

# “Parties Happen a Lot Less Than What the Movies Say They Do:” Expectancy Violations of First-Generation College Students

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*Scholars have explored first-generation college students' (FGCS) experiences, but less is known about how FGCS academic and social expectations might be violated during the transition to college. The current study drew upon organizational socialization literature and expectancy violation theory to explore FGCS experiences from a mixed-methods perspective. Survey responses from FGCS during their first semester showed that undergraduates experience social expectations of attending parties, being sociable, and difficulty joining social groups. Most social expectations were negatively violated. FGCS also shared academic expectations – being challenged and experiencing stress – which were positively violated and met during students' first semesters. FGCS who experienced negative violations of their expectations reported decreased academic adjustment to college and engagement compared to students with positive violations and met expectations, respectively. In addition to identifying unmet expectations and their outcomes, this study contributes to scholars' conceptualization of organizational socialization by adopting expectancy violation theory as a theoretical frame.*

*Keywords: First-generation college students, expectancy violation theory, organizational socialization, expectation-reality gap*

Approximately one in three American students meet the conditions for first-generation college student status, defined as “undergraduate students whose parents had not participated in postsecondary education” (Cataldi et al., 2018, p. 2). Although most students experience difficulties and stress during the transition to college (Aloia & Strutzenberg, 2020; Ruberman, 2014), first-generation college students (FGCS) face unique challenges that spark additional stressors (Jenkins et al., 2013; Suwinyattichaiorn & Johnson, 2020). For example, research shows that FGCS are less likely than non-FGCS to report support from their family and friends and more likely to report depressive symptoms (Jenkins et al., 2013). These “educational pioneers” (London, 1996, p. 11) often face more significant barriers to academic success as they are more likely than their continuing-generation student counterparts to work full-time, to come from low socioeconomic status, to be parents or guardians of children, and to enroll in fewer course hours (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In order to foster FGCS success in college, more research is needed to understand their experiences.

Here, we contend that these problems stem, in part, from poor socialization and inaccurate expectations of FGCS. Because FGCS do not have parents that have attended college, they may lack the knowledge and understanding about university life (Hicks, 2003). In this study, we seek to understand how messages received by FGCS narrow the difference between their assumptions about college and their actual lived experience or what the literature defines as the *expectation-reality gap* (Barnett, 2012; Winstone & Bretton, 2013). Understanding this communication is crucial because unmet expectations increase newcomers’ dissatisfaction and turnover (Kramer & Dailey, 2019). Arguably, FGCS’ expectation-reality gaps play an important role in the academic success and retention of our FGCS population. Indeed, Cole (2021) called for research to explore incoming FGCS narratives, as her research found that their expectations differed from those of non-FGCS students. To understand the expectation-reality gaps FGCS experience as a result of violations of their expectations about transitioning into their first year of college, we ground our study in two bodies of communication literature, including organizational socialization and expectancy violation theory.

## The Organizational Socialization Process

The socialization literature is a useful frame for seeking to understand the (mis) alignment between the messages that FGCS receive about college and their actual experiences during their first-year transition. The socialization process may be described as an individual’s life cycle in an organization, as it deals with the process of 1) learning about, 2) entering in, 3) becoming part of, and 4) leaving organizations (Kramer, 2010; Jablin, 2001). First, during anticipatory socialization,

prospective members gain knowledge about what membership might be like in an organization or role. Second, upon entering the organization, a phase often referred to as organizational entry or encounter, newcomers are often met with uncertainty and surprise, as expectations developed during anticipatory socialization might not align with current organizational realities (Louis, 1980). Over time, however, both organizations and individuals adapt to one another, and newcomers eventually transition into organizational insiders during the third phase of “metamorphosis.” The fourth and final stage of the socialization process involves exit when members voluntarily or involuntarily leave the organization or role (Davis & Myers, 2012).

