Understanding First-Year First-Generation Students' Experiences of Peer Mentoring at A Canadian University During The COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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Abstract

In this multiple-case constructivist grounded theory study I investigated how five first-year first-generation students (FGS) experienced support from their peer mentors at a Canadian university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings showed that they expected to receive academic and social support from their peer mentors. They were hoping their peer mentors would be an experienced and knowledgeable guide for university. Also, they wanted help with finding and making friends in university. Moreover, they were expecting their peer mentors to be actively involved in the relationship. They reported receiving basic academic support and needing more social and emotional support. In other words, there was a gap in the participants' expectations for peer mentoring and their lived experiences of peer mentoring. In fact, they reported struggling with understanding the nature of the peer mentoring relationship, finding common ground with their peer mentors, and developing a close relationship with their peer mentors.

Keywords: First-Generation Students; First-Year Students; Academic Support; Social Support; Emotional Support; Undergraduate Peer Mentoring

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the five first-generation students who shared their experiences with me. I appreciate you all.

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Prologue

The first year of university can be intimidating, overwhelming and nerve-racking, especially if your parents have not completed or attended university and do not understand the experience. Additionally, the experience can be extra challenging if you are born to immigrant parents whose first language is not the language of the university. I was one of these students when I first entered university in 2013. Although I was born in Canada, my first language was Cantonese. Throughout my K-12 education in Canada, I struggled with English but I was a resilient student and I always tried my hardest to do well in school.

I suffered poor academic performance for the first few years of elementary school. The language and cultural differences between my family and school made it challenging to perform well in school. It took some time to improve my English and to build my confidence as a student. A turning point in my education occurred in fourth grade. In the process of figuring out a study routine for myself that helped me succeed in my schoolwork I developed an interest in helping others who struggled with their studies. At this early age, I started teaching my peers whenever the opportunity arose, for example, when the class was doing group work. During high school, I continued pursuing my interest in peer learning and teaching. In fact, I created study groups with my friends, and I tutored students from lower grade levels.

As I came to the last two years of high school, my older brother and my English tutor became my mentors for university. My parents had only completed high school back in their home country, Hong Kong. As a result, I could not ask them for help with my undergraduate studies. Luckily my older brother and English tutor gave me advice on how to study, read and write in university. Fortunately, they both attended the same university that I was entering. However, the age gap between myself and my mentors was quite large. My brother was ten years older than me, and my English tutor was around my mother's age. Although I had some advice and support from my mentors, I still felt that I was missing opportunities and information. Upon reflection, it would have been nice to have a mentor who was closer to my age. A peer mentor would have been easier to talk to. I would have felt less intimidated to ask questions and could have learned in a more relaxed manner. Also, a peer mentor would have had more up-to-date

experiences at my university. Moreover, a peer mentor could have helped with finding friends and building connections with people in my field of study.

During my first year of university, I had the luck of meeting an older student, “S”, whose parents also did not attend university. She was in her third year and came from a rural area. Like me she had spent a significant part of her life with a close-knit community and going to a new, diverse, and large environment like university felt intimidating. I had spent thirteen years at a small private school in a suburban area. I had the same group of classmates throughout my schooling. I was fearful with getting accustomed to the learning and social environment at university. I recall her being friendly and patient with me. She was the first person that I felt I could be friends with during my first year. Working with her on my first group project helped me gain confidence and develop my communication skills. Although she was not my formal peer mentor, I felt that she made a difference in my adjustment to university. After completing the course, we became friends and went on to take another course together. We became study partners for that course and helped each other learn the course content.

In my second year of university, I met a younger student, “L”, in one of my courses. Although she was younger than me, we quickly became friends and did a group project together. With “L”, I was able to share more about my life and difficulties because we come from similar backgrounds. We are both from a single-parent family, our parents did not attend university and they came from a different country. As a result, we had similar values in life and school. In my third year, “L” and I took another course together. “L” recommended me to a professor to help mentor students in a lower-level course. We shared office hours and collaborated to help students with coursework. When “L” and I were close to graduating, we helped each other with applying to university programs that would further our education after our undergraduate degrees. I recall speaking with “L” about the stress and uncertainty that I experienced while applying for graduate school. I also helped her with applying to a teacher education program. Until now, we are still very good friends and often check in on each other.

In my final year of university, I learned about a peer mentoring program in my Faculty. In fact, “L” was a peer mentor in that program. I was excited and happy to hear there was a peer mentoring program for first-year students in my Faculty. Although I could not find time to be a peer mentor, the idea stuck with me.

By my first semester of graduate school, I already had a strong passion to research peer mentoring programs for first-year students. I went to speak with the supervisor of my faculty's peer mentoring program to learn more about how the program helped first-year students. Also, in the process of writing a paper for one of my courses, I came across the concept of first-generation students. First-generation students (FGS) are students whose parents did not complete a four-year university degree. I finally discovered a group of students who I identified with. I was happy and interested to see research being done on these students. However, I did not fully pursue the topic until my third semester, when I created a research proposal for my research methods course.

During my graduate studies I also became a mentor in an e-mentoring program that focuses on helping rural students with life after high school. This program takes care in pairing mentors and students with similar interests and backgrounds. I was matched with two mentees who were also FGS. The program's curriculum allows mentors and mentees to discuss various topics like planning for post-secondary education, academic skills, socio-emotional skills, cultural knowledge, career education and financial literacy. The program allowed me to give back to my fellow FGS and share my experience of being a FGS.

From my educational experiences, I developed an interest in researching how peer mentoring programs can provide academic, social, and emotional support to first-year FGS. As a FGS and a mentor of FGS, I felt the need to raise awareness about this group of students and to help them during their first year. I also felt that this group of students should have the opportunity to find each other. Although my university does not have a peer mentoring program specifically for FGS, I wanted to see if and how the existing peer mentoring programs were able to support first-year FGS.

My experiences of being FGS and a peer mentor for FGS have played a strong role in shaping my research on first-year FGS' experience of peer mentoring. I would like to make explicit my bias that I am in support of peer mentoring programs for first-year FGS. I believe that such programs can provide first-year FGS valuable opportunities to raise and to discuss academic, social, and emotional concerns with a trustworthy peer. I believe it is important that first-year FGS have access to information, resources and connections that can help them thrive and succeed.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. First Generation Students

First-generation students (FGS) are students whose parents did not complete a four-year university degree. Students who have at least one parent who completed a four-year university degree are known as continuing-generation students. Most North American studies conducted on FGS are from the United States (U.S). In the U.S. FGS are more likely to be ethnic minorities who have lower socioeconomic status and speak languages other than English compared to continuing-generation students (Banh, 2002). As a result, FGS are more likely to need financial aid and to work during their undergraduate studies. First-year FGS at 4-year institutions often express that they feel academically underprepared for university and fear that they will fail in university compared to continuing-generation students (Banh, 2002). Indeed, in the U.S. it is well established that in comparison to continuing-generation students, FGS are at greater risk for poorer academic performance and drop-out (Chen, 2005; Eveland, 2020; Ishitani, 2003, 2006).

Canada has been lagging in the investigation of FGS (Auclair et al., 2008), but the few Canadian studies of FGS suggest a somewhat different picture than what has emerged from the American research. Using data from 2007 to 2009, Finnie et al. (2010) reported that although in Canada FGS spent slightly fewer hours studying and have marginally lower grades than continuing-generation students, they are "perhaps surprisingly, not more likely than [continuing generation students] to leave post-secondary education (PSE) in first or second year without graduating" (p.2). Similarly, in a more recent quantitative report based on 2014 data from Statistics Canada, Chatoor, MacKay and Hudak (2019) argued that although in Canada fewer FGS than continuing-generation students are admitted into university, those who are admitted tend to fare well. Canadian first-generation post-secondary students are less likely than continuing-generation post-secondary students to drop out. Since Chatoor, Mackay and Hudak's (2019) report was based on a cross-sectional study, it is not possible "to definitively

say… the gap in PSE completion rates has changed or remained the same over time" (p.16). As a result, more research on Canadian FGS is needed.

It is known that FGS in Canada and the U.S. differ from each other. In Canada, FGS tend to perform as well as continuing-generation students or even better; whereas in the US, FGS are more at risk to drop out. Generally, FGS lack knowledge and resources due to their parents' lack of a four-year university degree. How are FGS in Canada achieving this performance in post-secondary education? How do they fare well in their first year of university?

Angrist, Oreopoulos, and Lang (2008) conducted a mixed-method randomized field experiment called PROJECT STAR. This study involved 1,600 first-year undergraduate students from an urban university in Ontario. Around 25 percent of the students were FGS and 80 percent of the FGS were immigrants and 72 percent of the FGS were female. The goal of the study was to examine the efficacy of support services and merit scholarships on university students' academic performance.

Three interventions were provided to participants. The first intervention was the Student Support Program (SSP), which involved peer advising services and supplemental instruction services. Regarding peer advising services, participants had peer advisors who were in the same program of study and gave academic advice on how to successfully cope with the first year of university. Supplemental instruction entailed attending classes on study habits and skills that were facilitated by upper-undergraduate students. The second intervention was the Student Fellowship Program (SFP). It involved participants receiving a merit scholarship that was equivalent to one full year of tuition if they were able to achieve a specific GPA. Finally, the third intervention was a combination of the first two interventions, the Student Fellowship and Support Program (SFSP).

This was a rare study in Canada that addressed FGS' peer advising outcomes. Specifically, female FGS became an important subgroup in the study. Lang et al. (2021) found that female FGS from a Canadian university were able to obtain better outcomes such as higher credits and GPA when they participated in the SFSP compared to female continuing-generation students. In addition, female FGS had more positive and significant responses to all three interventions compared to male FGS. Unfortunately,

this study only focused on academic and financial support for FGS. Social and emotional support were not addressed. Also, interviews conducted in the study did not specifically address the FGS' lived experiences. Therefore, it is unclear how FGS perceived the interventions. More research is needed to understand FGS' lived experiences of and personal outcomes from interventions.

Grayson (2011) conducted a quantitative longitudinal survey-based study of domestic and international students at four Canadian universities. Compared to Chatoor, Mackay and Hudak (2019), Grayson (2011) delved deeper into "…the nature of first-generation students' experiences over a three-year period at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver), York (Toronto), McGill (Montreal) and Dalhousie (Halifax) and the relationship of these experiences to the outcome, academic achievement" (p.606). Through the longitudinal survey, Grayson (2011) found that "Canadian domestic first-generation students, at the end of both their first and third years of study, are less involved than others in campus activities and obtain relatively low grades" (p.626).

Besides quantitative research on Canadian FGS, there have been one previous qualitative longitudinal study. Birani and Lehmann (2013) conducted a four-year longitudinal study on working-class Asian-Canadian first-generation university students to investigate how the ethnicity of FGS influences their university experiences. They found that "… [the] ethnic identities [of working-class Asian Canadian FGS eased] their disadvantaged positions in university by serving as both bonding and bridging social capital in the form of relationships, peer groups and ethnic clubs" (p. 281). In other words, regarding bonding social capital "… the participants in this study kept close ties to their families, but also established close ties with other students of the same ethnic background through friendships, romantic relationships and participation in ethnic clubs and associations on campus" (p.293). The ethnic social networks provided FGS comfort and consolation, which helped them with their dual outsider status of being a FGS and an ethnic-minority student. As a result, they were able to overcome their disadvantages of lacking immediate family who could provide support on university.

Interestingly, as these students gained academic and social success, they began connecting with people outside their ethnic group because they became more engaged at the university. For example, they "…develop bridging social capital by [forming] friendships with middle-class students, [engaging in] middle-class cultural practices or

[participating in] university clubs outside their ethnic affiliations with the intention of developing inroads into professional careers" (p.294). However, since this study only focused on interviewing fourteen Asian-Canadian FGS who were all academically successful during their four years of university, it provided a limited understanding of Canadian FGS' experiences of university. Considering this was the only qualitative study that investigated Canadian FGS' perceptions and experiences, it is necessary for researchers to continue investigating Canadian FGS with a wider lens.

In the Canadian context, there is an abundance of quantitative data on FGS, but a lack of qualitative data on FGS. In other words, Canadian FGS do not have a sufficient voice in the existing research. More research is needed on how Canadian FGS experience higher education. Additionally, it is unclear how Canadian FGS fare well in post-secondary. On one hand. Chatoor, Mackay and Hudak (2019) assumed that completing a post-secondary program was equivalent to faring well in post-secondary. On the other hand, Grayson found that "… the experiences of first-generation domestic students are comparatively negative, and their academic achievement is not spectacular" (p.622). PSE completion alone cannot fully uncover the experiences of Canadian FGS. Researchers are missing the voices of Canadian in describing their struggles, failures, satisfactions, and successes during their university experience.

It is also important to consider the context in which current FGS are attending university. In the recent years, FGS attended university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic has had implications for all university students, it is possible that it may have had a particularly negative impact on FGS. This is supported by research of Davis et al. (2021) who found that during the pandemic American FGS had to "…persist through college despite great uncertainty given the greater financial, emotional, and social barriers" associated with the pandemic (p.18). In addition, they found that more FGS had to share the responsibility of taking care of their family during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic life. In other words, on top of the lack of resources and knowledge about university, in the U.S. FGS also experienced barriers that were brought on by the pandemic.

Research on how the pandemic impacted FGS in Canada is limited. Appleby et al. (2022) performed a cross-sectional study to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian and UK undergraduate students' experiences and mental health.

In the Canadian sample, the researchers recruited undergraduate students from Queen's University. This is also called the Queen's sample, which consisted predominantly of domestic students, female students and students who were starting or finishing their first year. Unfortunately, the researchers did not explicitly identify FGS in their study.

However, there are still important findings in this study. The Queen's sample "…commonly reported that the pandemic had negatively impacted their studies" (Appleby et al., 2022, p.6). In fact, compared to current students, it was more likely for incoming students to impart a negative influence. Furthermore, most students held negative perceptions of online learning and they stated "… a negative impact on their prospects for internships, exchanges and other enriched learning experiences" (Appleby et al., 2022, p.6). Moreover, students reported that "[online] learning …. was difficult or less effective than in-person instruction due to lack of quiet study spaces, blurred school and home boundaries and distance from peers" (Appleby et al., 2022, p.10). Finally, "[many] students … described feelings of anxiety, loneliness and restlessness associated with social isolation due to loss of in-person contact with peers, friends and significant others" (Appleby et al. 2022, p.10). For example, many students brought up how the loss of a support system negatively impacted their academics and mental health. More research is needed on FGS' experiences of the pandemic.

1.2. Statement of The Problem

Based on the previously mentioned findings about FGS in Canada, two gaps in the literature are evident: (1) a lack of knowledge on the lived experiences of Canadian FGS and (2) a lack of knowledge on if and how Canadian university programs for FGS helped them navigate university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore FGS' experiences of peer mentoring programs in their first year at a Canadian university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework

2.1. An A Priori Theoretical Framework in Constructivist Research

The current qualitative study takes a constructivist approach combining a multiple-case study design with constructivist grounded theory data analysis. Both case study and constructivist grounded theory adopt a constructivist paradigm (Charmaz, 2014; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). A constructivist approach involves four philosophical assumptions: (1) subjectivist epistemology, (2) relativist ontology, (3) naturalist methodology and (4) balanced axiology (Charmaz, 2008; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In terms of subjectivist epistemology, researchers recognize that knowledge is socially constructed (Charmaz, 2014; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). For example, the researcher develops her own interpretation or meaning of the data that is collected through interactions with participants (Merriam, 1998).

