 80% of individuals in low-income communities experience mental health challenges or disorders (Funk et al., 2012). Compared to other social groups, minority students are disproportionately impacted by their environments and circumstances. With limited resources to support degree completion, FGCS encounter barriers that extend beyond those faced by other students at metropolitan universities. These challenges often lead to emotional and psychological health concerns that shape their college experiences.

Relationship of the Problem to the Field of Psychology

A central issue in psychology research involves the intersection of financial strain and mental health among young adults, particularly FGCS. These students often carry the burden of tuition, housing,

and family obligations, while also navigating higher education without the guidance available to continuing-generation peers. Such strain frequently results in chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, each of which undermines academic performance and persistence.

Financial stress is not limited to diagnosable conditions. It also manifests as isolation, low self-esteem, and a diminished sense of belonging. These internal struggles are often compounded by external barriers such as limited access to campus resources, housing instability, or food insecurity. Prior research confirms that unresolved financial stressors predict long-term mental health decline, especially for students from under-resourced communities (Knifton & Inglis, 2020).

This study connects psychology with communication by applying Julien Mirivel's (2013) *The Art of Positive Communication*. Building on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's insight that "the main function of conversation is not to get things accomplished, but to improve the quality of experience" (1990, as cited in Mirivel, 2013, p. 129), Mirivel argues that communication is not merely functional, but transformative. For FGCS, communication—whether through self-talk, peer exchanges, or faculty mentorship—becomes a resource for resilience and emotional regulation.

The constitutive view of communication emphasizes that speaking is not only "doing" but also "being." Everyday exchanges shape self-concept, identity, and belonging. Simple affirmations such as "You've got this" or "I'm proud of you" serve as more than words—they are speech acts that foster confidence, recognition, and connection. For FGCS, these moments can interrupt negative thought cycles, encourage cognitive reframing, and sustain motivation when formal psychological supports are absent.

In this way, communication serves as both a psychological tool and a lifeline. By examining FGCS through this lens, this project highlights how intentional, positive communication supports mental health resilience and educational persistence.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how financial obligations influence the mental health of FGCS at a metropolitan university and to investigate how positive communication strategies—both interpersonal and intrapersonal—support determination and adaptability. Financial strain has been identified as a strong predictor of anxiety, depression, and burnout, but limited research examines the protective role of communication in buffering these effects.

Drawing on Mirivel's assertion that conversation can "improve the quality of experience" (2013), I conceptualize communication as therapeutic action. Words from professors, supportive texts from peers, or affirmations in self-talk all serve as speech acts that carry measurable effects on student well-being.

This study is guided by two research questions:

1. What mental health challenges do FGCS experience as a result of financial obligations while working to complete their degree at a metropolitan university?

2. What communication strategies do FGCS use to sustain determination and adaptability when navigating financial and mental health challenges?

By answering these questions, this project seeks to document the psychological toll of financial strain while showing how FGCS employ communication practices to sustain resilience. In doing so, it contributes to both psychology and communication studies by reframing conversation as a central tool in resilience-building for financially burdened students.

Literature Review

Low-Income & First-Generation College Students

Research continues to highlight the limited attention given to FGCS experiences (Capik & Shupp, 2021). Typically, FGCS are defined as students whose parents did not attend or complete college. They disproportionately come from working-class households, underrepresented ethnic backgrounds, and low-income communities. These students often arrive at universities without the academic, financial, or cultural preparation of their peers (Hartley, 2018).

Common challenges include stigma tied to social class (Garriot et al., 2017), limited awareness of institutional resources (Martin et al., 2014), and the long-term psychological consequences of poverty (Knifton & Inglis, 2020). Funk et al. (2012) argue that untreated mental health conditions in low-income families further exacerbate these barriers, creating additional challenges for degree attainment. For FGCS balancing tuition, housing, and family obligations, these factors create compounding stress that often undermines persistence.

Despite these challenges, few studies focus on how communication might serve as a protective resource for FGCS. This study applies Mirivel's (2013) *The Art of Positive Communication*, which argues for a constitutive view of communication. This perspective frames communication as the process by which meaning, identity, and belonging are actively created.

For students facing financial strain, even brief positive interactions a professor's encouragement, a peer's empathy, or a self-affirmation can help restore confidence and belonging. In Mirivel's framework, such speech acts are purposeful: they perform functions of support, reassurance, and recognition.

This theoretical framing underscores the need to investigate not only the barriers FGCS face but also the communication practices that help them persist.

Determination and Adaptability

Grit and resilience have been identified as key predictors of student success (Almeida et al., 2019; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). For FGCS, these traits manifest as determination—the commitment to long-term goals—and adaptability—the capacity to adjust to evolving challenges.

Hartley (2018) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 65), describing it as the extra push needed to persist despite setbacks. For FGCS under financial strain, grit and resilience reinforce one another: grit supports determination, while resilience enables adaptability in the face of changing stressors. Together, they empower students to persist in completing their degrees despite structural and personal barriers.

Capik and Shupp's (2021) study, based on first-hand student accounts, shows that these traits are not purely innate; they can be developed and strengthened through positive relationships, supportive networks, and institutional resources. This connection is critical: determination is reinforced when students receive encouragement that validates their progress, and adaptability grows when they learn flexible problem-solving strategies through communication with peers, faculty, and advisors.

Resilience, defined by Theron and Theron (2013) as "the process of positive adaptation to significantly difficult life circumstances" (p. 392), enables FGCS to remain mentally and emotionally steady when faced with financial stressors. Straub (2020) describes it as holding the belief that "the hard times that you're going through now are temporary" (p. 68), a mindset that makes adaptability possible.

Morales (2014) further explains that resilience can be seen both as a process and an outcome one that allows students to recover from challenges and continue progressing toward their degrees.