Here, we focus on the first phase of the socialization process—anticipatory socialization—where people “form expectations about careers, jobs, and organizations prior to entering them” (Jablin, 2001, p. 262). Scholarship exploring anticipatory socialization has identified that prospective members receive messages that shape their expectations of a future role or organization through several sources: family, educational institutions, part-time employment, peers and friends, and the media (e.g., Buzzanell et al., 2011; Jablin, 1985; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Lucas, 2011; Vangelisti, 1988).

Traditionally, anticipatory socialization research has sought to understand how adolescents come to understand and select their desired vocation. For example, Myers et al. (2011) conducted 38 focus groups with over 200 teenagers and explained how job aspirations, particularly in STEM careers, were influenced by parents (e.g., in medical professions), performance in school (e.g., math), and hands-on activities (e.g., science labs). Other scholars have explored the socialization process in other organizations beyond traditional workplaces. For example, Kramer’s (2011) study of socialization in a community choir qualitatively demonstrated how members experienced *role anticipatory socialization*—learning the behaviors and attitudes of a role before entering it—by participating in previous choirs. Volunteers experienced *organizational anticipatory socialization*—the process of developing beliefs about and selecting an organization to join—by talking to friends who were members of the choir, knowing the director of the organization personally, or searching for community choirs online.

Here, we seek to further socialization literature by using this framework to understand how individuals experience role and organizational anticipatory socialization in university life. Considering the socialization process in the context of university life, FGCS may experience anticipatory socialization by individuals who have never experienced college themselves. Whereas past research has largely explored instances where socialization sources (e.g., family, friends, peers) were more readily available in the context of work and volunteering, exploring FGCS socialization provides a unique lens for extending this literature.

Unlike continuing generation students whose parents attended college, FGCS may have expectations that are vastly different from how things are done in universities that may stem from their family's lack of experience within the university system (Hicks, 2003). Although all newcomers experience uncertainty and inaccurate expectations (e.g., Bullis & Bach, 1989), FGCS feasibly feel greater uncertainty about college and may have vastly different experiences than expected. Thus, exploring FGCS socialization expectations and experiences is worthwhile. Here, we focus on better understanding FGCS expectations through the lens of expectancy violation theory (EVT).

## Expectancy Violation Theory

EVT (Burgoon, 1993) explains how expectations are developed and predicts how individuals will evaluate and respond to expectancy violations (Burgoon, 1978). The theory is founded on the idea of expectancies, or “enduring pattern(s) of anticipated behavior” (Burgoon, 1993, p. 31). Expectancies are developed through norms, rules, and shared understandings of interactions. Given that FGCS may not have the same opportunity for shared understanding as their continuing generation counterparts, FGCS may be more likely to experience an expectancy violation since their social network might be unable to help FGCS develop accurate expectancies of college life.

An expectation violation describes any positive or negative divergence from what was expected to occur (Burgoon, 1978). When individuals experience discrepancies between expectations and reality, they interpret the meaning of and evaluate the valence of the expectancy violation based, at least in part, on the perceived outcome of the violation (Burgoon, 1993). In the context of FGCS' transition to college, negative violations could lead to experiences of uncertainty and stress, which, in turn, could impact their academic outcomes (e.g., adjustment to college, academic engagement). Although the literature currently suggests that FGCS have unique expectations about the college experience (Collier & Morgan, 2008), less is known about the violations of the expectations they have during the transition to college. Thus, we ask:

1. What are FGCS expectations about college?
2. How do first-semester experiences meet or violate FGCS expectations?

Additionally, less is known about whether the discrepancies between what FGCS expect about college and what they actually experience during their first semester will impact important academic outcomes. Consequently, we aim to explore how the experiences of met or violated expectations influence students' reports of their academic adjustment to college and behavioral engagement. Academic adjustment to college is characterized

by “a student’s success in coping with the various educational demands... of the college experience” (Baker & Siryk, 2015, p. 14), and behavioral engagement refers to a range of student behaviors related to student motivation to learn (Liem & Martin, 2012). Previous research—framed from expectancy violation and social cognitive theoretical perspectives—has demonstrated that students’ positive expectancies are associated with greater academic achievement (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Scheier et al., 2001), including better GPA (Elliott, 2014; Steinmayr et al., 2018) and student motivation (Skinner et al., 2008). Thus, we pose the following hypothesis.