In addition, the researcher expresses the assumption of relativist ontology through her belief in multiple realities, which "…[could] be explored and meaning made of them or reconstructed through human interactions between the researcher and the subjects of the research, and among the research participants" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.33). Furthermore, the researcher utilizes naturalist methodology, which is collecting and analyzing data through qualitative methods (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Finally, the researcher shows a balanced axiology, which is the assumption that her own values influence the construction of knowledge. Consequently, Charmaz (2017) encourages researchers to practice reflexivity to explicitly state their perspectives and values because this can help reveal hidden beliefs, which could influence the data if not reported and addressed. It is important for researchers to only include their views in the theory if it is grounded in the participants' data.

Merriam (1998) who is a seminal author for case study research, concentrates on the qualitative tradition. She clearly outlines the procedures for conducting a qualitative case study. She recommends researchers perform a literature review and develop a theoretical framework prior to data collection. Since the current study was a combination

of a multiple-case study and constructivist grounded theory analysis, it utilized guidelines from both methods. For this study I developed a literature review, a theoretical framework, research questions, and an interview guide prior to data collection. I utilized a social capital theory lens to frame first-year FGS' experiences of receiving academic, social and emotional support from peer mentoring at a Canadian university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social capital theory is complex, involving different explanations regarding how people can obtain resources, information, and support from social relationships. Without this a priori framework, it would be difficult to develop research and interview questions, which in turn would hinder data collection and analysis.

Mitchell (2014) used an a priori framework based on social capital theory in his constructivist grounded theory dissertation. He argues that using such a theoretical framework in grounded theory research does not necessarily lead researchers to develop a priori hypothesis or to force data into the new and emerging theory. Rather, he used the framework to "shape the study or bring focus to a particular aspect [of his research topic] …, [but it was] the participants [who] guided the study" (Mitchell, 2014, p.6). In other words, social capital theory provided him with a general framework within which he was able to co-construct a theory with his participants about the specific phenomenon he was interested in, which was African American students' experiences in Black Greek-lettered organizations that were situated in predominantly White institutions. In the same way, in the current study social capital theory provided me with a framework in which to co-construct findings about first-year FGS experiences of peer mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Social Capital Theory

Like Mitchell's research, this study was also framed by social capital theory, particularly as proposed by Häuberer (2011) and Lin (2019). Häuberer (2011) defines social capital as "a resource embedded in social relationships" (p.148). Lin (2019) defines social capital as an "investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions" (p. 39). Lin's (2001, 2019) definition highlights three important components of social capital: (1) it is a resource embedded in a social structure; (2) it is accessible to individuals and (3) it can be used purposefully by individuals with the motivation to gain or maintain resources via social actions.

In utilizing social capital individuals can obtain returns via what Lin (2001, 2019) refers to as instrumental action or expressive action. Instrumental action involves gaining resources that one does not already possess and occurs when individuals connect with people who can provide them with resources that they lack. Expressive action involves maintaining resources that one already possesses and occurs when individuals connect with people who possess similar interests and resources to their own. From Lin's perspective, all individuals can make use of social capital, but the amount of social capital that people have access to is unequal and dependent on their position in the social structure.

Theorists have argued that social capital can exist as both an individual resource and a collective resource. At the individual level, social capital is viewed as a resource used by individuals to gain personal benefit (Häuberer, 2011; Lin, 2019). Lin (2019) explains that at the individual level, the focus is on "(1) how individuals invest in social relations, and (2) how individuals capture the embedded resources in the relations to generate a return" (p.8). At the collective level, social capital is viewed as a resource used by the group (Häuberer, 2011; Lin, 1999). Lin (2019) explicates that at the group level, the focus is on "(1) how certain groups develop and maintain more or less social capital as a collective asset, and (2) how such a collective asset enhances group members' life chances" (p.8).

Relatedly, a distinction has also been made between social capital as a private good and as a public good. As a private good, individuals or groups who invest in social capital directly benefit from it (Häuberer, 2011). As a public good, groups or communities can benefit from social capital without all individuals investing in it. For example, a student struggling in a course asks his or her professor for help. This is a singular student-teacher relationship. The professor tries his or her best to answer the struggling student's questions. In this case, the help that the professor is providing is a private good. After their session, the professor notices that other students might also struggle with similar issues. As a result, the professor decides to share some insights from the session with the rest of the class. Here the professor is taking on a teacher-student relationship with his or her whole class. In other words, the professor's assistance is a public good. All students would receive the professor's help even though they did not directly ask the professor for help.

When perceiving social capital as a public good, it is important to recognize that it differs from other public goods, such as trust and norms of reciprocity (Lin, 2019). In other words, trust and norms of reciprocity are not forms of social capital (Lin, 2019). Häuberer (2011) explains trust and norms of reciprocity as preconditions to and outcomes of social capital. Häuberer (2011) defines norms of reciprocity as "[people helping] each other without expecting an immediate service in return (p.56). "[These preconditions] ease the creation and maintenance of relationships and are facilitated by relationships" (Häuberer, 2011, p.148). As outcomes they can be benefits reaped from social capital. In Häuberer's (2011) refined model of Lin's network social capital theory, preconditions for social capital are clearly outlined. These include generalized trust, norms of reciprocity, collective assets (economy, technology, historical background) and individual characteristics. These are important to consider because they affect the investment in, development of or maintenance of social capital (Lin, 2019).

Building on Lin's ideas, Häuberer (2011) also highlights that social capital can exist in both open and closed structures. In an open structure, group members form ties with people outside of the original network; these are called weak ties. Putnam (2002) refers to weak ties in open structures as bridging social capital. Weak ties facilitate relationships and exchange of information and opportunities across social groups, for example, between people who possess diverse cultural, demographic, or attitudinal characteristics (Rademacher & Wang, 2014). They often offer a bridging function, which promotes social integration and cohesion, but they may lack trust and reciprocity.

On the other hand, in a closed structure, group members form ties within the original network; these are called strong ties. Putnam (2002) refers to strong ties within closed structures as bonding social capital. In these instances, interactions occur between people who share similar cultural, demographic, or attitudinal characteristics (Rademacher & Wang, 2014). Strong ties provide social and psychological resources. "[They] strengthen interpersonal relationships, resulting in increased feelings of reciprocity and trust. This cultivates feelings of social solidarity and overall social cohesion" (Rademacher & Wang, 2014, p.1214). However, strong ties can also lead to a narrow sense of self and social isolation because it prevents interactions with diverse others.

Earlier theorists such as Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1990) concentrated on closed structures and strong ties as requirements for social capital. Häuberer (2011) raises the issue of missed opportunities for obtaining new knowledge and resources when only focusing on closed structures and strong ties. Exclusive emphasis on closed structures ignores connections with outsiders who can provide new information and innovation as well as the opportunity for outsiders to enter and access resources in the network.

Lin (2019) indicates that when contemplating closed and open structures, it is crucial to determine outcomes of interest. For example, if the goal is to preserve or to maintain resources, then a closed structure could be advantageous. On the other hand, if the goal is to search for or to obtain new resources, then an open structure could be beneficial. Therefore, it is not viable to solely rely on either structure because they are needed in different circumstances.

It is important to include both weak and strong ties in the concept of social capital because together they capture the various interactions individuals engage in to access resources. Specifically, these interactions can lead to instrumental and expressive outcomes. In weak ties, an individual can interact with diverse others who possess resources that he or she lacks. In strong ties, an individual can interact with people who possess similar characteristics, interests, and resources.

This study investigates social capital as an individual resource and as a possible private good for first-year first-generation students at a Canadian university during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study peer mentorship programs and the relationships they entail are seen as potential sources of social capital for first-year FGS. If these students do receive support and benefits from peer mentors, I would like to understand what they are and how they are obtained. On the other hand, if students do not receive support and benefits, I would like to understand the consequences of and the reactions to a lack of support.

In this study social capital is seen to be gained through both opened and closed structures as well as strong and weak ties. In attempting to understand if and how first-year first-generation students receive support from their peer mentors, it is important to investigate all the different ways these students get support. In other words, this study

seeks to determine what type of structures and ties first-year first-generation students use and form to obtain academic, social, and emotional support from their peer mentors.

Previous research by Sánchez et al. (2022) demonstrated how graduate student and faculty mentors provide social capital to Latinx adolescents in science education through bridging and bonding behaviours. For instance, if mentors act as bridges, then they can help first-year FGS develop weak ties with people outside of the mentor-mentee relationship and obtain new knowledge from these people. This would be an open structure that allows first-year FGS to not solely rely on their mentor. Sánchez et al. (2022) define bridging behaviours as “connecting students to resources (e.g., books, journal articles), people, and/or opportunities for development that students may not have been able to access without the intervention of the mentor” (p.13).

On the other hand, if mentors develop a close relationship or bond with first-year FGS, then they are forming strong ties. This would be a closed structure that allows first-year FGS to receive support or resources directly from the mentor-mentee relationship. Moreover, such support and resources will be preserved and maintained within this relationship. Sánchez et al. (2022) define bonding behaviours as emotional support, sharing personal experiences, encouragement, and spending time together.

Finally, Häuberer (2011) states that all previous theorists do not address the issue of potential negative effects of social capital. She points out that not all attempts at maintaining and gaining social resources lead to positive outcomes. There are cases in which individuals undergo interactions that lead to negative returns or no returns. As a result, in this study, I investigated the positive and negative experiences of first-year FGS receiving academic, social and emotional support from their peer mentor.

2.2.1. Applying A Social Capital Lens to Peer Mentoring for FGS

It is important to recognize that research shows that FGS are more likely to have lower social capital than continuing-generation students when they enter university, which is hypothesized to increases their risk of attrition (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012; Sánchez et al., 2011). The peer mentoring programs for first-year FGS found at North American universities can be viewed as initiatives aimed at increasing social capital for those students. There is a lack of research on if and how peer mentors can increase the

social capital of first-year FGS, helping them to adjust academically, socially, and emotionally to university in the Canadian context. Moreover, the application of a social capital lens in research on FGS is limited.

Following Lin (2019) and Häuberer (2011), I understand social capital as the resources that can be gained in the context of social relationships. Peer mentoring entails a social relationship with knowledgeable others that can provide social capital for FGS in their transition to university (Sánchez et al., 2021; Tynan et al., 2019). Peer mentoring involves more experienced students providing support, information, and resources to less experienced students. This study focused on academic, social, and emotional support as the key resources that first-year FGS might gain from their peer mentors.

Moschetti et al. (2018) found that peer mentoring could be a form of social capital for U.S. Latino/a FGS entering their first year of university. The mentees in that study stated that they felt that "…peer mentors (a) provided helpful resources, (b) helped [them] learn course materials, (c) helped [them] make better grades, (d) were available, (e) helped [them] to understand [their] major, (f) informed [them] about university events, (g) made [them] feel someone at the university cared, and (h) were supportive" (p.382). Furthermore, researchers found that American FGS participated in mentoring relationships because they believed that they could obtain academic support and emotional support from their peer mentor (Grabsch et al., 2021; Smith 2007). In other words, the FGS who choose to participate in a peer mentorship program, likely hoped to increase their social capital by receiving information, support, and assistance from their peer mentor.

Drawing from Lin (2019) and Häuberer's (2011) social capital theories, I view peer mentorship programs as formal social networks that entail both bonding and bridging structures. The mentor-mentee relationship can involve at least two broad kinds of interactions. The first of these are direct interactions between the peer mentor and mentee which involve expressive actions like sharing personal experiences and providing emotional support and encouragement. In Häuberer's (2011) terms, this kind of interaction constitutes a bonding structure. It enables returns on physical and mental health and satisfaction with life as a university student for the mentee (Häuberer, 2011).

In the second kind of interaction the peer mentor is a middle person who assists the mentee in finding and using resources, connecting with people, and gaining opportunities for development (Sánchez, 2022). According to Häuberer (2011) this kind of interaction constitutes a bridging structure. The mentee has access to valuable knowledge, connections, and opportunities outside of the bonding structure, which fosters instrumental actions like gaining knowledge from resources like books, articles, websites, and videos as well as people who are experience and well-versed in their field (Häuberer, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2022). These interactions, in turn, can lead to returns like learning about how university works, getting information on one's degree or discipline, forming relationships with peers, obtaining future volunteer and/or part-time work, building relationships with professors, getting support from an advisor, a counsellor or a librarian, and finding assistance for financial aid.

FGS also have individual characteristics that can make it difficult to increase social capital. Both Häuberer (2011) and Lin (2019) address these individual characteristics as preconditions of social capital. FGS who are low-income and identify as racial and sexual minorities have a lower chance of first-to-second-year persistence (Lofink & Paulsen, 2005) suggesting that these individual characteristics pose a challenge to FGS in terms of adjusting to university. Cultural and language differences can also make it difficult for FGS to connect with other continuing-generation students from the dominant group. However, it is important to consider that institutions often misinterpret the FGS status as equivalent to low-income status (Davis, 2010). FGS status refers to only a lack of a four-year university degree among parents, but it does not necessarily mean a student is low-income. In fact, Lofink and Paulsen (2005) found that "…FGS come from diverse social class backgrounds, have different amounts and types of cultural and financial capital, and access and manipulate capital and financial resources differently in their persistence decisions" (p.418). This demonstrates that some FGS could possess characteristics that are more conducive to gaining social capital.

Joining a peer mentoring program does not necessarily mean that FGS will access social capital. Häuberer (2011) cautions that attempts to gain social capital can also have a negative effects like exclusion. As mentioned before, social capital involves instrumental and expressive actions as well as bonding and bridging structures. A peer mentor who does not provide empathy and understanding towards FGS would be

denying expressive action and a bonding structure. The mentee would not receive returns for expressive action and would not experience bonding. Similarly, a peer mentor who does not provide referrals to outside sources would be denying instrumental action and a bridging structure. The mentee would not receive returns for instrumental action and would not experience connecting with resources, people, and opportunities outside of the bonding structure.

The various forms and levels of social capital received, depends, at least in part, on how much the mentor is willing to give to the mentee. In the worst and unlikely case, a peer mentor could prevent a mentee from gaining any social capital. However, it is more likely for a peer mentor to neglect some opportunities to provide a mentee social capital. These unfortunate scenarios could potentially be a more common issue for mentee-mentor relationships that lack a good fit between the peer mentor and mentee. Previous research shows the importance of matching mentor-mentee characteristics in developing a strong mentor-mentee relationship (Crisp & Cruz, 2017). Besides mentors, the external contacts that mentors refer to mentees could present this issue as well.

Chapter 3.

Review of the Literature

3.1. Academic Adjustment of Canadian FGS

The scant research on FGS in the Canadian context does not include the voices of FGS, but rather reports numerical data on PSE completion rates. Although Canadian FGS have similar university completion rates as continuing-generation students, it is inappropriate to assume that Canadian FGS who complete PSE necessarily have a smooth first-year transition to university. As previously mentioned, Grayson (2011) found Canadian domestic first-generation students to lack involvement in campus activities and to obtain lower grades than other students during their first and third years of university. With only two quantitative studies that investigated academic achievement of FGS in the last decade, it is important to investigate the academic adjustment of Canadian FGS.