The growth mindset concept (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2016) reinforces this link: when students believe that abilities can be developed, they are more likely to sustain determination through grit and shift strategies through adaptability. Access to advising, counseling, and mentorship can help foster this mindset (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2019; Checkoway, 2017; Neff & Germer, 2012; Sumilhig, 2016). However, these resources only strengthen determination and adaptability when students are aware of them and can effectively seek them out.

Julien Mirivel's (2013) *The Art of Positive Communication* provides a valuable lens for understanding how communication actively supports grit and resilience. From his constitutive view of communication, determination is not simply an internal state; it is nurtured through speech acts that inspire persistence, such as a mentor affirming, "You've come this far; you can finish." Likewise, adaptability is reinforced when students engage in conversations that reframe problems, offer emotional grounding, or share new strategies for managing academic and financial stress. As Mirivel notes, "the main function of conversation is not to get things accomplished, but to improve the quality of experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, as cited in Mirivel, 2013, p. 129). For FGCS, each supportive exchange can become a moment that restores confidence and renews motivation.

In sum, grit and resilience form the backbone of determination and adaptability for FGCS. Yet, they are not developed in isolation; they are cultivated and sustained through intentional, positive communication. Understanding this relationship is essential for identifying how financially burdened students at metropolitan universities maintain both the drive to succeed and the flexibility to navigate the unexpected.

Theoretical Frame

First-generation college students (FGCS) often face a complex combination of financial pressures, academic demands, and social transitions that can impact both their mental health and their ability to complete a degree. While many institutions have implemented resources to support these students, access and utilization remain uneven especially at metropolitan campuses, where student populations may be more diverse in background, commute patterns, and financial need. For FGCS managing heavy financial obligations, resilience is not simply a personality trait, but a set of skills and practices that can be actively nurtured through positive communication.

This study draws on Julien Mirivel's (2013) framework from *The Art of Positive Communication*, which positions communication not merely as an exchange of information, but as an act of creating social reality. Mirivel's constitutive view of communication emphasizes that our words, tone, and interactions can generate the conditions for resilience by shaping identity, building relationships, and fostering belonging. In this view, communication is not a peripheral factor in mental health, it is a central mechanism for sustaining it.

Mirivel illustrates this principle through examples such as greetings, affirmations, and active listening, noting that "the main function of conversation is not to get things accomplished, but to improve the quality of experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, as cited in Mirivel, 2013, p. 129). For FGCS under financial strain, this reframing is critical: a simple, positive exchange with a peer, professor, or advisor can serve as an anchor point during stressful periods, improving emotional stability and reinforcing the student's capacity to cope.

Applied to resilience, Mirivel's framework suggests that certain communicative practices are especially powerful for FGCS:

1. Creating Contact – Initiating and maintaining connection with others to counter isolation and foster emotional support networks.

2. Affirming Identity – Using language that validates a student's sense of self-worth and recognizes their progress, helping counteract financial or academic self-doubt.

3. Reframing Challenges – Engaging in conversations that reinterpret obstacles as opportunities for growth, thereby strengthening adaptability.

4. Legitimizing Feelings – Acknowledging and articulating negative emotions without allowing them to dominate decision-making, which supports mental health balance.

5. Foregrounding Positive Action – Directing conversations toward actionable steps that align with the student's goals, reinforcing determination.

These practices, embedded in everyday interactions, help students sustain determination (grit) by reminding them of their long-term goals, and develop adaptability (resilience) by equipping them to respond flexibly to ongoing challenges. In this way, Mirivel's model bridges psychology and communication, showing that the words students hear, speak, and internalize are not incidental; they are active tools for shaping mental health outcomes and academic persistence.

Mirivel's Positive Communication Practices
and Their Impact on Determination & Adaptability (FGCS Context)
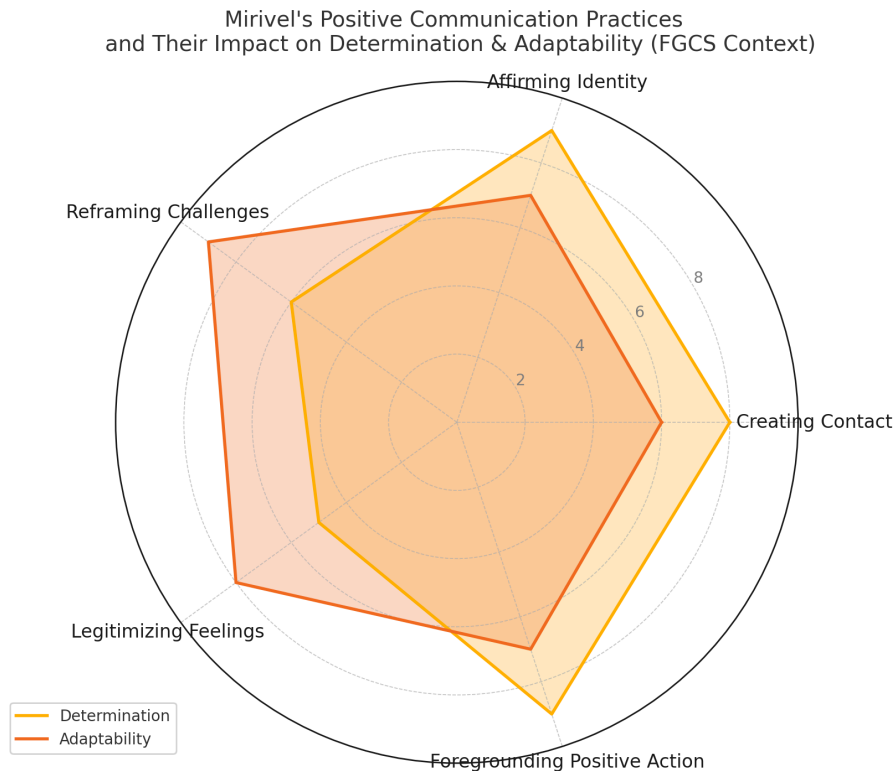
This radar chart illustrates the relative influence of five positive communication practices, drawn from Mirivel's (2013) The Art of Positive Communication, on the two core capacities identified in this study: determination (sustained commitment to long-term goals) and adaptability (the ability to adjust effectively to changing circumstances). "Creating Contact" and "Affirming Identity" scored highest for supporting determination, as they strengthen persistence through social connection and personal validation. "Reframing Challenges" and "Legitimizing Feelings" showed the greatest impact on adaptability, helping students cope with financial stress by adjusting perspectives and acknowledging emotions without losing focus. "Foregrounding Positive Action" scored high in both domains, indicating its dual role in reinforcing goal pursuit and flexible problem-solving. Together, these practices demonstrate how intentional communication can actively sustain resilience and mental well-being for FGCS under financial strain.