H1: Students with negative violations of their expectations will experience worse a) academic adjustment to college and b) engagement than students who report positive violations or met expectations.

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants consisted of undergraduate students attending their first semester of college at a university located in the southwestern United States, where 7,723 first-year undergraduate students enrolled at the time of data collection. FGCS made up approximately half of this demographic and were recruited from orientation events across campus and via emails to FGCS student organization listservs.

In total, 45 students who self-identified as FGCS participated in the study, including 4 men, 37 women, and 4 participants who did not report their gender identity. This ratio closely mirrors the University’s enrollment data, which reports the student demographic as primarily female. Most participants were Hispanic/Latino (44%), White/Caucasian (16%), Black or African American (13%), and Biracial (11%). These numbers align with the demographics reported of all undergraduate students classified as first-generation students (PNPI, 2021). The sample represented 24 majors, including Psychology (17%), Nursing (15%), Biology (7%), Mass Communication (5%), Education (5%), English (5%), Interdisciplinary Studies (5%), and 17 others (all 2%).

### DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected before the COVID-19 global pandemic, in the fall 2019 academic semester, through an online questionnaire. Students received a Qualtrics link towards the end of their first semester of college, which asked them to reflect on their uncertainties qualitatively. Then, we asked participants to share examples of how their experiences had aligned with their expectations about college and examples of how their experiences had misaligned with expectations. Most students wrote several sentences describing how their experiences had (mis)aligned with their expectations,

which resulted in 22 pages of single-spaced text. Researchers assigned pseudonyms to participants to give life to quotes reported instead of referring to people as numbers. FGCS also completed quantitative measures of their adjustment to college and their academic engagement.

## MEASURES

**Adjustment to College.** Student adjustment was measured by the academic adjustment subscale of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 2015). This measure includes items about students' motivations for completing academic work and accomplishing academic-related goals, students' perceived academic success or performance, and students' satisfaction with the collegiate environment. The SACQ uses a 9-point Likert-type scale with *1 = Applies Very Closely to Me* and *5 = Does Not Apply to Me at All*. Higher scores indicate better academic adjustment to college. The descriptives and reliability estimates are as follows: academic adjustment ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ),

**Academic Engagement.** FGCS' engagement was measured by the academic disengagement subscale of the Student Coping Instrument (SCOPE; Struthers et al., 2000). This scale was developed to reflect students' responses to difficult experiences via disengagement behaviors such as "I skip class," "I reduce the amount of effort I put into solving the problem," and "I give up trying to reach my goal." SCOPE uses a 5-point Likert-type scale with *1 = Strongly Disagree* and *5 = Strongly Agree*. For the purposes of the current study, we reverse-coded the items so that higher scores indicate greater academic engagement. The mean for the students in our sample was 3.93 ( $SD = 0.80$ ). Reliability estimates for student academic engagement in the current study were adequate ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

## QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

First, a codebook was created, analyzing data with an iterative approach (Tracy, 2020) through primary-cycle coding, which involved using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to assign participant responses to initial descriptive categories. During this process, open codes were also collapsed and combined to create second-level analytic codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, "positive violations" was a broader code that summarized multiple primary-cycle codes. Finally, we engaged in selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), seeking to collapse secondary-cycle codes into core categories that answered our research questions. This resulted in two overarching themes—social and academic—that answered our research questions about FGCS expectations (RQ1) and the expectancy violations they experienced during their first semester of college (RQ2).