The American literature on FGS demonstrates that FGS struggle with academic adjustment. Ishitani (2003; 2006) found that first-year FGS had a 71% higher risk of attrition compared to continuing-generation students and were less likely to complete their degrees within the four-year timeframe. Also, Grabsch et al. (2021) found in their academic peer coaching study that FGS possess "a desire to develop academic skills related to time management, study skills, organization, and others." (p.105). They also found that the FGS would like to obtain assistance in academic goals, degree planning and progress, and overcoming barriers to academic success from a peer mentor (Grabsch et al., 2021).

3.2. Social and Emotional Adjustment of Canadian FGS

Similarly, there is a lack of research on the social and emotional adjustment of Canadian FGS. It is unclear how Canadian FGS fare in university. Specifically, there is little information on how Canadian FGS receive social and emotional support in university. As previously mentioned, Birani and Lehmann. (2013) found that "… [the] ethnic identities [of working-class Asian Canadian FGS eased] their disadvantaged positions in university by serving as both bonding and bridging social capital in the form

of relationships, peer groups and ethnic clubs" (p. 281). They discussed that ethnic social networks provided emotional support like comfort and consolidation to the working-class Asian Canadian FGS. Also, they demonstrated that working-class Asian Canadian FGS who succeeded in university tended to become involved in university and branch out of their ethnic groups to develop their professional careers. This could be a form of social support, in which working-class Asian Canadian FGS join clubs and associations on campus that can connect them to more privileged students and professionals. However, it is still unknown how other Canadian FGS receive social and emotional support.

Unlike Canada, the U.S. has an abundance of research on FGS' social and emotional adjustment. Previous research in the U.S. indicates that FGS would benefit from assistance in socio-emotional adjustment. Ishitani (2016) conducted a study on American FGS' college persistence behaviours at four-year institutions through looking at the 2004 – 2009 Beginning Post-Secondary Student data set sponsored by the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES). In this study Ishitani (2016) found that FGS were most likely to drop out in their second year. Also, social integration was related to academic persistence for the first three years of post-secondary education for FGS. Social integration involves informal interactions with peer groups and faculty. The findings show that it could be important for FGS to interact with peers and faculty starting from their first year and to continue to do so up to their third year. A lack of social integration could increase the risk of drop out for FGS.

It is crucial to assist FGS in developing social connections during university because they often have trouble in feeling a sense of belonging (Stebleton et al., 2014). FGS often face the challenge of feeling like they do not belong in their home or their university (Rendón, 1992)

> Indeed, one world implores them to leave behind that which they knew and are comfortable with by growing intellectually (i.e., the university) while the other reminds them not to forget where they have come from or to rise so far socially that they feel as though they are better than those who reared them (Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022).

FGS who are ethnic minorities are in danger of assimilation into the dominant culture of post-secondary education (Rendón, 1992). They may lose parts of their culture because they wish to succeed (Rendón, 1992). As a result, they may lose closeness

with their family. The diminishing connection with family can lead to lack of family social support, which in turn may increase stress and depression (Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022).

Researchers demonstrate that FGS likely require social and/or emotional support from others. Suwinyattichaiporn and Johnson's (2022) study investigated the relationships between stress, depression and social isolation with family and friend support in the college experiences of Latino/a FGS. They found that Latino/a FGS experience negative psychological processes such as stress, depression, and social isolation. Specifically, the perception of a lack of meaningful relationships and close others was strongly related to stress and depression of Latino/a FGS. Social isolation could exacerbate Latino/a FGS' transition to university because they might move away from or spend less time in their home communities. In other words, it is important for Latino/a FGS to develop friendships and obtain friend social support in university. Additionally, the authors report two findings on family social support for Latino/a FGS: (1) they could benefit from family social support during university and (2) family social support could mitigate stress and prevent depression. Overall, "…the more social support [Latino/a FGS receive,] the less stress, depression, and isolation these students experience" (Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022, p.308).

Cheong et al.'s (2021) study found that "regardless of college-generation status, [first-year] students' frequency of communication with on-campus friends was positively related to academic self-efficacy and school connectedness mediated this relation" (p.393). In other words, by having regular communication with on-campus friends about academic, social, and personal concerns, first-year students increase their belief of being able to carry out academic tasks and to achieve academic goals (Cheong et al., 2021). Moreover, the authors found that this relationship is mediated by first-year students' perceived sense of belonging and engagement in the university.

Helmbrecht and Ayars (2021) found that FGS who utilized emotional support seeking had lower levels of stress than those who used reflective coping methods. Emotional support is "a sense of listening, providing moral support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement, and establishing a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and linking between the student and the mentor" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.538-539). Reflective coping is "the tendency to examine causal relationships,

plan, and be systematic in coping" (Heppner et al., 1995, p. 282). It also involves approaching instead of avoiding problems as well as applying methods from the past to solve current problems (Heppner et al.,1995). Since FGS lack previous experience with dealing with college-related problems or tasks, it might be more difficult for them to engage in reflective coping compared to their continuing-generation peers (Davis, 2010). In other words, coping alone and not seeking help from others may not be the best method for FGS especially since they lack knowledge, resources and belonging in terms of post-secondary education.

Garriott and Nisle (2018) performed a study on stress, coping and perceived academic goal progress of American FGS and continuing-generation students. They found that "institutional supports, may play a more central role in first-generation students' stress during college compared to their continuing-generation counterparts" (Garriott & Nisle, 2018, p.455). For instance, FGS felt that college preparation programs, teachers, tutors, mentors, and advisors would be helpful in reducing anxiety and stress during university (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

Contrarily, Garriott and Nisle (2018) found that FGS often used reflective coping to reduce stress levels. They stated that "it is possible that first-generation students' capacity to draw from a greater number of experiences coping with stress helps explain their use of reflective coping strategies" (Garriott & Nisle, 2018, p.446). In other words, FGS might apply previous methods of coping with stress that are unrelated to college to assist them in coping with stress in college. Additionally, they did not find family and friend support to have a role in FGS' stress. However, this might be because they narrowly defined family and friend support as support for deciding to attend college. They neglected the possibility of family and friends providing tangible support on college tasks and emotional support on facing college-related problems. In these cases, FGS could feel more or less stressed depending on whether their family and friends can or cannot support them through college. In other words, a lack of tangible and emotional support during college could increase FGS' stress and negatively impact their perceived academic goal progress.

Overall, the findings on coping strategies of FGS are mixed. More research is needed to understand how FGS could benefit from receiving institutional, family and/or friend support during university. For example, connecting with faculty and staff, getting

help from a mentor, advisor, or professor, joining extracurricular activities, maintaining relationships with family, making friends, and interacting with people who share their culture and language. Depending on the context, FGS could find one type of support to be more effective than another.

Two major gaps in current research include: (1) a lack of research on providing first-year Canadian FGS social support, like maintaining relationships with family and building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and (2) a lack of research on providing first-year Canadian FGS emotional support, like feeling heard, receiving comfort and encouragement, developing, and maintaining coping strategies for stress and negative emotions.

3.3. Undergraduate Peer Mentoring

Seminal authors Gloria Crisp and Irene Cruz in 2009 wrote a critical literature review on the topic of mentoring undergraduate students. Their literature review modified and improved Jacobi's definition and characteristics of mentoring. Through their literature review, they also developed "[a conceptual framework that] is specific to higher education and the needs and goals of students" (Crisp et al., 2017, p.61). This framework entails four key variables in mentoring undergraduate students: (1) psychological and emotional support, (2) goal setting and career paths, (3) academic knowledge support and (4) the existence of a role model (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

"[Psychological] and emotional support involves [mentors performing active empathetic] listening, providing moral support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement, and establishing a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and linking between [them] and [their mentees]" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.538-539). In addition, they could converse with their mentees about fears and uncertainties. Moreover, they could help their mentees build self-confidence.

Regarding goal setting and career paths, mentors evaluate their mentees' strengths, weaknesses and abilities as well as help their mentees set academic and/or career goals (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). For instance, mentors should consider their mentees' plans and progress to achieve their goals. Also, mentors can help facilitate mentees'

critical thinking when conceiving their future. In other words, mentors aid mentees to develop ways to actualize their dreams.

As for academic knowledge support, mentors assist mentees with their academic success both inside and outside the classroom. For the former, mentors help develop and improve mentees' skills and knowledge within their field of study. As an example, the mentor "… [educates, evaluates and challenges] the mentee academically" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 539). For the latter, mentors "[discuss their mentees'] accomplishments with others, [nominate] them for positions, [provide] them visibility and [take] the blame for [their mentees], shielding [them] from negative publicity" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.539).

Finally, the existence of a role model entails mentors sharing their "…present and past actions as well as [their] achievements and failures" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.40). In this domain, mentees learn from mentors' life experiences and feelings. Through this process, mentors and mentees could improve their relationship. By being role models, mentors "serve as [exemplars and guides] to a new social world" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.40).

From reviewing the four key variables in mentoring, Crisp et al., (2017) define undergraduate peer mentoring as "…academic, career, and/or psychosocial development [of] undergraduate students through the provision of guidance from a more experienced student" (p.50).

3.3.1. Undergraduate Peer Mentoring in Canada

To the best of my knowledge, there are four Canadian studies that investigated undergraduate peer mentoring. Goff (2011) implemented a quantitative evaluative study on "[a] peer-mentoring program [that] was developed for students in an introductory biology course at a university in Ontario, Canada" (p.0). The study evaluated if the peer mentoring program met the following goals: (1) assist first-year students with their transition to university, (2) help first-year students with their success in introductory biology and (3) encourage first-year students to seek studies in biology. In other words, psychological and emotional support and academic support were the key aspects of the program.

The study found that students who attended three or more peer mentoring sessions had significantly better academic performance in their introductory biology courses than students who attended less sessions. Interestingly, this study lacked "…evidence … to support that the program had an effect on transitioning or program selection" (Goff, 2011, p.8). However, it is important to note that the study lacked "… data … that asked students directly whether they believed that peer-mentoring program had any impact on their transition to university" (Goff, 2011, p.7). More research is needed on how peer-mentoring programs in Canadian universities influence students' perceptions of transitioning to university, especially first-generation students.

Roy and Brown (2016) conducted an explorative qualitative study that focused on Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) accounting student peer mentors' perceptions of their mentoring experience. The researchers examined how a mandatory BBA accounting Student Peer Mentorship Program at a Canadian university was useful to 82 second- and third-year BBA accounting students "…in developing their interpersonal and communication skills and leadership capacity" and how their experiences can be transferred to the workplace (Roy & Brown, 2016, p.0).

Although the researchers did not focus on mentees' (first-year first-semester students') experiences, they do find it valuable to pursue in future research. Through interviewing the BBA account student peer mentors, the researchers found that "…the mentors' experiences and knowledge of the institution have a direct impact on the mentees' understanding of the institution and how the institutional and academic structure can support their academic needs" (Roy & Brown, 2016, p.11). In other words, mentors can impart important information to mentees, such as demystification of the first semester, introduction to the program and tips for academic success (Roy & Brown, 2016).

Finally, Roy and Brown (2016) stated that "any postsecondary institution can enhance its undergraduate curriculum by creating and integrating a formal Student Peer Mentorship Program to support new and continuing students with their social and academic transition during their first year of their program" (p.13). They believe that a peer mentorship program can "[enrich] social culture and [develop] social connectedness, [encourage] student interactions, and [facilitate] a positive learning

community based on support, camaraderie, and engagement (Roy & Brown, 2016, p.13).

Gunn et al. (2017) carried out an exploratory mixed-methods study that aimed to "categorize the benefits and challenges of mentors and mentees (student-to-student mentoring) in a higher education context using Crisp and Cruz's mentoring framework" (p.16). The study involved 107 first-year undergraduate students (mentees) and 16 fourth-year undergraduate students (mentors) who came from a peer mentoring program in an undergraduate business degree program at a Canadian university in downtown Toronto.

The study found that "first-year mentees [regarded] the acquisition of academic knowledge and support as critical to their success at university, yet they also [reported] it as the most challenging part of their experience" (Gunn et al., 2017, p.22). Another finding was that first-year mentees felt that psychological and emotional support was also beneficial to their university experience. They described examples of this support as "…encouragement, [identifying] problems, … and … empathetic listening from peers with experience in their academic program" (Gunn et al. 2017, p.22). The researchers deduced that first-year mentees view psychological and emotional support as helpful in terms of developing confidence in traversing academia.

On the other hand, mentors reported that academic knowledge support was less important than emotional support. Also, the former was easier to provide than the latter. Finally, they expressed that being a role model to first-year mentees was the most useful part of the mentoring program. However, this was the most difficult to provide to first-year mentees.

Evidently, mentees and mentors set different priorities for the mentoring program. Regarding mentees, they prioritized academic and knowledge support. However, for mentors, they prioritized psychological and emotional support. As a result, mentees reported a challenge in receiving academic and knowledge support. In other words, mentors spent more time providing psychological and emotional support to mentees. This could be because mentors believed that academic and knowledge support is more accessible and less crucial in helping first-year mentees develop confidence (Gunn et al., 2017).

Giannone et al. (2018) performed a mixed-methods study that examined "the effectiveness of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) Student Mentorship Program. The CPA Student Mentorship Program provides "undergraduate psychology students (i.e., mentees) from various academic institutions in Canada [with] the opportunity to gain career support and guidance from graduate students (i.e., mentors; also, from various academic institutions in Canada) in navigating their educational training, professional development, and career decision-making" (p.6).

In the study mentees were "…(1) a student member of the CPA; (2) currently enrolled at the undergraduate level at a Canadian post-secondary institution; (3) interested in pursuing graduate studies or a career in an area of psychology" and mentors were "(1) a student member of the CPA; (2) currently enrolled at the graduate level at a Canadian post-secondary institution or a post-doctoral fellow at a post-secondary institution or a related setting…; and (3) pursuing training in an area of psychology" (Giannone et al., 2018, p.8).

The study examined mentees' perceptions of the program's strengths and weaknesses. In terms of strengths, mentees frequently reported "…the opportunity to learn from someone more senior than them or from someone who had experience pursing advanced education and training in psychology" (Giannone et al., 2018, p.11). Also, they disclosed the opportunities to "… network or create connections nationwide with individuals in the discipline…" (Giannone et al., 2018, p. 11). Finally, mentees imparted the development of personal growth and certain skills through the program.

As for weaknesses, mentees communicated the challenge of email communication and cross-country distance in forming relationships with their mentors. Also, mentees expressed the issue of a lack of guidance or structure in the program. For example, mentees found that "…there [was] no set guideline about the information mentors can provide" (Giannone et al., 2018, p.13). In addition, some mentees articulated a lack of fit with mentors. Moreover, the mentees felt that the mentors lacked mentorship training. Furthermore, since the program assisted undergraduates across the country, it was difficult for mentors to provide specific advice to mentees. In other words, the mentors might not have gone to the same university as the mentees. Lastly, mentees described the issue of infrequent contact between them and their mentors.

Since the results from the study heavily relied on descriptive and inferential statistics and had minimal use of open-ended items, it only provided a general evaluation of the program. The more detailed processes of the mentoring experience for mentors and mentees were lacking. Also, since the study only focused on undergraduate students studying Psychology, there was a lack of information on students from other disciplines.

Evidently, these studies raised the importance and the usefulness of peer mentoring. However, there was a lack of identification of FGS in these studies. In other words, there is a lack of FGS' voices of their experiences and perceptions of undergraduate peer mentoring programs.

3.3.2. Undergraduate Peer Mentoring in the U.S

The American literature contains two studies that investigated undergraduate peer mentoring for FGS: Grabsch et al. (2021) focused on FGS of various ethnicities who were majoring in Engineering at a Southern U.S. university and Moschetti et al. (2018) focused on Latina/o FGS at university in Southern California.