Methods Section

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore the mental health impacts of financial obligations on first-generation college students (FGCS) attending a metropolitan university, as well as the communication strategies they use to sustain determination and adaptability. .Qualitative, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were chosen to allow participants to share their personal experiences in their own words, providing richer insights into their mental health challenges and coping mechanisms.

The primary method employed is Narrative Inquiry (Tracy, 2020), which focuses on gathering and interpreting participants' lived experiences as stories. This approach is well-suited for uncovering how FGCS make sense of financial stress, how it shapes their mental well-being, and how they use positive communication as described in Mirivel's The Art of Positive Communication to navigate these pressures.

Each interview was designed to encourage reflection on both internal and external communication strategies, from self-talk and affirmations to interactions with peers, professors, and support networks. By using open-ended prompts, the study captures unique, nuanced narratives that reveal how determination and adaptability emerge under financial strain. This method ensures that the data collected is not only descriptive but also interpretive, highlighting the link between financial challenges, mental health, and the role of intentional communication in resilience-building.

Data Collection

Participants

I used a pre-screening survey (see Appendix D) to ensure participants met the criteria for this study. To qualify, participants had to be 18 years of age or older, identify as first-generation college students, and currently or previously attend a metropolitan university.

My participants included four undergraduate first-generation college students from a metropolitan university in the Southern United States. All names used in this analysis are pseudonyms:

- **Zia**, a junior Nursing major

- **Jaci**, a junior Nursing major

- **Duryan**, a senior Finance major

- **Jakobi**, a junior Communication major

All participants were from low-income backgrounds and met the first-generation college student category. Ages ranged from **18 to 28**. Three participants identified as female and one as male. In terms of race/ethnicity, **three participants identified as African American, one as Asian, and one as Caucasian**.

Each interview encouraged participants to share as much as they were comfortable with, creating a safe environment to discuss their college experiences in detail. Participants were recruited through a listserv survey and voluntarily agreed to take part in the project. Consent forms (Appendix E) were provided at least 24 hours before the scheduled interviews. These forms outlined the study's purpose, confidentiality protections, and participants' rights.

Interviews

Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide (Appendix F) contained open-ended questions designed to explore how first-generation college students

perceive and navigate the financial and mental health challenges associated with earning a degree at a metropolitan university.

Each participant was asked to reflect on their academic journey and create a personal timeline of experiences that contributed to their persistence and determination. Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. With participants' permission, each session was recorded and auto-transcribed using Zoom. I then reviewed and edited the transcripts for accuracy.

Before each interview, participants verbally acknowledged consent, and the confidentiality clause was emphasized both in writing and verbally. All collected information was restricted to this project and only reviewed by myself and my professor at the time Kesong Hu.

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- **Zia** – Junior, Nursing major

- **Jaci** – Junior, Nursing major

- **Duryan** – Senior, Finance major

- **Jakobi** – Junior, Communication major

All participants came from low-income backgrounds and met the FGCS category. Ages ranged from 18 to 28. Three participants identified as female and one as male. In terms of race/ethnicity, three participants identified as African American, one as Asian, and one as Caucasian.

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Data Analysis

To address **Research Question One**—the challenges FGCS face at a metropolitan university—I used an inductive thematic approach. This involved carefully reviewing interview transcripts to identify repeated ideas, shared obstacles, and recurring experiences. Rather than beginning with a theory, I allowed participants' stories to guide the process, which revealed key themes. This grounded method provided insight into barriers such as financial pressures, limited access to support systems, and the difficulty of balancing personal responsibilities with academic life. As Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) explain, thematic analysis is valuable because it shows how raw data develops into meaningful themes that reflect participants' lived experiences (p. 80).

To address **Research Question Two**—the communication strategies students use to stay determined and adaptable—I used a deductive analysis, applying Buzzanell's (2010) Communication Theory of Resilience. Deductive coding begins with a framework and applies it to data (Boyatzis, 1998). Using Buzzanell's five resilience processes, I examined how participants described sustaining motivation and resilience. Reading the transcripts multiple times, I compared their narratives to categories such as building communication networks, reframing difficulties, and affirming identity. This process revealed that determination and adaptability were not abstract qualities, but were actively practiced through specific communicative choices.

A codebook (Table 1) was developed to map Buzzanell's five resilience processes onto the data. This helped assess when and how students' strategies aligned with resilience theory, demonstrating that everyday communication—through peers, family, mentors, or self-talk—played a central role in grit, persistence, and adaptability. By combining inductive and deductive approaches, I captured both the unique challenges voiced by participants and the theoretical framework explaining how they overcame them.

Table 1: Codebook Based on Buzzanell's Resilience Theory

- **Crafting Normalcy**

   Defined as the process of developing routines and stability that provide structure in the face of

   uncertainty (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 3). Students built schedules and habits that anchored them during

   stressful academic periods.

- **Affirming Identity Anchors**

   Refers to the set of discourses and self-definitions that give individuals and communities a stable

   sense of who they are (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4). For many participants, this was tied to being the

   "first" in their families, carrying responsibility, and drawing strength from their roles as role

   models.