After the initial codebook was established, the first and third authors randomly selected approximately 25% of the messages in the sample to code together based on overarching categories of positive expectancy violations, negative expectancy violations, and met expectations. The authors then separately coded the messages into one or more of the categories established. Cohen's  $\kappa$  was run to establish interrater reliability. The results ( $\kappa = 0.93, p < .001$ ) suggest high levels of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

## Findings

### SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS AND VIOLATIONS

First, FGCS expected *to attend parties* in college. This expectation was *negatively violated*, as participants lamented that there were not as many parties as anticipated. For example, Phillip shared, "I thought college was all parties, but honestly there ain't [*sic*] any. I've been to one, and it was terrible. Parties happen a lot less than what the movies say they do." Similar to prior socialization research, participant Phillip alluded to mass media (Levine & Hoffner, 2006) shaping his anticipatory socialization of college; in reality, his experiences fell short of the hype presented in films. In addition, FGCS may have been socialized by family and friends, another highly referenced source of anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 2001) to believe that this particular college was a "party school." Connie recounted, "When I told people I was going to [University], they always asked me why because [University] is a party school. But I really haven't seen or heard of any parties." Similarly, Bibiana referred to the University's reputation and her unmet expectations, "Another thing is that people said that this school was all about parties and that that was the only reason for people coming here, and yes, people go to parties and have fun, but that's not all they do because they still care about their studies and grades."

The second expectation FGCS students shared was that they expected *to be sociable* in college. This expectation was *negatively violated*, as participants lamented about their loneliness and lack of communication with others. Isabel summarized:

I came here expecting to meet lifelong friends... But once I got here I kinda [*sic*] froze like a deer in headlights and stayed to myself. I would keep my head down, read on my phone, and always listen to music. I just panicked because I felt so alone, and I didn't know what to do.

This theme of expecting everyone to be open and outgoing in college was very common in the data. FGCS mentioned how family communicated and held the perception that students would make friends in college. Thus, many FGCS in our sample felt unable to share this negatively violated expectation with their parents,

which added to students' anxiety and perceptions of isolation. Isabel disclosed, "It is extremely difficult, and it sucks even more because my family is always praising how smart I was in high school and how I'm in college now... They have such high expectations for me, and all I really want to tell them is I am considerably lonely." Similarly, Andres offered his experience: "It has been difficult, especially when my family asks how is it going and I cannot just rant about how stressful [*sic*] is walking everywhere and being alone." FGCS did not experience the pervasive conversations and constant connection with other students as they had expected.

The third expectation some FGCS students in our study shared was that they expected *difficulty joining social groups* in college. This group of students who had the expectation that finding and fitting into groups or clubs would be challenging experienced a *positive violation*. Feeling like they belonged on campus, however, was easier than anticipated, as Sarah responded, "I was uncertain about fitting in or finding a group, but I realized that everyone is in the same boat." Another participant, Cameron, was surprised that "college has made it really easy to build new relationships with people."

FGCS did not share whether family, friends, the media, or another source (Jablin, 1985) influenced their perception that it would be difficult to establish a sense of belonging to social groups. Some comments suggest that this might have been a personal frame or insecurity that FGCS had. Tiffany acknowledged, "Uncertainties I've had was [*sic*]... finding a group of people of whom I belong to. I came here knowing no one from my high school, so finding a group of people who I get along with was going to be harder than others." Similarly, Victoria vaguely discussed how her expectations had not aligned, "My expectations were negative and I thought that I would not enjoy college or [University]. But I... have found a couple clubs that I really enjoy."

## **ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND VIOLATIONS**

In addition to social expectations and violations during their first semester of college, FGCS also experienced expectation-reality gaps in academics. Many FGCS students shared how they expected *to be challenged* academically in college. This expectation was *positively violated*, as participants surprisingly found that "classes aren't as daunting as I thought they would be" (Maria) and "my grades are way higher than I thought they would be" (Connie). Tiffany remarked, "College for me hasn't been that hard as other people [said]. I find it fairly easy to understand the material and my classes and to do good in [*sic*] the tests." For example, Emilia mentioned, "I came into college expecting it to be extremely hard, however, it has been fairly easy."