Grabsch et al. (2021) analyzed "secondary data from [a] peer academic coaching registration process…" (p.98). The study included two sources of data: descriptive statistics on the demographic characteristics of students who registered to participate in a voluntary peer academic coaching program and responses to an "…open-ended registration question that read, "Please explain what you are hoping to experience or achieve through academic coaching with a [peer mentor position title]" (Grabsch et al., 2021, p.98). Responses to the open-ended question were subjected to content analysis.

Grabsch et al.'s (2021) analysis placed emphasis on academic and emotional support for FGS. They found that the FGS were interested in receiving help with academic skills, academic goals, degree planning and progress and overcoming barriers to academic success from their peer mentor. The FGS in the study also mentioned the "…idea of having "another human being" or "someone" to interact with during a student's experience in the program" (Grabsch et al., 2021). The FGS expressed that a relationship with their peer mentor could assist them with accountability, staying on track or being well-balanced and sensible. Rather than just simply gaining information from a

peer mentor and then doing things alone, the FGS wanted their peer mentor to listen to their struggles and provide guidance. In other words, they expressed a need for emotional support from their peer mentor.

Moschetti et al. (2018) conducted a three-year mixed-methods study, which investigated 458 Latina/o students with peer mentors and 86 Latina/o students without peer mentors. The researchers collected demographic information in all three years. In Years 2 and 3, the participants filled both a pretest and post-test survey, which asked about their peer mentor and the peer mentor program. The survey response choices were based on a Likert scale, which involved ratings on level of agreement or value. Moreover, in Year 3, the researchers implemented a pretest-post-test, comparison group design. Finally, “in all [three] years, mentees were asked two open-ended questions: (a) “What was beneficial about the peer mentors?” and (b) “How could the peer mentors be improved for next year?” (Moschetti et al., 2018, p.382).

Through both the qualitative and quantitative analyses Moschetti et al. (2018) demonstrated that the mentees perceived their mentors “….as providing helpful information about the campus and major, academic support, encouragement, and emotional support” (p.386). In terms of a minor social support, the researchers found that mentors provided mentees information about university events like plays or sports. Furthermore, they found that the mentees felt that their peer mentors assisted them in academic and social integration in the university.

Both Grabsch et al. (2021) and Moschetti et al. (2018) provided findings that demonstrated FGS could receive useful academic, social, and emotional support from their peer mentor. In other words, peer mentoring for FGS could be a worthwhile endeavour. However, gaps persist in explaining how FGS mentees obtain support from peer mentors in: (1) developing academic skills and goals, (2) attending social events and building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and (3) finding their stressors and developing coping strategies.

3.4. Conclusion

By conducting a provisional literature review I discovered that the current literature on FGS focuses heavily on the experience of American FGS with relatively

sparse information available on FGS in the Canadian context. Also, through reviewing peer mentoring programs for FGS, I noticed that they are often offered during the first year of university. As a result, this study focused on first-year FGS attending a Canadian university. In other words, the purpose of this study was to use a social capital lens to understand if and how peer mentoring can provide support to FGS during their first year at a Canadian university.

Aside from conducting a literature review prior to data collection, I also developed a tentative research question informed by a social capital lens. The mentor-mentee relationship in peer mentoring is a formal social relationship that entails both bonding and bridging structures. Specifically, the mentor can act as a form of social capital in two ways: (1) as a direct source of capital or (2) as a bridge to social capital. Moreover, bonding structures often involve sharing personal experiences and providing emotional support and encouragement. This can lead to expressive outcomes like personal health and life satisfaction. On the other hand, bridging structures usually involve gaining knowledge from and connecting with people who are experienced and well-versed in their field. This can result in instrumental outcomes like finding and obtaining future work, building a network of relationships, receiving support, and finding assistance. Moreover, it is important to address preconditions to social capital such as trust and norms of reciprocity and individual characteristics. Depending on these preconditions, individuals could have difficulty with accessing social capital. Using a social capital lens, I decided to investigate the process in which first-year FGS experience support from their peer mentors. This support is a form of social capital and can be categorized as academic, social, or emotional. Subsequently, my study is guided by the following research question:

How do first-year FGS experience support from their peer mentors?

I purposefully kept this research question open-ended since it enabled me to be open-minded when conducting my research. As stated previously, I used a social capital lens to create a research question to help frame the study. However, the participants guided the study. In other words, only data relevant to the participants' experiences were analyzed and reported.

Since this is a multiple-case study that utilizes constructivist grounded theory analysis, I adopted my literature review to relate to the findings and analyses that emerged from the data. Also, I modified or added interview questions during data collection and analysis to reflect participants’ experiences.

Chapter 4.

Methods

4.1. Participants and Setting

I used a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Following Moser and Korstjens (2017), I selected participants who fit my inclusion criteria of being a first-year FGS who sought peer mentoring. These criteria were based on my judgment about who would be most informative. After applying these criteria to my sampling process, I obtained a convenience sample of five first-year FGS who came from two different faculty-based peer mentoring programs at a university in Lower Mainland, B.C: the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education. The participants were FGS who were mentees in their first year from the Fall 2021 cohort of one of the peer mentoring programs.

The peer mentoring programs in this study focused on training peer mentors to be knowledgeable peers who help first-year students connect with involvement opportunities and become familiar with the campus. There were specific events that peer mentors hosted to inform or to entertain mentees. Peer mentors were not expected to be academic tutors and were not responsible for providing mental health counselling. Rather they were trained to refer mentees to appropriate professionals.

Although peer mentors were trained in their peer mentoring roles, mentees were not. Once they signed up for the peer mentoring programs, mentees were assigned to a peer mentor. Furthermore, mentees had to share their peer mentors. Each peer mentor had multiple mentees.

Peer mentors did not receive monetary compensation. Rather their experience of being a peer mentor was recorded in their co-curricular record. This is an official university document that acts as a supporting documentation for job, graduate and/or professional applications.

During the time of their interviews, four of the participants were in their second year of university. The remaining participant was in her third year of university since she

was a transfer student when she started her studies at the university. All the participants were female. Three self-identified as Caucasian, and one each self-identified as South Asian and Black. Only one participant did not have English as their first language. However, all participants were proficient in communicating in English.

4.2. Procedure

At the beginning of the Fall 2022 semester, supervisors of the peer mentoring programs sent out an invitation letters to past mentees from the Fall 2021 cohort. The recipients of the invitation letter needed to self-identify as FGS (see Appendix A). Potential participants sent an email to me to indicate their interest in participating in the study. I then sent them a consent form (see Appendix B). Once I obtained consent, I sent them the demographic questionnaire to complete (see Appendix C) and arranged an interview appointment with the participant. The participant indicated a time that was convenient for them.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants for approximately one hour through Zoom. During the interviews, I followed an interview guide (see Appendix D). After completing the interviews, I sent each participant a member checking email to confirm the information they would like to keep, modify, or omit from their interviews (see Appendix E). Once I finished my research, I wrote a one-page summary of the study for the participants and the peer mentoring programs (see Appendix F).

4.3. Researcher's Positionality

As a researcher I understand the importance of revealing my motives in conducting this study. I always knew I was at a disadvantage compared to my peers who were continuing-generation students. Prior to entering university, my classmates from high school had parents who attended university and obtained a four-year degree. Some had parents who attended the same university and studied in the same program. Even if their parents did university a long time ago, they could still gain basic help with foundational course content, study skills, writing skills and networking skills.

I was a FGS during my undergraduate studies. I struggled with lacking parents who completed a four-year university degree. I had many questions about university, but

my parents were unable to provide any answers. Although, I had an older brother who went to the same university, he studied a different major and took different courses. Moreover, he was nine-years older than me, so he did not have the most up-to-date information. Since he was also a FGS, he missed some university information and resources. In fact, he struggled in his first year and had to transfer to a college. Once his grades improved and he felt more confident with post-secondary education, he returned to the university. Therefore, my older brother completed his four-year degree, but it was not the most effective or relatable approach.

Once I was in university, I noticed that there were various problems and questions that I did not know. Most of the time I was figuring things out on my own and going to the student learning centre, library and advising department for help. Since my parents did not have university experience, I did not know how to get help from a teaching assistant (TA). High school teachers held students' hands, but a TA expected students to articulate their learning and struggles. A TA was much more intimidating to approach. In the end I had to learn on my own how to explain my learning or thinking process as well as my problems to a TA. Unfortunately, I did not learn how to personally connect with my TAs in my first year.

Although I knew my parents could not assist me with my university journey, I was clueless about the FGS term during my undergraduate studies. Consequently, I did not know the importance of sharing my FGS status in university with my peers, faculty, or staff. Instead, I prioritized researching and asking faculty and staff questions about doing well in university. I felt that sharing my parents' lack of university experience would make me vulnerable to people who could get advice and support from their parents. I did not feel pride in being a FGS, rather I felt hopeless when I could not ask my parents for help. To remove the feelings of hopelessness, I decided to focus on my studies and avoid talking about my family background.

Finally, when I was in my first year of university, there were no peer mentoring programs or workshops and courses on first-year transition. It was not until I was close to graduating that my university implemented faculty-based peer mentoring programs and offered summer courses on university transition for incoming first-year students.

Through my personal experience of being a FGS in university, I developed a strong passion to investigate first-year FGS' experiences of peer mentoring. As a FGS who missed out on having a peer mentor, I wanted to gain an understanding of how peer mentors could support first-year FGS.

4.4. Multiple Case Study & Constructivist Grounded Theory Analysis

This study is a qualitative multiple-case study that utilizes a constructivist paradigm, as described by Merriam's (1998). Merriam's design is a combination of Yin's and Stake's approaches (Yazan, 2015) providing a semi-structured case approach that concentrates on a qualitative and constructivist perspective towards case study research. Unlike Yin (2002) and Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) provides explicit advice on case study design.

Merriam (1998) defines a case as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). In other words, a case can be a person, a program, a group, a policy (Merriam, 1998). She defines a qualitative case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p.xiii).

In this multiple-case study I examined if and how five first-year FGS' received academic and social and emotional support through peer mentoring. Each first-year FGS mentee is a case that is bounded by time and space (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In terms of time, the mentees discussed their first-year experiences of receiving academic, social and emotional support from their peer mentors through a Faculty-based peer mentorship program. As for space, the mentees are all from a single geographical location, a university situated in the Lower Mainland of B.C. Each case provided insight into one focal issue, which was their experience of receiving academic, social, and emotional support through peer mentoring (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Merriam (1998) outlines three characteristics of a qualitative case study: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. *Particularistic* means "focusing on particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon" (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). *Descriptive i*nvolves "yielding a rich thick description of the phenomenon under study" (Yazan, 2015, p. 148).

Finally *heuristic* entails "illuminating the reader's understanding of phenomenon under study" (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). Merriam (1998) further explains that case studies "…can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience or confirm what is known" (p.30).

The current study possessed the three characteristics of a case study that Merriam outlines. In terms of particularistic, the focus of the study was on if and how five first-year FGS obtain academic, social, and emotional support from their peer mentors. For descriptive, this study investigated five first-year FGS and produced five individual rich and thick case descriptions. Regarding heuristic, this study explained if and how first-year FGS obtain academic, social, and emotional support from their peer mentors. This explanation could give rise to new meanings, add to the reader's experience, or confirm previous knowledge or findings.

Additionally, Merriam (1998) discusses the importance of *intent* in categorizing case studies. In line with constructivist grounded theory, *interpretive case studies*, "are used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering" (p.38). In other words, this type of case study complements constructivist grounded theory because it aids in "…analyzing, interpreting or theorizing about a phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p.38). Therefore, the current study is also an interpretive multiple-case study.

Charmaz (2006) sheds light on the fact that researchers can pair grounded theory with other data collection methods and qualitative traditions. The goal of this study is to obtain thick and rich data from multiple cases, to compare and contrast these cases and to possibly develop a theoretical model from the data. Grounded theory involves building a theory, which is based in the data provided by participants. By using grounded theory, I can generate an explanation that ties all the data collected from first-year FGS on their experiences of academic, social, and emotional support from peer mentoring. In other words, I can co-construct with my participants a clearer and more detailed narrative of the process of obtaining academic, social, and emotional support through peer mentoring for first-year FGS.

Due to the different types of grounded theory methodology, it is important to clarify that this study used constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory

also includes important characteristics within the research process (O’Connor, Carpenter, & Coughlan, 2018). Charmaz (2014) argues that it is not practical or realistic to expect researchers to not have any prior knowledge or personal perspectives when conducting research. Moreover, she states that a literature review enables the researcher to establish theoretical sensitivity. As a result, constructivist grounded theory promotes the use of a literature review before collecting data and generating a theory (O’Connor, Carpenter, & Coughlan, 2018).

O’Connor, Carpenter, and Coughlan (2018) explain that constructivist grounded theory encourages researchers to create research questions based on the literature review before data collection. They argue that the research questions could help with choosing a data collection method and with drafting interview guides. However, they also caution researchers to maintain flexibility in changing or adding interview questions. Charmaz (2014) highly recommended novice researchers to create a detailed interview guide to ensure that they are asking questions that are relevant to the research questions.

In this study I conducted two stages of analysis that are related to multiple-case study design: (1) within-case analysis, which involves coding and describing each individual case and (2) cross-case analysis, which involves comparing data, codes, and categories across cases. During the first stage of data analysis, I performed initial coding and wrote case descriptions. In the second stage of data analysis, I conducted focused coding, and I compared focused codes across cases. Then, I noted and kept the focused codes that applied to all cases. Next, I used theoretical coding to group these focused codes into broader categories, which I then compared across all cases. Finally, I outlined the relationships between these categories.

4.4.1. Within-Case Analysis

Within-case analysis began once I completed interviewing the first participant. I transcribed the interview and performed initial coding on the transcription. I repeated this routine with the other four participants. It was important to transcribe and conduct initial coding after interviews as soon as possible, because each interview’s data will be based on data from previous interview(s). In other words, initial codes in an interview can help improve and modify the interview guide. For example, my interview guide originally had

16 questions and probes based on four key topics: (1) First-year FGS background and assumptions on peer mentoring; (2) peer mentoring and university experience; (3) support from peer mentor and (4) mentor-mentee relationship. After completing the transcribing and initial coding for the first participant I had a better understanding on what to ask my next participant.

I learned that some questions required re-wording because participants did not understand the questions, which led to weak responses. As I interviewed more participants, I noticed that I was able to develop more in-depth inquiries for topics such as support from peer mentor and mentor-mentee relationship. Participants' responses could be useful in pointing the researcher in directions that did not appear obvious at first. Additionally, I started to add reflective questions as well as advice questions to get participants to think critically about their experiences. In the end, my interview guide grew to 39 questions and probes. Although the number of questions and probes grew, I did not necessarily ask each question in all my interviews. Rather I developed a stronger arsenal of questions and probes that could help me obtain more detailed responses from my participants. This would not have been possible, if I did not perform transcribing and initial coding in a timely manner.

Initial Coding

Initial coding is the first step in constructivist grounded theory analysis. The key to initial coding is to "…stick closely to the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p.116). To do so, Charmaz suggests researchers pay close attention to actions and "…code data as actions" (2014, p. 116). This way researchers do not code people as types and impose labels on people. Rather they focus more on what is happening in the data. Coding data as actions means coding with gerunds. A gerund is a verb that works like a noun and ends in *-ing.* For example, feeling, being, lacking and having.