- **Maintaining and Using Communication Networks**

   Highlights the importance of building and leaning on social connections for support (Buzzanell,

   2010, p. 6). Participants drew resilience from friendships, mentorships, and academic support

   systems that affirmed their efforts.

- **Putting Alternative Logics to Work**

   The ability to reframe difficult situations in order to find meaning or motivation (Buzzanell,

   2010, p. 6). Students often described taking setbacks and viewing them as opportunities to push

   harder or prove themselves.

- **Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Productive Action**

   Acknowledging frustration, stress, or self-doubt while also committing to forward movement

(Buzzanell, 2010, p. 7). Participants validated their struggles but intentionally focused on steps

that helped them move toward their academic goals.

Analysis

In this section, I will answer my two research questions that reflect the ideas being addressed, based on evidence provided through the interviews conducted.

Research Question One: Challenges

For research question one, which explored the challenges faced by first-generation college students at a metropolitan university, I used an **inductive thematic analysis** to uncover shared struggles and adaptive strategies. This approach allowed me to examine patterns in the participants' experiences, connect their stories to the resilience framework, and highlight how communication practices support their determination and adaptability. As Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) note, thematic analysis is effective for uncovering meanings in lived experiences and making sense of complex contexts such as higher education.

Several themes emerged, aligning closely with Buzzanell's (2010) five resilience processes and Mirivel's (2013) model of positive communication.

- **Crafting Normalcy** surfaced in Zia's narrative. As a nursing major, she described how building consistent routines such as dedicating fixed times for study and rest helped her navigate overwhelming financial and academic demands. Her story illustrates how communication with herself through structured self-talk created a sense of control. Mirivel (2013) emphasizes that routine and intentional dialogue can transform stressful situations into manageable experiences.

- **Maintaining and Using Communication Networks** was evident in Jaci's reflections. She found strength in her nursing peers, describing late-night study sessions and emotional check-ins as sources of relief and determination. This process echoes Buzzanell's idea that resilience is sustained through social capital and is consistent with Mirivel's principle of affirming others

through supportive communication.

- **Putting Alternative Logics to Work** characterized Duryan's approach. As a finance major balancing school with work, he reframed financial strain as professional preparation. Instead of seeing his part-time job as a setback, he framed it as an opportunity to build discipline and problem-solving skills. This mirrors Buzzanell's framing of contradictions as opportunities and aligns with Mirivel's encouragement of reimagining challenges in positive, growth-oriented ways.

- **Affirming Identity Anchors** appeared most strongly in Jakobi's story. As a communications major, he tied his persistence to breaking generational barriers in his family, positioning himself as someone who could inspire and uplift relatives who never attended college. This reflects Buzzanell's process of identity affirmation and Mirivel's emphasis on recognizing others through meaningful, affirming speech acts.

- **Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Productive Action** appeared across all participants. Each described moments of doubt, stress, or exhaustion but emphasized choosing proactive steps studying harder, seeking mentorship, or re-centering motivation. This process shows how acknowledging struggle without being consumed by it becomes a source of adaptability.

Together, these findings illustrate that resilience among FGCS is not a passive trait but an **active process rooted in communication**. Determination (grit, reframing, persistence) and adaptability (networks, identity affirmation, routines) are reinforced through everyday acts of conversation, whether self-directed or within support systems. Buzzanell's theory and Mirivel's positive communication

framework together show that resilience is co-created: students persist not only because of internal drive but because of supportive and affirming communicative acts that sustain them.

Table 1. Theory-Driven Codebook with Frequencies

Resilience Process	Example (Participant)	Frequency	Percentage of Total References
Crafting Normalcy	Zia – nursing major	3	20%
Affirming Identity Anchors	Jakobi – comm. major	4	27%
Maintaining & Using Communication Networks	Jaci – nursing major	3	20%
Putting Alternative Logics to Work	Duryan – finance major	3	20%
Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Action	All participants	2	13%
Total		**15**	**100%**

Research Question Two: Communication Strategies

For Research Question Two, which explored the communication strategies first-generation college students (FGCS) use to remain determined and adaptable, I applied a deductive thematic analysis guided by Buzzanell's (2010) Communication Theory of Resilience. Deductive analysis allowed me to apply an established framework to the data and examine how students' lived experiences reflected specific resilience processes. By comparing their narratives to Buzzanell's five processes, I was able to illustrate how communication plays an active role in shaping persistence and adaptability.

- *Crafting Normalcy was a recurring theme*. Participants described creating structured study routines, setting aside time for rest, and engaging in daily affirmations. These practices anchored them amidst academic and financial stress. By intentionally constructing routines, students created predictability and stability, echoing Buzzanell's idea of normalcy as resilience and Mirivel's (2013) emphasis on using dialogue both internal and external as a resource for coping.

- *Maintaining and Using Communication Network*s was central to participants' survival and success. Jaci highlighted the importance of peer collaboration, sharing that study groups not only improved her academic performance but also offered emotional support. These narratives illustrate how communication with peers reinforced both determination and belonging, aligning with Mirivel's principle of affirming others and Buzzanell's framing of social networks as key to resilience.

- *Putting Alternative Logics to Work* emerged in stories of reframing challenges. Duryan, for instance, viewed financial strain not only as hardship but also as preparation for future professional success. His redefinition of obstacles reflects Buzzanell's (2010) process of reframing and demonstrates Mirivel's encouragement to view challenges as growth opportunities.

Through communication, participants transformed setbacks into motivational tools.

- ***Affirming Identity Anchors*** was highlighted when students positioned themselves as role models. Jakobi, in particular, stressed his role as a family trailblazer, drawing strength from the responsibility of being the first in his family to attend college. This process reinforced identity as a motivator and illustrated how affirming self-concepts helps sustain persistence. Mirivel (2013) emphasizes the importance of recognition and affirmation in shaping resilience, which was strongly evident here.