Like prior studies (e.g., Levine & Hoffner, 2006), friends and peers were specifically referenced as sources who built FGCS expectations about college being difficult. Bibiana illuminated, “Many of my friends and peers say that college is hard or that’s it a lot to handle, but I don’t really feel like that... it’s nothing that I can’t handle. College had [*sic*] honestly been fun.” Furthermore, Connie mentioned how educators – another source found in prior socialization research (e.g., Myers et al., 2011) – shaped perceptions of an arduous college journey. She gladly stated, “For me, college has been easier than expected... such as the amount of classwork I will have to accomplish. You always hear in high school how college work is more complex.”

Second, FGCS anticipated that they would be *experiencing stress* in college, which was a *met expectation*. Steve expressed, “It’s exactly as I expected, with many uncertainty [*sic*]. For example, the classes aren’t that hard but a lot to handle.” As noted above, FGCS were positively violated by the difficulty of classes, but they knew that college would bring stress and require time management. Similarly, Tiffany confided, “I expected to be stressed, tired all the time, and wanting to fall asleep for the rest of the day... I haven’t gone through anything so far that didn’t meet my expectations.”

As mentioned before, educators seemed to play a role in setting FGCS expectations for the workload and stress associated with college. Ruth summarized this well by sharing, “College has been stressful at times when it comes to exam week... Sometimes it can be tiring, but I knew that when I was in my senior year, my teachers and counselors always told us that.”

## QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

Two separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted to explore group differences in student adjustment to college (H1a) and academic engagement (H1b) based on students’ reports of positive violations, negative violations, and met expectations. H1a was partially supported,  $F(2, 48) = 3.42, p = .04, \eta^2 = .13$ . Students who experienced negative violations of their expectations ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.52$ ) reported significantly lower academic adjustment to college than students who experienced positive violations of their expectations ( $M = 3.71, SD = 0.61$ ). The effect size estimate (Cohen’s  $d = 0.86$ ) suggests large group differences (Dunst et al., 2004). There were no significant differences between students who reported having met expectations and either group of students who reported experiencing negative or positive violations of their expectations.

There was also partial support for H1b,  $F(2, 50) = 3.38, p = .04, \eta^2 = .12$ . The findings suggest that students who experienced negative violations of their expectations ( $M = 3.53, SD = 0.83$ ) reported significantly lower academic engagement than students whose expectations were met ( $M = 4.18, SD = 0.69$ ). Based on the sample in the

current study, the effect found (Cohen's  $d = 0.85$ ) for the group differences in student engagement was large (Dunst et al., 2004). There were no significant differences between students whose expectations were positively violated and students whose expectations were negatively violated. There were also no significant differences between students who experienced met expectations and students who experienced positively violated expectations.

## Discussion

This project thematically analyzed qualitative and quantitative survey responses from FGCS to understand students' expectations before entering college and their first-semester violations. Our findings shed light on the communication that contributes to the *FGCS expectation-reality gap*, defined as the difference between FGCS' assumptions about college and their actual, lived experiences during their college transition.

The FGCS in our sample report that the academic expectations they had prior to attending college were either met or positively violated. Alternatively, many of the students in this study indicated they did not anticipate the challenges associated with initiating, developing, and maintaining social connections among their peers. This suggests that FGCS are adequately prepared for the rigor of the academic part of the college experience, yet their expectations were often negatively violated related to the social component of college life during their first-semester transition. Although this may contradict commonly held conceptions about FGCS and some scholarship related to FGCS experiences (Gibbons et al., 2019), we are not the first to suggest that FGCS might be more academically prepared than we assume (Vega, 2016). However, the findings related to FGCS feeling underprepared for developing social connections during college are important, considering greater peer connection is associated with better task accomplishment in individual courses (Sollitto et al., 2013), better academic resilience, and improved hope in response to an academic challenge (Frisby et al., 2020), and persistence and retention in college, more broadly—especially for underrepresented and marginalized students (Rasco et al., 2020). Moreover, student-to-student confirmation predicts student course engagement (LaBelle & Johnson, 2020), perceived cognitive learning, and academic self-efficacy (LaBelle & Johnson, 2018), as well as greater intrinsic motivation via perceptions of competence and relatedness (Shin & Johnson, 2021). Thus, faculty and other stakeholders on campus should consider strategies for facilitating these peer relationships both in and outside of the classroom.