The type of initial coding that I used was line-by-line coding, which involves coding each line in the written data with gerunds. In this study, I coded each line in my interview transcriptions. Charmaz (2014) states

> This type of coding helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore, spurs making comparisons between data, and suggests emergent links between processes in the data to pursue and check. (p.121)

Additionally, initial coding involves in-vivo codes, which are "…participants' terms as codes…" (Charmaz, 2014, p.134). These codes play a role in maintaining participants' meanings and actions. Charmaz (2014) outlines four useful in vivo codes:

> Terms everyone knows that flag condensed but significant meanings. A participant's innovative term that captures meaning or experience. Insider shorthand terms reflecting a particular group's perspective. Statements that crystallize participants' actions or concerns. (p.134)

For example, one of the participants raised the issue of 'hoping their peer mentor would be a jumping point'. 'Jumping-off point' is a term that everyone knows and holds significant meaning. The participant borrowed this term to demonstrate her desire for her peer mentor to be a point where she could start her journey in university. Another participant brought up the problem of 'feeling peer mentor offered boilerplate information'. She used the term 'boilerplate' to describe the way she received information from her peer mentor. This is an insider shorthand term used by individuals working in law. It meant that the participant received uniform, standardized text from her peer mentor.

When conducting line-by-line coding, I answered Charmaz's (2014) following questions:

> What process(es) is at issue here? How can I define it? How does the research participant(s) act while involved in this process? What does the research participant(s) profess to think and feel while involved in this process? What might his or her observed behaviour indicate? When, why, and how does the process change? What are the consequences of the process? (p.127)

Once I completed initial coding of each interview transcription, I developed individual tables of initial codes for each participant. I numbered the initial codes and italicized in-vivo codes. By creating these tables, I was able to have a clear organized space to view each participant's initial codes.

Case Descriptions

Besides developing tables of initial codes for each participant, I also wrote detailed case descriptions for each participant. It was important to describe each participant's case because in a multiple-case study design, one of the aims is to give an in-depth analysis of each individual case. From a qualitative research perspective, case

descriptions give participants the opportunity to voice their experiences. By conducting this study, I wanted to ensure that first-year FGS can openly and comfortably share their feelings, thoughts, and reflections on their experiences of peer mentoring in Canada because the current literature was lacking information on these students' experiences.

4.4.2. Cross-Case Analysis

Cross-case analysis involves comparing data, codes, and categories across cases. During cross-case analysis I also used two steps of coding from constructivist grounded theory: focused coding and theoretical coding.

Focused Coding

Focused coding involves identifying and using the most important or frequent initial codes to develop categories within data (Charmaz, 2006). To develop focused codes for each participant, I reviewed each participant's table of initial codes. To group initial codes into focused codes, I created radial diagrams. A radial diagram is useful when demonstrating a relationship between multiple items and a central item. In other words, by using a radial diagram I was able to show the relationship between a set of initial codes to a focused code.

When performing focused coding, I responded to Charmaz's following questions:

> Which of these codes best account for the data? Have you raised these codes to focused codes? What do your comparisons between codes indicate? Do your focused codes reveal gaps in the data? (p.141)

Charmaz (2014) highlights the importance of treating focused codes as tentative decisions. Focused coding involves investigating productive codes and setting aside unproductive codes. To develop focused codes, I had to perform constant comparison, which aided me in refining the focused codes. In fact, Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) state that:

To generate and refine categories, researchers have to make many constant comparisons such as: (1) comparing and grouping codes, and comparing codes with emerging categories; (2) comparing different incidents (e.g. social situations, actions, social processes, or interaction patterns); (3) comparing data from the same or similar phenomenon, action or process in different situations and contexts…; (4) comparing

different people (their beliefs, situations, actions, accounts or experiences); (5) comparing data from the same individuals at different points in time; (6) comparing specific data with the criteria for the category; and (7) comparing categories in the analysis with other categories… (p.159)

It is also crucial to note that focused coding does not progress linearly from initial coding. In other words, by working with multiple participants' data, at times I had epiphanies in which I noticed that a participant's response helped shed more light on a previous statement from another participant. When this occurred, I went back to study earlier data and initial codes. Sometimes I reworded or added initial codes to develop more fruitful codes.

Once I completed focused coding for each participant, I developed a focused codes table for each participant. Here I was concentrating on understanding each individual case on its own. In other words, I created tentative categories for each participant.

Due to the large number of categories, I implemented the constant comparative method to narrow down this list. When comparing the categories, I found that a large chunk demonstrated overlap or similarities. Therefore, in these situations it was reasonable to group these categories into one category. If necessary, I also renamed the category so that it fitted with all the cases.

Theoretical Coding

After finalizing the categories I created during focused coding, I moved on to theoretical coding. This stage of coding involves "...[specifying] possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p.63). When working on theoretical coding, I narrowed down the categories in terms of their relevance to all the cases. Unlike initial coding and focused coding, theoretical coding pays more attention to abstraction, conceptualization, integration, and coherence of the data (Charmaz, 2014).

A significant issue in theoretical coding is "the tension…between emergence and application…" (Charmaz, 2014, p.151). In other words, does "…theory only ["emerge"] from the data or [is] theory…actually "forced" on the data?" (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019,

p.90-91). To tackle this issue, Charmaz (2014) recommends the use of Glaser's coding families. Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) define coding families as

> sets of general sociological concepts organized into loosely connected frameworks, which are supposed to foster the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher in order to support the development of theory from the data. (p.91)

While conducting theoretical coding, I followed Charmaz's (2014) recommendation of utilizing coding families. However, I also was cautious of Charmaz's (2014) reminder that "…theoretical codes must earn their way into your grounded theory" (p.153). In other words, it is not wise to solely rely on the coding families to develop theoretical codes. Additionally, Urquhart (2013) states that coding families are "…existing theoretical codes [that] are there to inspire you while theorising, but because theory-building is a creative endeavour, we can always develop our own" (p.108). For example, Keane (2021) developed analytic questions for herself to answer during theoretical coding based on inspiration from Glaser's Six C's coding family, which includes causes, context, contingencies, consequences, covariances and conditions. The analytic questions were:

> What is going on here? What seems to have led to this happening? What are the conditions under which this occurs? What seems to have happened as a result of this?

As stated by Charmaz (2014), there is no set limit on coding families, rather it is possible to consider numerous coding families during analysis. For this study I borrowed Keane's (2021) analytic questions, which were inspired by Glaser's Six C's coding family when performing theoretical coding.

Once I developed my final set of categories and wrote them up in the findings, I presented them to my supervisory committee. We reflected on, discussed, and refined the findings to best represent the participants' perceptions and experiences.

4.4.3. Memoing and Diagramming

Within the coding process is the use of memo-writing, Charmaz (2006) states that "memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue" (p.72). Also, memo-writing

identifies the missing pieces of categories or remaining gaps in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Memos can assist researchers in changing or adding interview questions as well as returning to previous participants for follow-up interviews. Constructivist grounded theory is an iterative process because the researcher is constantly going back and forth between data collection and data analysis.

Additionally, the researcher sorts, diagrams and integrates memos to develop the emerging theory. Charmaz (2006) argues that:

> …through sorting and integrating memos, you may explicate implicit theoretical codes which you may have adopted without realizing it. In addition, these strategies may force you to think through theoretical links among categories that may have been left implicit. Diagramming sharpens the relationships among your theoretical categories. All three strategies can spark ideas for constructing your written report and shaping the introduction and writing the theoretical framework (p.121).

In this study I wrote memos during initial, focused, and theoretical coding. With memos written in initial coding, I used Charmaz's (2014) early memo writing to help myself "…explore and fill out [my] qualitative codes…[and] to direct and focus further data collection" (p.169). In other words, I took note of actions that stood out in participants' interview transcripts. To investigate these actions further, I remind myself to pay attention to these actions in the subsequent participants. For instance, my early memos examined experiencing problems with virtual support, lacking a peer mentor who was a good fit, peer mentor lacking initiative and expectations vs experience.

I also applied Mihas' (2021) document reflection memo, which "…is a record of the researcher's initial understanding of a transcript that may be examined later in the project when looking across participants" (p.219). It enabled me to review each interview transcript from beginning to end as a standalone. As a result, I gained a holistic view of each interview transcript, which was helpful during within-case analysis because my focus was on coding and describing each individual case. By maintaining a holistic perspective, I was able to preserve each interview transcript as a narrative, which demonstrated participants' emotional and mental states. Moreover, I followed Mihas (2021) writing prompt: what does this one transcript teach me about the research question?

During focused coding, I used Mihas' (2021) key quotation memo, which pinpoints a power quote that is explicative. It allowed me to "focus on a process, behaviour, or an implicit or explicit action – how participants, act, or interact" (Mihas, 2021, p.224). A key quotation memo can be descriptive or reflective. The writing prompt I used was: why does this particular text segment capture my attention? How does this single quotation help me better understand the participant's lifeworld?

Furthermore, I used Mihas' (2021) comparing quotations from the same transcript memo. It helped me to examine two or more quotations within a transcript and analyze "…how they echo, contradict, or complicate each other" (Mihas, 2021, p.225). The writing prompt I used was: how do these separate quotations inform each other? What do they reveal together that may not be otherwise evident?

During theoretical coding, I used Keane's (2021) preparatory memos and conceptual memos. Preparatory memos "[capture] in summary form participants' experiences in relation to the particular code, concept or category" (p.237). In other words, preparatory memos story the data participant by participant (Keane, 2021). Conceptual memos investigate analytic questions that help with highlighting relationships between categories and explaining how sensitizing concepts could be applied to the data (Keane, 2021).

Diagramming held a key role in theoretical coding. It is crucial to recognize that diagramming can be used before, during or after memo-writing. I found that solely writing and sorting memos led to a messy and confusing space for data analysis. As I sorted and reviewed my memos and focused codes, I decided to make integrative diagrams, which involve placing categories into diagrams (Urquhart, 2013). Charmaz (2014) raises an important point that memo sorting and diagramming lead to tentative arrangements. These processes are meant to enable researchers to freely play around with the data. By making diagrams I was able to visualize the categories and the relationships between them. After creating diagrams, I often gained a better understanding of the next direction to take. I felt more at ease to write more conceptual memos. Through more memo-writing and diagramming, I was able to improve my diagrams in a way in which they explained relationships between the categories better.

4.5. Validation

Qualitative research validation strategies are divided into three lenses: researcher, participant, and reader (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In terms of a researcher's lens, I achieved data saturation, sought evidence for alternatives, utilized negative case analysis, engaged in researcher's reflexivity, and presented an audit trail. I achieved data saturation by enacting thorough data collection and analysis to the point in which I "…saw or [heard] the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaced…" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.248). I sought evidence for alternatives by finding other methods to exhibit and explicate the data. I performed negative case analysis by deliberately finding data that disputed or disconfirmed my expectations or findings. I engaged in researcher's reflexivity by presenting my biases, dispositions, assumptions, experiences, and theoretical orientations. This provided readers with the opportunity to understand the rationale behind my interpretation of the data. Finally, I presented an audit trail by providing a detailed description of "how data were collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.252). To create this audit trail, I wrote memos throughout my research.

As for the participant's lens, I conducted member checking, which involved asking participants for their feedback on their interview transcripts. This ensured that each participant read through their transcript and felt that the information was accurate prior to data analysis. Member checking demonstrated its crucial role in this study when Rebecca, modified her interview transcript since her original interview missed an important explanation to her lack of knowledge on the use of a peer mentor. She edited the transcript to include this explanation, which allowed for the development of a significant category in this study.

Finally, with regards to the reader I created rich, thick descriptions. In other words, I meticulously described each participant's case. Additionally, in writing up the findings developed in this study, I described in detail the categories and their properties as well as the connections between these categories.

Moreover, each strategy is focused on a different form of validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Internal validity or credibility in qualitative research concentrates on if

"…the findings are credible, given the data presented" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.242). Through data saturation, seeking evidence for alternatives, negative case analysis, researcher's reflexivity and member checking I achieved internal validity or credibility. Reliability and consistency are concerned with "… whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.251). Researcher's reflexivity and an audit trail established reliability and consistency. Finally, external validity or transferability focuses on "…leaving the extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations. The person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.256). Rich, thick description assisted with accomplishing external validity and transferability.

Chapter 5.

Cases

5.1. Maggie

Maggie is a third-year Canadian-born first-generation student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). She self-identifies as Caucasian and prefers to use English in social communication with others. She stated that she came from a lower-middle class family. Her parents were born in Canada and their highest education was high school. Maggie completed her first year at a different university in 2020. She transferred to her current university in Fall 2021 because she wanted to pursue a Criminology major. Although she was a second-year student, it was her first year at the university. She was studying full-time at the university and worked off-campus. In total she worked between nine to fifteen hours a week. Maggie had an academic scholarship, a job, grants, and student loans to pay for her university tuition.

During her first semester, Maggie received a promotional email for the peer mentorship program from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She had a few reasons for joining the peer mentorship program. She wanted to get involved in the university and meet new people. In addition, she thought the peer mentorship program would be helpful in learning about the university.

5.2. Serena

Serena is a second year Canadian-born first-generation student from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). She self-identifies as South Asian and prefers to use English in spoken communication. She stated that she came from a middle-class family. Her parents were both born in India and had some university experience in India. However, they did not obtain a four-year university degree. Serena had help from her parents to pay for her undergraduate studies. However, she contributed to costs by working part-time on campus. She worked around one to eight hours a week. Serena has been studying full-time at the university since her first year.

In her first year, her FASS academic advisor informed her that her program of study allowed students to join the partnership program, which gave Serena the ability to take courses at another post-secondary institution throughout the course of her undergraduate degree. In other words, Serena was able to take courses from the university as well as a small college.

In Fall 2021, Serena joined the FASS peer mentorship program. She found the program while she was checking the university website. She regularly checked the website because she felt new and lost at the university. She wanted to be prepared and avoid missing any vital information or events.

5.3. Ora Lee

Ora Lee is a second-year Canadian first-generation student from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She was born in Somalia and has a Canadian citizenship. Ora Lee and her family immigrated to Canada from Somalia. Ora Lee self-identifies as Black. She speaks Somali as a language of cultural origin and is also proficient in using spoken English. She stated that she came from a lower middle-class family. Both her parents were born in Ethiopia and did not receive formal schooling. She paid for her tuition by obtaining an academic scholarship. She was not employed during her undergraduate studies. She was also studying full-time in her first year.

She found the FASS peer mentorship program in the summer via social media. She was searching her university's Instagram accounts to prepare for her first year. She knew that social media helped with finding resources for students. As a result, she had a habit of using social media to find resources on her university. Through her research, she saw information on the peer mentorship program. She became curious about the program and decided to join.

5.4. Elle

Elle is a second year Canadian born first-generation student in the Faculty of Education. She self-identifies as Caucasian and prefers to use English in social communication. She stated that she came from an upper middle-class family. Both her parents were born in Canada and did not complete a four-year university degree. Her

mother partook in some high school education, whereas her father had some university experience. Elle paid for university through academic scholarships and help from parents. She was a part-time student and was not employed while attending university.

Elle was recruited into the peer mentorship program. Her faculty pre-assigned her to her peer mentor. When she registered her university email, she received an introductory email from her peer mentor prior to the start of the program. Elle recalled that peer mentors had a list of ten to twenty students. Once she received the first email from her peer mentor, she felt a connection. Although she was one mentee out of ten or twenty mentees, her peer mentor sent out personalized emails that were welcoming and fostered a one-on-one connection. Elle felt a sense of comfort having someone who had experience with university. From then on, her peer mentor contacted her once or twice a month for the first semester. She was given the option to opt-out of the program after the first semester.