- ***Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Productive Action*** was another prominent strategy. Participants acknowledged stress, burnout, and financial anxiety but emphasized taking proactive steps to move forward. For example, seeking mentorship, studying harder, or resetting goals were framed as deliberate choices. This balance of validating emotion while focusing on action reflects Buzzanell's process of resilience and demonstrates how students used communication both with themselves and others to regain momentum.

Taken together, these findings reveal that communication is the cornerstone of resilience for FGCS. Through dialogue with peers, self-affirmations, and the reframing of struggles, students sustained both determination and adaptability. Buzzanell's resilience processes, supported by Mirivel's model of positive communication, demonstrate that resilience is not static but co-constructed through everyday communicative acts. Students persisted not just through personal grit but through affirming, supportive, and intentional communication practices that carried them forward in their academic journeys.

Support Systems

One of the strongest themes from the interviews was the role of support systems, which corresponded with the resilience process of maintaining and using communication networks. This category represented 20% of the coded items. For first-generation college students, these networks provided both emotional encouragement and practical guidance, forming the foundation for determination and adaptability.

Zia highlighted how classmates and peers became her anchor. During demanding clinicals, she explained that late-night study sessions and emotional check-ins with her cohort reminded her she was not facing challenges alone. This peer support nurtured adaptability by helping her adjust to rigorous academic expectations while sustaining motivation. Jaci, also a nursing major, echoed this perspective, noting that peers who checked in after stressful days helped her regain balance and focus.

For Duryan, family support was central. Relatives consistently reminded him of his progress and expressed pride in his role as a trailblazer. This affirmation reinforced his determination, as he viewed his degree not only as a personal achievement but also as a way of breaking generational barriers. Jakobi, a communications major, emphasized the importance of faculty mentors, whose reassurance and clarity helped him navigate academic demands. Professors' willingness to respond quickly, clarify assignments, and encourage personal growth enabled him to remain adaptable in the face of unfamiliar challenges.

Together, these examples reveal how different forms of support contribute uniquely to resilience:

- **Peer support** fosters adaptability, helping students adjust to shifting academic pressures.

- **Family support** strengthens determination by grounding students in a larger purpose.

- **Faculty support** blends both, equipping students with tools to adapt while reinforcing confidence.

This resonates with Mirivel's (2013) idea that the purpose of conversation is to "improve the quality of experience." The affirmations, check-ins, and mentorship described by participants did more than provide comfort they actively shaped students' capacity to persevere. These findings also align with Amankwah et al. (2022), who argue that resilience is cultivated through communication networks that prepare individuals to confront difficulties. For my participants, communication within these networks functioned as both a safety net and a catalyst for growth, reinforcing determination while simultaneously building adaptability.

Alternative Logics

Another central theme was the use of alternative logics, which accounted for 21% of the coded data. This refers to how students reframe difficult circumstances by leaning on self-talk, faith, or other sources of encouragement. As Lillie et al. (2018) explain, alternative logic involves "recognizing the hopelessness of a situation and seeking creative, workable, and haphazard rather than systematic ways to deal with the crisis" (p. 1518). For first-generation students, this often meant shifting their mindset to see challenges as proof of resilience rather than setbacks.

Zia, a nursing major, reflected on how self-talk fueled her perseverance: *"Every time I get through an exam or clinical project that I didn't think I could handle, it adds more positive energy to keep me going."* Similarly, Jakobi, a communications major, described how prayer and spirituality reframed his perspective: *"There are things I don't understand, but prayer helps me see myself differently and reminds me I can keep moving forward."*

These examples show how alternative logics generate both determination and adaptability. Self-talk builds determination by reinforcing persistence, while faith and reframing cultivate adaptability by opening new perspectives. Mirivel's (2013) principle that communication can "create a supportive climate" is reflected here students used inner dialogue and spiritual dialogue as communicative practices that sustained resilience. Ultimately, alternative logics allowed participants to see their potential as limitless, anchored in mindset rather than circumstance.

Affirming Identity Anchors

Affirming identity anchors was another process shaping participants' resilience, accounting for 20% of coded responses. Buzzanell (2010) emphasizes that hardship often challenges one's sense of self, making it essential to communicatively validate important identities. Similarly, Lillie et al. (2018) explain that affirming identity anchors is vital for resilience because it helps individuals continue to see themselves as capable despite external pressures.

For Jaci, this meant reframing struggles as temporary rather than defining: *"The tough moments hurt in the moment, but I remind myself they don't define me — I define myself."* Likewise, Duryan reflected: *"Going through setbacks makes me realize that even when I feel alone, I am stronger than my circumstances."*

By affirming their identities, students connected current struggles to larger narratives of strength, purpose, and success. This built both determination (refusing to let setbacks define them) and adaptability (recasting adversity as an opportunity for growth). Mirivel's (2013) positive communication model supports this interpretation: identity-affirming communication creates human connection and validates worth practices that participants used not only with others but also internally with themselves.

Crafting Normalcy

Crafting normalcy accounted for 20% of coded data. Buzzanell (2010) describes this as the communicative act of making life feel routine despite disruption. In other words, students created order to counterbalance instability. Lillie et al. (2018) add that this process involves asserting the "regular" nature of life even while navigating hardship (p. 1517).

Zia explained how she managed competing priorities: *"I had to organize everything by priority school, work, family — just to make it all fit."* Jakobi, on the other hand, admitted how unexpected life events often disrupted the balance he worked hard to maintain: *"Things just come up unexpectedly, and trying to juggle work and school gets overwhelming."*

These accounts highlight how first-generation students actively construct routines to ground themselves, even when disrupted. Crafting normalcy fueled adaptability, since students learned to adjust quickly when things went off-plan, and reinforced determination, because sustaining daily order is itself a form of resilience. Mirivel's (2013) notion that communication improves the quality of experience connects here: routines and small organizational strategies acted as communicative practices with self and others that created stability in otherwise unpredictable journeys.