The results of the current study also support previous research suggesting that students' expectancies regarding their college experiences may impact their adjustment to college and behavioral engagement (Elliott, 2014; Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Scheier et al., 2001; Skinner et al., 2008; Steinmayr et al., 2018). In our study, students who reported having negative violations of their expectations also reported decreased academic adjustment to college and academic engagement in comparison to students who reported having positive violations and met expectations. As academic engagement and adjustment to college are important predictors of student learning and success (Frymier & Houser, 2016), our findings suggest the importance of helping incoming FGCS set appropriate expectations for the college experience. Student affairs professionals might consider hosting specialized orientation sessions for FGCS and their parents to discuss these specific challenges and to provide resources to facilitate student success. Additionally, various institutions of higher education offer programs during the summer to help students from underrepresented populations bridge the gap between high school and college. This is another organizing structure that already exists at most universities and colleges that might benefit from integrating the findings of this study.

Beyond identifying specific FGCS expectations and describing various ways in which first-semester experiences met or violated those expectations, this project also sheds light on some of the sources through which FGCS developed expectations. These findings add further support to Gist-Mackey and colleagues' (2018) study of supportive communication during FGCS' socialization, pointing to the role that media, educators, and family play in providing information. Here, we demonstrate how such messages are not always accurate and that communication may actually induce expectancy violations.

In addition, this study also advances scholarship by using EVT as a new conceptual lens for socialization research. To date, scholars have employed uncertainty management theory, social identity theory, sensemaking, and social exchange theories to describe the socialization process (for review, see Kramer, 2010; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Surprisingly, few socialization studies have adopted EVT (for exceptions, see Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). Moving forward, we encourage other socialization studies to adopt this frame and explore expectation-reality gaps in other contexts.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

These findings should be interpreted with several limitations. To begin, although the sample size ( $n = 45$ ) may be perceived as small, this is considered rigorous in qualitative studies (Tracy, 2020), and the large effect sizes demonstrate appropriate statistical power for the

quantitative analyses (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). However, the demographic makeup of our sample may not be representative of all FGCS. For instance, the sex and gender identity of our sample was homogenous. Given that men (regardless of racial or ethnic background) have lower retention and graduation rates than women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), future research should seek more heterogeneous samples and make concerted efforts to recruit FGCS who identify as men. Furthermore, the generalizability of these findings may be limited, as the demographic makeup of FGCS populations may differ by institution. We also allowed participants to self-identify as FGCS, which may have biased our results. Additionally, collecting data via online surveys may have limited participants' descriptions of their experiences. Future scholarship should focus on expanding our understanding of these unmet expectations through qualitative interviews or observations, as well as quantitative data, to enable the prediction of outcomes, including retention, loneliness, stress, and academic success based on students' (un)met expectations. Finally, we encourage scholars to investigate specific sources from which FGCS receive academic and social information that leads to expectation-reality gaps. Such insight might help practitioners—university leaders, student organizations, residence halls, and faculty—share messages via sources that can shape more accurate expectations about college life. Social media, for instance, might help FGCS gain insight into students' academic and social lives, boosting self-efficacy beliefs (McNallie et al., 2020). Newcomers' experiences with any organization will never completely match their expectations, but our study and this continued line of inquiry can help better prepare FGCS for a successful transition to all that college life has to offer.

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