5.5. Rebecca

Rebecca is a second-year Canadian-born first-generation student in the Faculty of Education. She self-identifies as Caucasian and prefers to speak English in social communication. She stated that she came from a middle-class family. Both her parents were born in Canada and had some university experience but did not complete a four-year university degree. Rebecca was a non-traditional or mature student. Unlike traditional students who entered university immediately after high school, she started university at the age of twenty-three years. After completing high school at the age of eighteen, Rebecca completed an eight-month certificate program to become a legal assistant, which included a practicum. Once she completed the program, she was hired for a full-time job as a legal assistant at the company where she completed her practicum.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rebecca decided to change careers. She was not in love with her job as a legal assistant. She wanted to be a teacher. As result, she chose to return to school part-time to obtain a degree and to eventually complete the Professional Development Program to become a teacher. Since her first year of university, Rebecca worked full-time as a legal assistant to partially pay for her university tuition. Her family also helped with her tuition.

In her first year, Rebecca worked full-time and took one or two classes a semester. Unlike her first-year peers, her first year was extended and it took her longer for her to complete the credits that she needed. She was content with her first year, but she also found it hard. She lived in a city that was far from the main campus. Therefore, she tried to take only online courses or courses at the closer and smaller campus. These limitations in turn made it difficult for Rebecca to find classes that she enjoyed. She recalled enjoying an in-person humanities course. She appreciated the ability to attend class in-person rather than watching video lectures.

Rebecca did not actively seek out the peer mentorship program. Rather she received an email from her faculty's peer mentorship program to join an introduction group Zoom call with peer mentors and some first-year mentees. She decided to participate to see if she could obtain any helpful information.

Chapter 6.

Findings

6.1. Participants' Expectations

Prior to entering a peer mentoring relationship, these first-year FGS had high and optimistic expectations for a peer mentor. They were looking forward to receiving a peer mentor. Also, they were hoping to have a close relationship with their peer mentor and/or to obtain positive outcomes through their peer mentor's help.

6.1.1. Academic support

All these first-year FGS mentees were expecting their peer mentor to be a guide who was knowledgeable and experienced. For example, Maggie expected her peer mentor to provide her with tips, tricks, and hacks:

> Also, someone to kind of not only be like "Oh yes this is what you need to do to get here and here". But also, someone who's like "Oh there's this really fun trick or this fun hack that you know you should know and it helped me" or something like that. Tips and tricks, but also just basic information.

Moreover, Serena expected her peer mentor to provide advice on study skills and university coursework:

> I wanted someone who was already in university to like be able to go to ask like for help to navigating it and advice on like coursework like university coursework 'cause it is very different from high school coursework.

Finally, Ora Lee discussed her expectations for a peer mentor who puts herself in her mentee's shoes and proactively asks her mentee about her potential struggles:

> So, I think like if I were to be a mentor I feel [audible] —like I uh —the first-gen —I would definitely go over things and like you know it's a fresh start. Like so, I would do everything I can to like help them to really fix their schedule. Kind of really be there for them like you know like put them in the same shoes as I was when I first started.
>
> I really wished [pause] I learned how to —like I really wished I learned how to adjust smoothly and kind of like —'cause if I were to be a mentor

> and I had a mentee I would definitely go over things that I needed help with. And so, I would be asking my mentee like "Do you know how to use Canvas? Is [sic] your lectures pre-recorded? Or are they in somewhere in the modules? 'Cause they are really hard to find. Or your emails, what are the emails you are receiving? Do you need to do the —do you have emails about FAN?" 'Cause I had emails about that and I really wasn't understanding. I thought I had a whole year —the whole four years to do it. But I didn't know I had to do it by the like the next semester. You know, things like that. I'd asked them about things that they are really struggling with and things like that. So that, but this is for me in the future. Things that I've learned. Things that I'd want someone else to help me with. You know? Because sometimes it just gets —you can be just —no one really —I guess no one really prepares you of how everything —like how overwhelming everything is.

6.1.2. Social support

These first-year FGS mentees tended to hope for a peer mentor who would help them meet and connect with people. For example, Maggie stated:

> Yeah. I just think like my goals like I said for going into the peer mentorship program was to like meet people, make connections, make friends.

Interestingly, Elle and Rebecca did not expect their peer mentors would help them with making friends. They were comfortable in finding friends on their own. For instance, Elle stated:

> So, I don't know if I'd more — needed the support with that. I was just kinda able to go up and talk to someone and kind of make a connection there. But I think if I were to have struggle with that issue and reached out, I think she would have definitely been understanding of it and would've kind of helped me through it.

Overall, these first-year FGS mentees did not expect to have a peer mentor who would give them tips on relationship building with faculty. Maggie explained:

> And so, I don't think I would've known to ask those questions at that time. But now [laughs] being you know a few years in now I would've been like, "Oh how do you form relationships with your faculty members or whatever that you are in classes with?" But at the time, I didn't know how important that was. So, I think yeah so I didn't —she didn't tell me, and I didn't ask [laughs].

6.1.3. Emotional support

One of the first-year FGS mentees was especially looking for a close relationship with her peer mentor. Maggie described a desire for a peer mentor who would be willing to develop a friendship or a sibling-like relationship with her:

> I think like [pause] hmm I want to say a friendship? Like a really good friendship and just someone to kind of like a big sister vibe. You know someone to ask questions to and have someone there whose done it, who's been through it.

The rest of the first-year FGS mentees expressed that they were looking for a transactional relationship. They were expecting their peer mentor would be a guide that allows them to ask questions, helps them navigate the campus and educates them on how university worked. For example, Elle stated:

> I was just kind of expecting someone to be there to answer any questions or to kind of guide me through things.

Similarly, Serena expected her peer mentor to be a good and experienced student who she could turn to for advice:

> I expected them to know the university well be like —have good grades and kinda have things more figured out than me. So, I can go to them for advice, and they know what they are doing.

Furthermore, the first-year FGS mentees expected their peer mentors to be actively involved in the peer mentoring relationship:

> I was expecting more of [pause] more of — being more interactive with my mentor and being —and being able to like have good communication and being active, but yeah that was what I was kind of expecting when I was going into it. Like my mentor being really really there for me through everything and like yeah.
>
> I do wish though that my peer mentor reached out a little bit more so maybe your mentors could be told to reach out a little bit more…

6.2. Participants' Lived Experiences

As these first-year FGS mentees reflected on their experiences with their peer mentors, they indicated that some of their expectations were met whereas others were not. Primarily, these students felt that they received basic academic support but

strikingly they expressed a need for greater social and emotional support from their peer mentors.

6.2.1. Academic Support

In terms of academic support, the first-year FGS mentees typically asked their peer mentors for assistance in choosing a degree, understanding programs, selecting courses, writing, studying, dropping courses, and understanding degree requirements.

Maggie mainly asked her peer mentor for help in determining her interests in research as well as her degree. Her peer mentor was studying Psychology and Criminology. Maggie was interested in both subjects but being able to learn about her peer mentors' experiences with the two subjects enabled Maggie to decide on pursuing a Psychology degree over a Criminology degree. Discussing her degree path with her peer mentor also allowed Maggie to see more opportunities in the Psychology field. She emphasized that she would not have known about these opportunities so soon without her peer mentor. She learned about subfields such as Counselling, Clinical, Forensic and Developmental Psychology. As a result, she learned to keep her mind and options open.

> Hmmm. I think in my just my — the way I would I say I am determining my interests in terms of like research and my degree and if I want to do a minor. My peer mentor was pretty —she was studying Psychology and Criminology, I think. And those were some things that I was really interested in. And so, it was a good kind of peak into what that could look like for me. So, I think yeah having her as my mentor was helpful to ultimately decide that I maybe don't want to do Criminology. But it was like a good elimination process. From there I think just knowing the different opportunities that she has had that I didn't know where possible. I think it has kind of helped me kind of look at things differently, in terms of like "I don't have to necessarily just go straight into the typical path of Counselling Psychology or Clinical." I could do like maybe Forensic, or I could go into like more specialized Developmental like there's just a lot of different things that I —like opportunities that I am thinking about now that I probably wouldn't have known so soon if I hadn't had a mentor, so yeah [nods and smiles]

Serena received academic support to improve her writing from her peer mentor virtually via messaging over Discord. She contacted her peer mentor and asked her peer mentor how she could get started with writing an essay and how she could write faster. She was struggling with procrastination with her essay. She attributed the cause of her

procrastination to her nervousness and lack of knowledge on how to start writing. Also, she felt overwhelmed with writing her first essay. She noticed that although she sat down to work, she could not get anything done. She recalled receiving helpful tips and feeling calmer after talking to her peer mentor.

> I remember one time I was working on an essay, and this was while I was at (university A). It was my first term, and I was really lost on where to get started. And I was really struggling with like procrastinating because I was so nervous about where to begin. And I was just so overwhelmed and so I talked to them, and I talked to them about like specifically about like how to get started and also about how to write faster. 'Cause I noticed that I was just sitting there for a long time not doing much. And they helped like give me tips and I felt a lot calmer after.

Previous undergraduate mentoring research conducted by Crisp and Cruz (2009) define mentors as role models who share their current and past experiences with their mentees. In this study first-year FGS mentees tended to receive academic support from their peer mentors by listening to their mentor's personal experiences. Subsequently this was a form of role modelling in which peer mentors shared past personal experiences with their degree and studies. In Zoom meeting with her peer mentor, Maggie sought her peer mentor's personal experiences. During the meeting, her peer mentor explained the process of transitioning from a Bachelor's degree to a Master's degree. She was seeking to hear about her peer mentor's personal experiences because she wanted to see things through the eyes of someone who has already been through it or done it. Additionally, she learned what was necessary and important from her peer mentor's personal experiences.

> I think the resources she did direct me to I think I kind of already knew about them. Not that they weren't helpful but I kind of already done — I like to do my research so I kind of have already done my research. But I was wanting kind of that personal experience. So that's why we also had a meeting, which was really helpful. I can't remember like exactly what we talked about. But I just know that like it was good to understand the process of moving from like your Bachelor's to grad — uh Master's. And if you want to do Honours and how that can fit in and what that might look like and why it is helpful to have also work experience, if you're —you know depending on which route you go. So, I think just little things like that was [sic] nice—there are things that I didn't know at that point. And so, it was really helpful to kind of understand from her perspective, someone who is in it what kind of things were necessary or you should start thinking about.

Also, Elle had the opportunity to ask her peer mentor about her experiences with a professor or course. Her peer mentor provided her with an overview of the course and detailed her experience with the course. This helped Elle feel less intimidated by the academic demands of a course. She was able to go into the course with some expectations that her peer mentor provided.

> If I had a question say, "What was your experience with this professor or this education class?" that she had already taken, she would kind of provide me with an overview on what that course was really about and how she — what her personal experience was with it, which I found very helpful as well. So, I could kind of be less intimidated by walking into something that I had no idea what to expect out of.

First-year FGS mentees also tended to ask their peer mentors for help with navigating challenging courses. For example, when Elle was struggling with a math course, she was unsure what her options were. Elle was concerned for her grade point average. She explained her situation to her peer mentor and asked her peer mentor about potential options:

> Yes, I think it was around this time last year. I was having a difficult time in my math class, and I didn't really know what options there were. Like it was coming close to the time where [sic] I was still able to withdrawal, or I didn't know if it would just be better to push through it and just get a lower grade. 'Cause I've always been pretty concerned with my GPA and I put a lot of pressure on it. So, I was pretty open with that and explained how I kind of been struggling. I didn't know what my options were, and she was pretty helpful and she recommended an advisor first. But also said that "It's okay at this difficult time to not be doing as good as you would like to be. Like it's a new transition." And kind of explained to me a little bit what the options were at that time if it would be better to withdrawal, if I wanted to push through it. There was one more option, I don't remember what it was. But just having those options was pretty comforting.

Similarly, Ora Lee struggled with a class and asked her peer mentor the process and consequences of dropping a course:

> So, I think one time I was —I was having trouble with a class and I guess I had —I wanted to know what —what it would be like to drop the class. So, she was telling me more about like what the W meant and like you know reasons to —what it would mean to drop a class. So, she sent me links about that. So, I found that helpful and something that I didn't know prior.

First-year FGS mentees also received support for course selections. For instance, Elle stated:

> I — if at — sometimes I was having troubles I guess with course enrollment. It took me a long time — I kept switching in and out through programs my first year. So, all of the course planning and online just stuff we had to deal with was very confusing. So, I would reach out a lot if — like what courses she would recommend or what courses I like actually need. So, it's great just having someone who is in the same program and who had the same end goal to kind of help me because we could relate in that sense.

These first-year FGS mentees' expectations for academic support tended to align well with their lived experiences of academic support. Their peer mentors sent them links via text or email to address their specific questions about academic concerns. However, Ora Lee discussed the limitations of receiving links from her peer mentor:

> So yeah, yeah like [sighs] but I think sometimes I kind of wanted —for instance when I had questions about certain things [pause] I wished that like sometimes my mentor helped me more than just sending me links. Give me more so like in-depth of like things to do and like what it really means kind of thing.

Ora Lee would have liked her peer mentor to study with her. Unfortunately, her peer mentor was a graduate student, and this intimidated Ora Lee. She felt that a peer mentor closer to her age would have been easier to study with:

> Yeah, I —like I —I wished that they were like maybe third year because it's like you know the age gap is perfect and they're also going through stuff. So, it would've been really nice to like you know kind of study together and like learn from them. But because like my mentor is almost graduating it was really hard to like I just felt like they were just way more mature than I was. That they would rather be going out and be studying with their own friend group than with me or that they're super busy and occupied. So, I —I didn't —I didn't want to feel like I was interfering with them. So, yeah.

Even though she received links to academic resources, Ora Lee still dealt with her academic struggles on her own:

> Okay so they did send helpful writing help and —and the student learning commons and how they have great resources. Stuff like that. 'Cause I did ask if there's any homework help in campus. Yeah so, she did guide me to there.
>
> Like my first semester academic wise was really not that great. So being honest, I don't even know if I dealt with it correctly. I was like hope — I was just praying that the semester would be over with. And I did learn lessons and things that —subjects that I was good at and subjects that I wasn't. So, from that like I did learn stuff, but in that moment and this semester was really really hard for me to like finish off successfully.

6.2.2. Social Support

Regarding social support, first-year FGS mentees were informed about events and clubs. However, they felt that their peer mentors could have given more tips on making friends and building relationship with faculty or staff. For example, Maggie stated:

> Just having that like jumping point do you know what I mean to other —maybe other people, other events, other groups? 'Cause I know she was involved in a few other like clubs and such. I think that might have been a way to just get more integrated into like the social community.

Similarly, Serena expressed a lack of support from her peer mentor in terms of making friends:

> Iris: Okay, I guess they didn't really help you with making friends? Were there instances where you were taught how to make friends?
>
> Serena: We didn't really talk about that. 'Cause it was usually just me reaching out with questions. And so, I was mainly just asking questions about like events and studying and things like that.

The other mentees also recalled a desire to learn how to make friends from a peer mentor, but they prioritized asking questions about events and academics. For example, Ora Lee described her struggle with finding friends:

> But I think finding friends was really really hard. And something that — like in my classes something that I felt like I —it's really hard to do is like finding friends in your lecture you know [inaudible]. That's about it.