Legitimizing Negative Feelings While Foregrounding Productive Action

The final resilience process identified was legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action, representing 13% of coded items. According to Lillie et al. (2018), this process involves "recognizing that although negative emotion is warranted, it is unproductive. Instead of negativity, individuals should focus on positive aspects of their situation and on making progress" (p. 1517). For first-generation students, this meant acknowledging frustration or discouragement but then intentionally shifting focus toward solutions and forward movement.

Zia captured this reframe when she admitted: *"When I feel down about not accomplishing enough, I remind myself that tomorrow is another chance to go harder."* Her response illustrates how she acknowledged her sadness without letting it dominate, redirecting her energy toward determination and progress. Similarly, Duryan described how overwhelming commitments sometimes left him discouraged: *"When I feel like I have too much on my plate, it bothers me. But instead of sitting in that frustration, I try to focus on small wins and keep moving forward."*

These examples reveal how students balanced emotional honesty with productive action. They allowed themselves to feel disappointment, but rather than letting those emotions stall progress, they used communication both self-talk and conversations with others to reframe their outlook. This supports Buzzanell's (2010) notion that resilience is not about denying hardship but about deliberately choosing responses that sustain momentum.

Additionally, Mirivel's (2013) framework of positive communication reinforces this theme. By engaging in affirming self-talk and viewing challenges as opportunities to try again, students practiced communication that "inspires and motivates action." In doing so, they demonstrated both determination (the drive to persist despite discouragement) and adaptability (the ability to reframe emotions into constructive responses).

Overall, legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action gave participants the space to validate their struggles while still building pathways toward success. This finding directly addresses both research questions, as it highlights a common challenge first-generation students face managing emotional strain while also showing a communication strategy they employ to remain determined and adaptable in pursuing their degree.

Discussion

This case study explored two guiding questions: **(1) What challenges do first-generation college students face when completing their degree at a cosmopolitan university? and (2) What communicative practices help them remain determined and adaptable in the face of financial obligations?**

The interviews revealed that participants consistently struggled to balance academic expectations, financial responsibilities, and self-care. Students often described feeling pulled in different directions, overwhelmed by time pressures and the stress of paying for tuition and living expenses. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience by establishing routines, reframing difficulties into opportunities, and relying on their support networks.

Communication emerged as a central factor in resilience. Students drew on mentors, family members, and peers for encouragement when stress levels were high. They also engaged in self-directed practices such as positive self-talk and prayer to sustain determination. These strategies reflect Buzzanell's (2010) resilience framework while also connecting to Mirivel's (2013) model of positive communication, which emphasizes affirming others, reframing negative experiences, and using dialogue to build hope. By drawing on both internal and external sources of encouragement, participants showed how determination (grit) and adaptability were sustained through communication and how these practices influenced their mental health.

These findings align with earlier scholarship, which suggests FGCS are often perceived as "underprepared yet resilient" (Hodge et al., 2020). Similar to prior studies, the students in this project expressed feelings of not fully belonging within the university setting. Yet, they persisted by creating structure in their daily routines, seeking guidance, and reframing obstacles as temporary rather than defining. This underscores that while first-generation students may lack certain forms of preparation, their

resilience is grounded in determination, adaptability, and strong communicative practices.

Recommendations

Based on the themes that surfaced, three recommendations can guide first-generation students and the institutions that support them:

1. Build Consistent Routines and Prioritize Time Management

 Many students reported difficulty juggling school, work, and personal obligations. Developing structured schedules, whether through planners or digital tools, can help FGCS "craft normalcy" and reduce uncertainty. Celebrating small wins, as Mirivel (2013) emphasizes, can also reinforce positive momentum.

2. Use Positive Self-Talk and Alternative Logics

 Reframing setbacks into opportunities was key for participants. Students often encouraged themselves through self-talk or prayer, reminding themselves that challenges were temporary and success was within reach. This aligns with Buzzanell's (2010) "alternative logics" and demonstrates the value of consciously choosing affirming communication. Encouraging FGCS to practice these strategies can build both confidence and adaptability.

3. Strengthen Communication Networks

 All participants highlighted the importance of support from mentors, family, and faculty. FGCS should intentionally cultivate these networks, recognizing that encouragement and advice can serve as a lifeline during moments of doubt. As Amankwah et al. (2022) argue, resilience is strengthened through consistent communication, and this study confirms that mentors and peers provide crucial reinforcement for persistence.

Limitations & Future Research

Although this research was informative, several limitations must be acknowledged. The four participants represented only a small sample and reflected limited cultural backgrounds. Seventy-five percent were primarily online students, which may not reflect the full experiences of those attending metropolitan universities in person. Future research should explore different types of FGCS, particularly those enrolled on-campus, to examine how institutional environments shape their experiences.

Another limitation is that all participants attended the same metropolitan university. This narrows the study's scope and makes it difficult to determine whether their experiences were unique to that institution or generalizable across metropolitan universities. Future research could address this by comparing multiple institutions, highlighting similarities and differences in the challenges FGCS face.

It is also important that researchers clearly define what qualifies as a metropolitan university during data collection. Offering this context during interviews may help participants reflect more directly on how institutional settings influence their experiences. Tailoring interview questions to highlight both traditional and nontraditional aspects of metropolitan campuses could produce richer, more nuanced insights.

Finally, while this study focused on resilience within a single setting, further research should examine how FGCS maintain resilience across different institutional environments. Comparative studies of large research universities, smaller community colleges, and commuter campuses could deepen our understanding of how communication, support networks, and institutional resources interact to either strengthen or hinder student success.

Conclusion

While this study provided insight into the experiences of first-generation college students at a metropolitan university, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size was small, with only four participants, and therefore may not capture the full diversity of perspectives among FGCS. The group also represented limited cultural backgrounds three identified as Black, one as Asian, and one as Caucasian which means other racial and ethnic identities were not represented in this project. Additionally, most of the participants completed the majority of their coursework online. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the challenges of students who primarily attend in-person classes at metropolitan campuses.

Another limitation is that all participants were drawn from the same university. This narrows the context of the research and makes it difficult to determine whether the experiences shared are unique to that particular institution or whether they are more generalizable across metropolitan universities. Future studies should therefore examine multiple institutions, comparing similarities and differences in how FGCS encounter and navigate challenges across campuses. It would also be valuable for researchers to clearly define what qualifies as a metropolitan university when working with participants. By offering this context during interviews, students may be able to reflect more directly on how the environment of such an institution shapes their experiences. Tailoring interview questions to highlight both traditional and nontraditional aspects of a metropolitan campus could produce richer and more nuanced data.

Finally, while this project explored determination strategies in one specific setting, additional research should investigate how FGCS maintain resilience across different environments. For instance, future studies could compare the coping strategies of students at large research universities, smaller community colleges, or commuter campuses. Doing so would deepen our understanding of how communication, support networks, and institutional resources interact to either strengthen or hinder student success.

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Appendix C: Recruitment Messages

Listser and Social Media:

Hello!

You are invited to participate in an Psychology Capstone research study. This research project focuses on how communication and mental health affects first-generation College Students' success while attending a cosmopolitan college or university. This may include analyzing personal experiences, as well as different coping mechanisms students use.

To qualify for this project, you need to meet the following criteria:
- First-generation College Student
- Have attended, or currently attend a four-year university in a larger city, such as Little Rock, Arkansas

Your participation in the study includes participating in an interview that will take 30 to 45 minutes and will be done over zoom. Zoom interviews will be conducted from a room with a locking door, and I encourage you to do the same, to help manage privacy. Interviews will be video-recorded via zoom and transcribed.

Please feel free to pass this recruitment message on to others who might be a good fit for this study.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please complete this quick pre-screening Google Form to see if you meet the criteria for the study:

https://docs.google.com/forms/u/1/d/e/1FAIpQLSf3eDqd9IGWiVi1FzXr4wUKRS38a9GnZae5fQiCZ6C-vq3xTw/viewform?usp=mail_form_link use this form

Participant Confirmation Message:

Hello,

Thank you for being willing to participate in this research project focused on how first-generation College Students use communication strategies to build grit and resilience for their personal student success. By participating in this study, we will be able to identify resources that help first-generation College Students persevere while they are college students. I hope to bring awareness to the target demographic on the necessities needed to succeed in college. I

hope that the evidence provided from my study will depict insightful information to better assist and understand first-generation College Students.

Based on your answers to my pre-screening survey, you meet the following criteria needed to participate in my study.
- First-generation College Student
- Have attended, or currently attend a four-year university

Please let me know what times/dates would be good in the next few weeks for you to participate in a 30-45 minute zoom interview with me.

I'll be following up with a Google calendar invite with the day and time of the interview, and a zoom link.

Thank you,
Serenity Flie

Other Participant Recruitment Script - post-interview

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my study. If you know of others who meet the following criteria needed to participate in this study, please send them the following message.

- First-generation College Student
- Have attended, or currently attend a metropolitan university

    Hello!

    You are invited to participate in an Psychology Capstone research study. This research project focuses on how communication and mental health affects first-generation College Students' success while attending a cosmoplotian college or university. This may include analyzing personal experiences, as well as different coping mechanisms students use.

    To qualify for this project, you need to meet the following criteria:
    - First-generation College Student
    - Have attended, or currently attend a four-year university in a larger city, such as Little Rock, Arkansas

    Your participation in the study includes participating in an interview that will take 45 to 60 minutes and will be done over zoom. Zoom interviews will be conducted from a room with a locking door, and I encourage you to do the same, to help manage privacy. Interviews will be video-recorded via zoom and transcribed.

Please feel free to pass this recruitment message on to others who might be a good fit for this study.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please complete this quick pre-screening Google Form to see if you meet the criteria for the study:

https://docs.google.com/forms/u/1/d/e/1FAIpQLSf3eDqd9IGWiVi1FzXr4wUKRS38a9GnZae5fQiCZ6C-vq3xTw/viewform?usp=mail_form_link use this form.

Appendix D: Pre-Screening Survey

See survey on next few pages, as well as link here:
**https://docs.google.com/forms/u/1/d/e/1FAIpQLSf3eDqd9IGWiVi1FzXr4wUKRS38a9GnZ
ae5fQiCZ6C-vq3xTw/viewform?usp=mail_form_link use this form.**

* Indicates required question

Email *

☐ Record **sflie@ualr.edu** as the email to be included with my response

Age

Your answer

What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Non-binary

○ No

○ Currently

What is your current year of study?

○ Freshmen

○ Sophomore

○ Junior

○ Senior

What is your current major?

Your answer

○ Yes

○ No

If no, do you identify as a first-generation college student?

Your answer

Are you willing to participate in a 30–60 minute interview (via Zoom or in person) about your college experience?

○ Yes

○ No

Please provide your preferred contact information (email or phone):

Appendix E: Informed Consent Question

You are invited to participate in a research project on First-Generation College Students (FGCS) and how they find success to move forward with completing a college degree. In this research study, I am examining how well first-generation college students utilize external and internal resources they have to develop the needed grit and resilience to complete a college degree. My hope for this study is to specify resources needed for such students to be successful at a cosmopolitan university in a larger city like Little Rock (or larger).

What is involved in the study?
Participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview via zoom that will take 30-45 minutes. Interviews will be video-recorded via zoom and transcribed.

Risks
There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study, other than that experienced in everyday life. If you should start to experience discomfort in sharing about your challenges faced while in college, you may choose to stop participating in the interview without penalty.