Moreover, Ora Lee knew that she missed out on having friends who could help her academically:

> Yeah, definitely like sometimes I'd like see students like studying like when it comes to like — they would have a class together and they would be able to study together and things like that. Like and be able to help each other to like prep for an exam or like a project. Like I —I did not have any of that. And so, it was really hard for me to find ways to like — study methods and things like that. So, it was just you know when you have friends and —or in the same class as you, you guys are studying, it's very motivational and you know you can get stuff done. But doing it yourself and kind of not having help at all, it was really hard.

In addition, Elle indicated that she would have liked to connect with other FGS at the university:

> I feel like I could've gotten a bit more support or maybe have gotten the chance to connect with other people who were as well first-generation students. So, I think I definitely missed out on that my first year.

Furthermore, Maggie stated her ignorance on the importance of building connections with faculty:

> Iris: Maybe her personal experiences with faculty or staff. Maybe referrals to those types of people. If you could give a little bit more detail if she did provide that to you?
>
> Maggie: No, she didn't. That also would've been helpful though. 'Cause I think now that I am —I guess it's a year later. Yeah. Now I am kinda like, "Oh man that would've been really nice to have like —to know which professors are maybe like this professor is really great at this, this professor you should definitely take this class with them or just like things like that." Or like "Hey I know this professor; I am doing work with them whatever." Now that I am further along in my degree, I realize how valuable that is. So, I think that would've been quite helpful to have. But no there wasn't any kind of connecting for me with faculty or anything like that.

On the other hand, Elle received plenty of support in building relationships with faculty:

> And again, it would just like a private space to ask questions that you may not be comfortable with in a big setting. But she said that teachers are usually pretty open with emailing or talking in person and that they always want to connect with their students even if you're online.

She took her peer mentor's advice in attending her professors' office hours, subsequently she noticed improvement in her studies:

> Elle: So, I would usually email them. But her telling me that "It's okay, they'll stay after class. You can talk to them in-person or you can meet with them at a later day. That they are usually pretty flexible with that. It was very helpful.
>
> Iris: Mhmm.
>
> Elle: Yeah, I started to do it and I noticed great — much more improvement in my classes.

6.2.3. Emotional Support

For emotional support, these first-year FGS mentees' expectations were high. Although, their peer mentors provided reassurance and encouragement and links to mental health resources, they seemed to expect more direct emotional support from their peer mentors. For instance, Elle's peer mentor provided her with mental health resources during midterm season. Elle was given a link to book an appointment with a counsellor if she needed it. She also received information about an online counselling app. Her peer mentor covered how to get in-person or virtual counselling.

> In the most stressful time, it was mostly just resources to mental health spots on campus or different apps that are good for those things.

Serena recalled two instances in which she felt she benefited from emotional support. The first was when she was writing her first essay at a partnership institution. Serena was nervous and overwhelmed. After getting help and advice from peer mentor on how to get started with writing, she obtained stress relief:

> I think that would just be the time where I got really overwhelmed with my assignment again. 'cause I was really stressed out. So, providing me with advice was sort of emotional support, because then like I knew like I had ways then —or like methods that I could use to help me out. And I wasn't this lost.

The second instance was when Serena developed confidence after learning to navigate the university campus from her peer mentor. In both cases, Serena felt that her peer mentor helped her feel less lost. This is a form of emotional support because Serena found comfort when her peer mentor provided her with methods that could help her out:

> There was confidence with like —I felt like a little bit more confident with navigating my way on campus. I knew there was someone that I could ask if I got lost and couldn't find the classroom. Like someone who already knew the campus really well.

Ora Lee received words of encouragement in being more social with professors and teaching assistants.

> Yeah, so she said — she'd — she admired my bravery and resilience and that I could do this, and she said, "It shows courage to ask help and to try to improve." And she told me that "It is understandable that things can seem intimidating and to talk people." But she would say that "Their

> intentions are to always help you as much as they can and talk —taking the first step is usually the hardest, but [inaudible] but yeah, but it's very rewarding to do so after."

Finally, the first-year FGS mentees tended to report that their peer mentors helped them to feel more comfortable and familiar with the school:

> I feel a lot more comfortable with the school and a lot more comfortable just in my choices academically or socially.
>
> It's made me feel more comfortable at (the university) for sure, which has been really nice. It's given me a little bit of like—not that I necessarily formed like relationships with people in the program. But it's like given me a familiarity, like you know "Oh, you know I think that was that person that I knew." There's just like an understanding of the school, of the people, of the program, of the department. I think it just kind of made it feel a little bit more comfortable. If that makes sense?

First-year FGS mentees tended to feel that they were not close with their peer mentors. As a result, they felt uncomfortable sharing their feelings with their peer mentors. For example, Maggie stated:

> So, I would say that was kind of —I don't know if there —I mean —I'm also very hesitant to reach out just —you know, it wasn't like we had a super close relationship. I think for me what would've helped with that was meeting in-person, which I mentioned before. That would've helped to take it from like, "Oh you're someone that I don't really know to like you know oh I've met you, I can be more honest about how I am doing emotionally." But yeah, it didn't quite go there.

6.3. The Gap Between Participants' Expectations and Lived Experiences

The first-year FGS mentees expressed a gap between their expectations for a peer mentor and lived experiences of connecting with a peer mentor. The participants raised three plausible reasons for this gap: (1) being uncertain of the nature of the peer mentoring relationship, (2) having difficulty seeking common ground and (3) experiencing challenges in developing a close and informal relationship.

6.3.1. Understanding the Nature of the Peer Mentoring Relationship

First-year FGS mentees expressed their ignorance towards what was appropriate in a peer mentoring relationship. Rebecca did not know how to get help from a peer mentor:

> I just don't think I was told that the peer mentors were really there to talk to. Like I thought that it was just intro meetings and kind getting you sorted out and then that was all.
>
> And I just — I mean I think that if I had known like made — had been made more aware that they were there if I did need help and I could be getting more one-on-one information that would've been useful.
>
> I mean that think that it's weird like talking to you now and I realizing that I didn't really know what the peer mentorship program stuff was even for. Like I don't think I was ever advised that I could like ask my peer mentor for specific help about stuff, I thought that she was just kind of sending like mass stuff to people and very busy with her own schooling.

Also, when Elle was ghosted by her peer mentor, she was unsure about requesting her peer mentor to continue their relationship and conversations:

> I think after hmm maybe like February ish? It kinda just stopped, and I kinda just stopped receiving emails. Kind — I guess more so after the Christmas break even. Might have been a little bit earlier than that. So, I got a lot of support and it was little — it was pretty constant and then yeah it just kinda died down, but she gave the opportunity to opt-out, which I decided to continue with the program.
>
> I didn't actually realize it until the mid of the second semester? I was like "Oh, I guess yeah maybe I missed an email or forgot to respond to one that she felt like I wanted to opt-out." So, it was kinda a little surprising to just see it all end so fast kind of with no warning.
>
> But I was like "Okay, like I guess I had her on Facebook so I still — and I still had her email, so I knew I would be able to reach out at any time I wanted to." But that one was a little more hesitant, I didn't reach out really my second semester 'cause I felt "Oh she didn't reach out to me first maybe she doesn't want me to reach out anymore." So, I really didn't my second semester.

Furthermore, Ora Lee expressed her unawareness of the ability to share her struggles with a peer mentor:

> But part of it was because I wasn't really communicating about things that I was struggling with and maybe it was because I didn't think she

> needed to hear about it? That it was necessary for her to know about it? And so, I just did not talk about it.

After reflecting on their peer mentoring experiences, the first-year FGS mentees tended to report that although they expected their peer mentor to be a guide, they were unable to rely on their peer mentor to take initiative to help them. Rather they had to do their own research and take initiative in asking their peer mentors questions:

> I think I took initiative by reaching out and asking questions. I would do my own research for the most part. And ask questions about things that I was confused about rather than like solely relying on the peer mentor to reach out. I did also like uhm see if they would reach out, but I did also do my part in doing my own research.
>
> I think it is okay for a first-generation student to kind of expect some more support from the peer mentor. Expect them to take more initiative because they are new, I think at the end of the day, it isn't the peer mentor's job to take that much initiative. And mainly I think the mentee should be asking questions stuff like that. And taking a little bit more initiative.
>
> In terms of first-generation students [sigh], I would say just ask all the questions. That's my biggest advice. It's like first do it, put yourself out there, be a part of the program. Ask your mentor or ask anyone in the FASS department honestly just all the questions about what it's like, how you can get more connected. All those kinds of things.
>
> I would give a lot of what my peer mentor gave to me, was just don't really be afraid to reach out. That all of your questions or comments are valid. And that ultimately everyone, your peer mentor, your teacher, everyone is there for you and your growth. So, I would definitely really encourage that.

These first-year FGS mentees did not report that they informed their peer mentors about their expectations for the peer mentoring relationship. Interestingly, Ora Lee upon reflecting on her experience, came up with some recommendations for first-year FGS on getting support from a peer mentor:

> I would say be more connected to your mentor. Really ex —talk about your experiences and things that you are dealing with and like from the get-go and talk about ways that you want to improve and things that you want to work on. 'Cause the semester goes by so fast. And like everything is just going so fast. Like you don't really even have time to really reflect on everything. And so, I feel like from the get-go preparing yourself to getting to know your mentor, to talk about things you want to improve on, your weaknesses and what you would like for your mentor —how you'd like your mentor to support you and things like that. I think those things are so important. And like and communicating

> that with your mentor and I feel like your mentor would do their job and like support you on things that you want to be supported in.

6.3.2. Seeking Common Ground

The first-year FGS mentees expressed their need for common ground with their peer mentors. For example, Maggie stated:

> I think that would've been quite helpful. That would've been nice. I think that is another part of the connected piece. Like having that. Be able to share her background and her experience in you know the three components —emotional, social, and academic. And just to be able to like —from that I have someone who has gone through it right? I can be like "Oh you know you — I don't know —had this group of friends. Oh, my friends are kind of like this too." Just someone to like I think have that shared common ground with that is like —has been through university, you haven't. And then, I think that would've been helpful.

The participants tended to report insufficient common ground with their peer mentors. For instance, Ora Lee felt that she and her peer mentor did not prioritize developing common ground:

> Iris: Mhmmm. So, on that line, how much common ground do you think you had with your peer mentor?
>
> Ora Lee: Can you clarify that question?
>
> Iris: Like how relatable was their experience to you?
>
> Ora Lee: To be quite frank not really because we didn't really discuss about it. You know it was not something that we talked about. It was —it was very like just question, answer, first meeting like I only had like what two or three questions. And it was just within the semester, so it was just yeah it wasn't a lot of time together and a lot of relatable things.

Moreover, none of the first-year FGS mentees felt that they had the opportunity to share their backgrounds or learn about their peer mentor's background:

> Iris: Mhmmm. And let's see. Could you tell me a time when you and your peer mentor shared each other's background?
>
> Elle: I don't think we did. Yeah, I feel like that case was either didn't come up or was different.

In addition, Maggie felt that she and her peer mentor had different academic paths and mindsets:

> I think she was going — she was more focused on like a working more of like a practical application I think of Psychology. And I was kind of looking more into the research side of things and more of —less Counselling and more Clinical. I think she was leaning more towards to Counselling and kind of —I —at that point I was wanting to go for like my PhD. So really just go all the way. And I think at that point she was just finishing her Honours or finishing her Master's. I can't quite remember, but either way she was like kind of done almost. She was like, "I am pretty much finished. This is kind of it. I don't think I am going any further." I was like, "Oh but I really want maybe some advice on like the long-term. The like if I want to do a PhD, what would that look like from someone who is also wanting to do that." So yeah, I think that's where they differed a little bit.

Interestingly, unlike the other FGS mentees, Elle had some common ground with her peer mentor:

> Elle: We kinda had found that we had similar goals. So, I feel having that one [sic] who had so much as the same interests I did and goals was easier to connect to.
>
> Iris: And what were those interests and goals?
>
> Elle: Some would just be activities, or some would be bigger goals like we both would want to be a teacher. Even though we were in different subjects it was still great to have someone who also wanted to be a high school teacher.
>
> Iris: Mhmmm.
>
> Elle: 'Cause I know both [sic] high school and elementary school are pretty different paths. And just having someone who loved to help people and get involved as much as I did, I really appreciated that we had so many of the same yeah interests.
>
> Iris: Mhmmm. And how relatable was your peer mentor's personal experiences?
>
> Elle: They were pretty relatable. Like just by not knowing where to go the first day or being confused on how to navigate through even just Canvas. We kinda shared the same things with those.

The first-year FGS mentees emphasized that being a FGS involved mixed feelings. On one hand, they were excited and proud. For example, they were proud and felt accomplished to be the first in their families to go to university to get a degree. On the other hand, they were nervous, confused, overwhelmed, and stressed. For instance, they felt their families could not provide any guidance on the matter, which put them under significant stress and pressure. They lacked knowledge about university, which

forced them to figure things out on their own. Maggie provided insightful descriptions of these mixed feelings:

> It was —it's exciting, I think. It's also a little bit nerve wracking just 'cause like I don't really have parents that can maybe provide additional guidance or like answer questions. So, it felt kind of very like much —it was like much —it was like very much a need to figure out a lot of stuff. Which is totally fine, good for growth, but it is also like there is not as much support in terms of understanding how university works. 'Cause it is kind of its own little world. So, I think that was kind of part of it. And —but it was exciting. It was exciting 'cause I knew that I was gonna be the first one in my family to hopefully get a degree and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, exciting, and nerve-wracking.
>
> So, I think that was kind of just stressful and a lot more pressure on me, because there wasn't really anyone that I knew when I was getting ready to go to (the university) that had a Bachelor's degree or had gone through university.

Similarly, Elle described feeling accomplished to be doing something that has never be done in her family:

> I feel like it's an achievement for myself and that I'm here doing something new and kinda carrying on my family's name in this academic setting where it hasn't been seen before. So, I feel like that's a huge accomplishment so far.

Also, Serena stated feeling proud to figure things out on her own and eventually share her experience with her younger sister:

> I was proud to be the first to go to university. And I was proud of myself for being able to figure out things on my own and to be able to help my sister who's gonna go after me.

As a result, they tended to feel that it would be more convenient to share their feelings with people who can relate or understand. Ora Lee expressed:

> But it's a different connection when you also meet someone who is also first-gen because there's a lot that goes onto [sic] it. I mean you are proud but at the same time you're nervous. The same time you're overwhelmed. There's [sic] so many emotions and it would've been nice to really express it to that person and kind of like work together and like figure out how to succeed because you know you're kind of doing this own your own.

Additionally, Maggie felt that she would have expressed her emotions more to her peer mentor if she was also a first-generation student:

Iris: So, could you go in more detail about how much you would share with her if she was a first-generation student? Like your comfort.

Maggie: Probably more, yeah. I think that level of comfort would've increased. I think the more common ground I would've found with her maybe not based on our academic interests. 'Cause that's kind of not superficial, but that's not super —like that doesn't get to the emotional and social part of things, right? If I would've found more common ground like if she was a first-generation student or on like other emotional levels if she was like I struggled my first year or anything like that I think any additional sharing on her part, probably would've also —I definitely would've shared more as well about how I was doing on those two other components.

Interestingly during the search for common ground first-year FGS mentees tended to not mention their FGS status to their peer mentors:

Iris: Mhmmm. Could you tell me a time when you expressed that you were a first-generation student?