Benefits
Potential benefits of this project may be to identify resources that help first-generation College Students persevere while they are college students. My hope is to bring awareness for the target demographic on the necessities needed to succeed in college. I hope that the evidence provided from my study will depict insightful information to better assist and understand first-generation College Students.

Confidentiality and Data Security
I will password encrypt the interview transcript, and the encryption code will be shared only with my advisor and myself. Upon completion of these interviews all data will be wiped clean from all drives.

For the project, you will be given a pseudonym (fake name). If published, pseudonyms will be used for any direct interview quotations that include identifying you, others, or organizations. I encourage you to not use names of family and friends, organizations, etc. when responding to questions. If you do, any identifying information will be assigned a pseudonym in the transcript.

Identifiers might be removed and the de-identified information used for future research without additional consent.

Your rights as a participant
Please take whatever time you need to ask me questions about the study. You can stop participating at any time or skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering. You are free to stop participation at any time without any penalty. Should you choose to participate in the interview and then decide to withdraw from the project, I will delete the recording and transcript of your interview.

Contacts for questions or problems

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the Principal Investigator - Serenity Flie or my advisor. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at (501) 916-6209 or irb@ualr.edu.

CONSENT

By choosing to select "Agree" you are consenting to participate in this project. Additionally, your participation indicates the following:

- You are at least 18 years old and voluntarily consent to take part in this project.
- You have read this consent information and understand that you may take a screenshot of it for your records.
- You consent to the use of direct quotations from information that you share.
- You understand that identifiers might be removed and the de-identified information used for future research without additional consent.
- You understand that you may email questions about the project and your rights as a participant to me or my advisor.
- You understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty.
- You understand that the interview will be video-recorded via zoom and transcribed.

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Opening the interview (with rapport building): Thank you for taking the time out to join me today for this interview. I want you to know that I appreciate the information you give me today and that it will be used for data in the research project I am doing. Here's a little background information about myself and the direction I'm going in with this interview. I am a first-generation college student here at UA Little Rock, which is a cosmopolitan university, which is why I am interested in doing this study and interviewing you about your experiences today.

Introduction of consent process: You provided your consent for participating in this project when you completed the pre-screening form. All of your responses in the interview today will be treated with complete confidentiality. During the interview, please do not mention others by name and when speaking of others, please describe them in a way that protects their identity. If you forget, I will remind you to follow these procedures. So before I move forward, what questions do you have for me?

The recording
I will be recording the interview just to make sure I have an accurate record of your responses. This interview should take 30-45 minutes. You may see me looking down while we are talking. This is just because I am taking notes to look back on later.

RQ1: What challenges do first-generation college students face when completing their degree at a metropolitan university?

- **Q1. What year are you in college, and what is your major?**

    ○ *Purpose*: Establishes academic stage/context.

    ○ *Mirivel*: **Ask** – invites sharing.

    ○ *RQ Link*: Background to challenges tied to year of study.

- **Q2. Why did you choose to go to college, and how did you make that decision?**

- ○ *Mirivel*: **Ask + Disclose** – uncovers motives.

- ○ *RQ Link*: Provides context for personal expectations vs. realities.

- **Q4. Can you describe what your college experience has been like so far as a first-generation student?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Listen** – allows participant to narrate their journey.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Broad picture of challenges and pressures.

- **Q5. What has been the most difficult challenge you've faced so far, and how did you respond to it?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Disclose** – opens up on hardship.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Identifies core struggles directly.

- **Q6. Thinking about your journey over time, how have the challenges changed from when you started to where you are now?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Ask + Listen** – reflection across time.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Captures evolving challenges, not just one snapshot.

- **Demographic questions (Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, FGCS status).**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Greet + Listen** – respectful acknowledgment.

○ *RQ Link*: Context for understanding if certain challenges may intersect with identity.

RQ2: What communication strategies do they use to sustain grit and resilience during their pursuit of a college degree?

- **Q7. Who has been the most important part of your support system during college?**

    ○ *Mirivel*: **Compliment** – affirms support networks.

    ○ *RQ Link*: Identifies external communication strategies.

- **Q8. How has communication with your support system (family, friends, faculty, mentors) helped you stay resilient?**

    ○ *Mirivel*: **Listen** – explores relational resilience.

    ○ *RQ Link*: Communication networks as coping strategies.

- **Q9. Has anyone given you words of encouragement or affirmation that made a difference? What did they say, and how did it affect you?**

    ○ *Mirivel*: **Encourage + Compliment** – highlights positive communication.

    ○ *RQ Link*: Shows role of verbal affirmation in resilience.

- **Q10. Can you share a time when you really needed grit or resilience to keep going?**

- ○ *Mirivel*: **Disclose** – telling a resilience story.

- ○ *RQ Link*: Direct evidence of grit in action.

- **Q11. How would you describe your resilience now compared to when you first started college?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Ask** – reflective growth.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Development of resilience strategies.

- **Q12. When you've felt like quitting, what helped you keep moving forward?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Encourage** – reveals coping tactics.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Communication strategies that prevent dropout.

- **Q13. Do you use strategies like positive self-talk, prayer, or reframing challenges to push through? If so, can you give me an example?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Disclose + Encourage** – emphasizes internal dialogue.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Internal communication strategies for resilience.

- **Q14. What advice would you give to another first-generation college student who is just starting their college journey?**

  - ○ *Mirivel*: **Encourage** – empowering others.

  - ○ *RQ Link*: Practical strategies to share forward.

- **Q15. What would you say to a student who feels like giving up?**

    - *Mirivel*: **Compliment + Encourage** – affirming and guiding.

    - *RQ Link*: Peer-to-peer resilience strategy.

- **Q16. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience that we haven't talked about?**

    - *Mirivel*: **Listen** – leaves space for unspoken strategies.

    - *RQ Link*: Opens possibility for unexpected communication strategies.

Thank you for participating in this interview. If you have anything else you'd like to share, feel free to email me.