Elle: It was mostly after I saw the email that was sent out. So, I kinda thought about it, and I was like "Oh, that's like a thing!" So, I kinda just yeah tried to think about it a little more." But I haven't gotten the chance to express it in the school setting.

Similarly, Ora Lee stated:

I don't know if I even mentioned I was a first-generation or this is all new to me and this is all hard. Like yes, here and there I said I was struggling with the class and stuff like that. But the communication aspect was lacking and so uhmm like I noticed she was very like very kind, very supportive, very like —a nice person overall.

Also, Elle and Rebecca, did not even know about the FGS status until they were recruited for this study. Therefore, they could not express their FGS status to their peer mentors:

Iris: Mhmm, so in your first year what did it mean to you to be a first-generation student?

Elle: I honestly didn't know that was a thing before I saw the email.

6.3.3. Seeking a Close Relationship

As these first-year FGS mentees reflected on their peer mentoring experiences, they reported a desire for a close relationship with their peer mentors. For example, Ora Lee stated:

> And I also kind of wished that I had someone who was also doing school at the same time. Like so that like we can meet up for like a coffee and talk like about our classes and things like that.
>
> And you know build a relationship.
>
> So, I'd really wish that me and my mentor like took a time to like you know study together, like meet in-person and kind of like fix our schedules and things like that.

Similarly, Maggie reported that she would have preferred to engage in casual conversations with her peer mentor over arranging formal Zoom meetings. She would much rather meet her peer mentor for coffee and converse informally. In fact, she expressed:

> But I think, just I am someone who prefers in-person interaction. So, I think if I would've met her in-person and just maybe like had more of a casual conversation and just hung out, I think it would've maybe provided a bit more like emotional and social benefits versus strictly like helpful academic — a little bit social.
>
> 'Cause we would set up a meeting and then chat because I had questions. But it's not as casual as just like meeting for coffee and then seeing where the conversation goes, right?

Due to COVID-19 these mentees were often communicating with their peer mentors virtually through messaging. Specifically, they tended to report that they formally reached out to their peer mentors with questions about university rather than casually expressing their experiences or feelings. For example, Ora Lee stated:

> I mean I was like [pause] I was —what was it? I wasn't really—like it was nice, but I don't think I was really talking about my experience. The thing was that I was just asking for things that I would get emails about that I didn't understand. But I don't think I —'cause it to me texting on messages about experiences like that's like a lot —like it's more comfortable to do it over text —I mean over in-person than to do it on text.

Also, the first-year FGS mentees tended to report feeling more comfortable sharing their feelings and experiences with friends rather than their peer mentors. For example, Maggie stated she needed to have a close relationship with a person before she can comfortably share her feelings:

> I mean I don't love to share my feelings, which is like anyone. So that's also like a me thing [points to self]. But I think just especially like not meeting her at all. And only really —I think we had maybe two Zoom meetings but they were like kind of later in the semester in Fall. So, it was really just texting. And so, I don't think for me that's not a comfort level. Unless I know you, I don't really share my emotions over text. Like yeah if you're my best friend, of course I will. I'll tell you exactly how I am feeling. But if —you know, if you are someone that I haven't even seen I am not gonna really say like, "Oh I am quite nervous, I don't know what to do or like whatever." So, I think that's kind of my comfort level. In that way, it was —we weren't able to —she wasn't able to provide the emotional support because I wasn't able to feel as comfortable to share. Yeah [nods].

Similarly, Rebecca reported casually meeting up with friends and sharing her experiences with them more than with her peer mentor.

> Iris: Mhmmm. So overall who would you turn to for help for university the most?
>
> Rebecca: Probably my friends.
>
> Iris: Mhmmm. And how often do you actually reach out to your friends for support?
>
> Rebecca: Maybe like once a month at the most not too much. I mean we'll — we'll like meet up and study together a lot, but not like actually reaching out for help that often.
>
> Iris: Mhmmm. And I guess during your first year what was the communication method between you and your friends?
>
> Rebecca: The communication method? Mostly just like text and meeting up in-person. So, text and like talking in-person.
>
> Iris: And when you like ask for help, were meetings casual or were there — or were they more formal like like directly asking — like planning to ask questions?
>
> Rebecca: No, no definitely casual, not anything formal.
>
> Iris: Mhmmm. [pause] And how comfortable were you sharing your experiences in university with your friends?

Rebecca: Oh, super. I mean I think that because I'm kind of behind all of them in getting a degree I'm — I don't — like I'm not fearful at all to be like "What am I doing?"— to express to them that I don't know what's going on.

Overall, the first-year FGS mentees felt that they did not know their peer mentors well enough to establish a close relationship. In fact, Serena felt that her relationship with her peer mentor was like receiving online customer service. She felt that her peer mentor was a stranger:

> I would've preferred it more than —sorry I would've preferred in-person support more than virtual support 'cause it would've felt like I was talking to someone, rather than like I can be talking to anyone online, you know. Like it's kinda like customer service support online, you know.

6.4. Summary

The first-year FGS mentees in this study had high and optimistic expectations for a peer mentor. They were seeking academic and social support. For example, they expected their peer mentors to be a knowledgeable and experienced guide. Also, they expected their peer mentors to help them meet and connect with people at the university. Aside from academic and social support, they expected their peer mentors to be actively involved in the peer mentoring relationship. However, these first-year FGS mentees reported receiving basic academic support through hearing their peer mentors' past experiences, getting website links from their peer mentors and/or being referred to an academic advisor from a peer mentor. They felt that they needed more social and emotional support from their peer mentors. In other words, they found a gap between their expectations for and lived experiences of peer mentoring. They reported a few factors that contributed to this gap: (1) understanding the nature of the peer mentoring relationship, (2) seeking common ground and (3) seeking a close relationship. Their experience of support from a peer mentor is shown below in Figure 1.

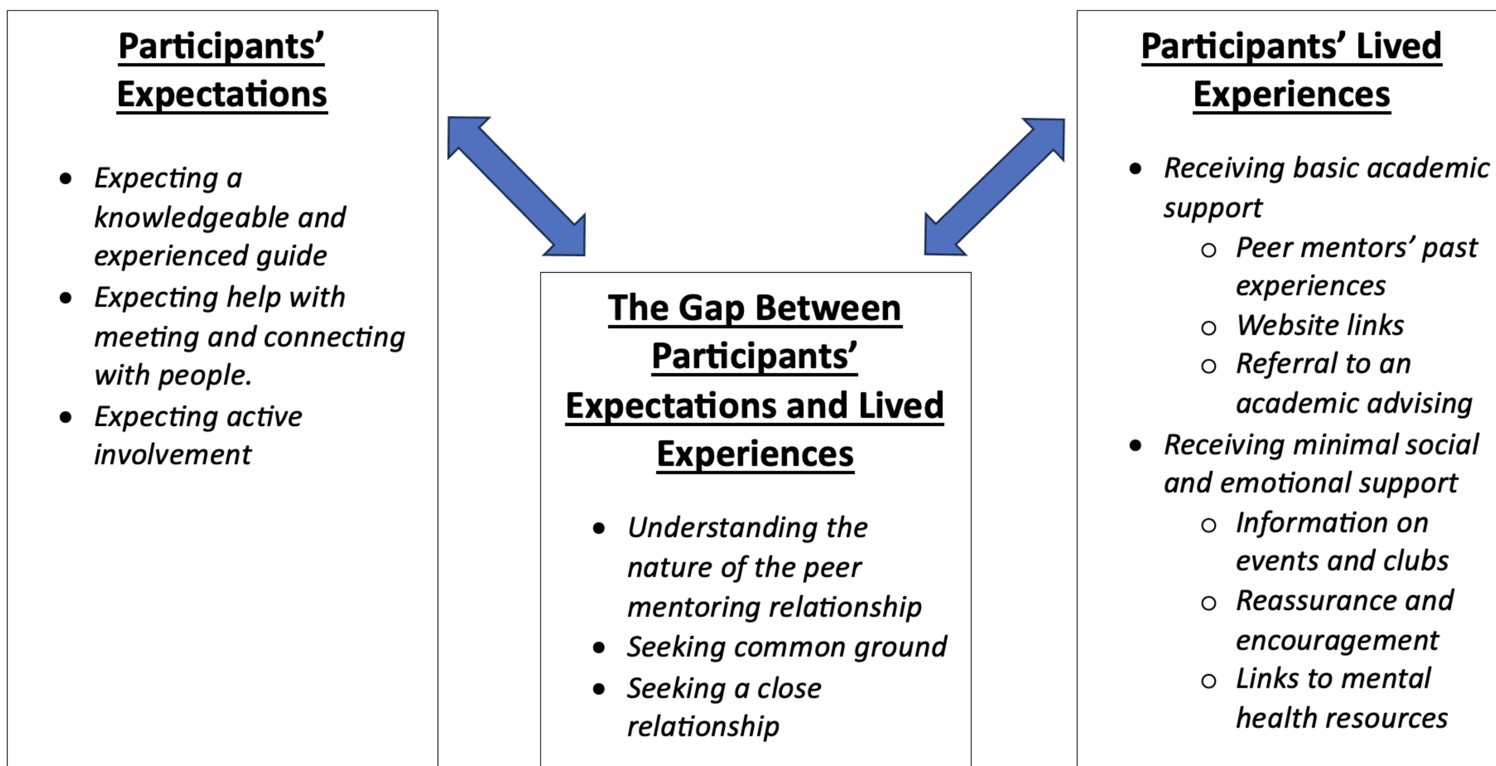

Figure 1. **First Year FGS' Experiences of Support from a Peer Mentor**

Chapter 7.

Discussion

7.1. Relationship Between Theory and Research Question

The aim of this study was to utilize a social capital lens to understand if and how peer mentoring can provide support to FGS during their first year at a Canadian university. Through individual interviews with five first-year FGS, I found that they had a discrepancy between their expectations for and lived experiences of peer mentoring.

At the beginning, they expected their peer mentors to provide academic and social support. They tended to report a desire for their peer mentors to be an experienced and knowledgeable guide for university. For example, they were looking for tips on typical issues that one could run into during their studies. Moreover, they were hoping to receive assistance in finding and making friends in university. Also, they expected their peer mentors to be actively involved in the relationship.

However, these first-year FGS mentees felt that they mainly received basic academic support from their peer mentors but needed more social and emotional support from their peer mentors. On one hand, they received academic support in three main ways: (1) listening to peer mentors' past experiences, (2) receiving website links from peer mentors and (3) being referred to an academic advisor. On the other hand, after reflecting on their peer mentoring experiences, they tended to express that they wanted more help from their peer mentors with finding and making friends in university and they wanted to develop a close relationship with their peer mentors. Furthermore, they reported that a close relationship would have enabled them to feel more comfortable to share their feelings and experiences. In fact, the first-year FGS mentees stated that they would have been more open to share their mixed feelings with their peer mentors if they had found more common ground with them.

7.2. Relationship to The Current Literature

In this section I will be explaining how the findings from this study relate to the existing literature. To recap, there is a need for research on how Canadian FGS are faring in university. Universities across Canada have invested in programs to assist FGS, but there is a gap in understanding how FGS in Canada perceive and experience support from such programs. Therefore, this study investigates five first-year FGS' experiences of peer mentoring at a Canadian university. I borrowed Crisp and Cruz's (2009) conceptual framework for mentoring undergraduate students. Since the participants were first-year FGS mentees, they were less likely to seek career support. Consequently, I focused on investigating academic support, social support, and emotional support.

Crisp and Cruz's academic knowledge support focuses on mentors providing content-specific support to mentees. However, for this study the peer mentoring programs did not train peer mentors to be tutors. Rather they were trained to provide general support like directing mentees to websites for general academic information and referring mentees to the student learning centre and/or to an academic advisor. In this study I investigated how first-year FGS experienced academic support from a peer mentor.

In terms of social support, Crisp and Cruz's conceptual framework lacks such a component. Birani and Lehmann (2013) indicated that being involved in university tended to help working-class Asian Canadian FGS to succeed in university. Similarly, Ishitani (2016) found that social integration was related to academic persistence for the first three years of post-secondary education for FGS. Therefore, I decided to also investigate how first-year FGS experience social support from a peer mentor.

Based on Crisp and Cruz's conceptual framework, emotional support involves "…[mentors performing active empathetic] listening, providing moral support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement, and establishing a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and linking between [them] and [their mentees]" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.538-539). As a result, I chose to examine how first-year FGS experience emotional support from a peer mentor.

Overall, I aimed to contribute to the current Canadian literature by investigating how first-year FGS at a Canadian university experience support from their peer mentors. Prior to this investigation, I applied a pre-existing theoretical framework, which was social capital theory. Specifically, I used Hauberer and Lin's social capital theories to help me create my research and interview questions. This investigation produced findings that illustrated first-year FGS' process of obtaining support from their peer mentors.

7.2.1. Social Capital Theory

This study utilized a social capital lens to understand how first-year FGS experience support from their peer mentors. A central aspect in this approach is the preconditions of social capital, which affect the investment in, development of or maintenance of social capital (Lin, 2019). Häuberer's (2011) social capital theory included the following preconditions: generalized trust, norms of reciprocity, collective assets (economy, technology, historical background) and individual characteristics. Similarly, the findings reported in Chapter 6 highlighted individual characteristics as preconditions for first-year FGS in obtaining social capital from their peer mentors. This study found that first-year FGS mentees possessed FGS mixed feelings, which they were reluctant to share with their peer mentors. They reported that they did not know their peer mentors well enough to develop a close relationship. In other words, they did not develop sufficient trust with their peer mentors to discuss their feelings and struggles. As a result, they missed opportunities to build bonding social capital from their peer mentors.

Like Moschetti et al. (2018) this study also showed that peer mentoring could be a form of social capital for first-year FGS. Moschetti et al. (2018) found that "mentors were perceived as providing helpful information about the campus and major, academic support, encouragement, and emotional support" (p.386). These aspects were resources that mentees gained from interacting with their peer mentors. As a result, peer mentoring was a form of social capital. However, Moschetti et al. (2018) did not focus on bridging and bonding social capital, which assists with understanding different forms and ways to obtain social capital.

Sánchez et al. (2022) showed that graduate student and faculty mentors could provide bridging and bonding social capital to Latinx adolescents in science education. When mentors engage in bridging behaviours, they could "[connect] students to resources (e.g., books, journal articles), people, and/or opportunities for development that students may not have been able to access without the intervention of the mentor" (Sánchez et al., 2022, p.13). As for bonding behaviours, mentors could provide FGS emotional support and encouragement, share their personal experiences with and spend time with FGS (Sánchez et al., 2022).

Like the participants in Sánchez et al. (2022), first-year FGS mentees in this study encountered bridging and/or bonding social capital through peer mentors. Lin (2019) and Häuberer (2011) explain bridging social capital as resources that individuals can obtain from people outside of their original network; whereas bonding social capital are resources that people receive from their existing network. In the former the individuals work with an open structure, which allows the opportunity to obtain new resources. Moreover, they form weak ties that act like a bridge to help them connect with diverse people who have resources that they lack. For the latter they interact with a closed structure that assists with the maintenance and preservation of resources. Furthermore, they develop strong ties with people who possess similar characteristics, interests, and resources, which in turn enable reciprocity and trust.

There were two examples of bridging social capital in this study. First, all first-year FGS mentees at one point received information via links from their peer mentors. Peer mentors were bridges between first-year FGS mentees and the resources that they lacked. Second, first-year FGS mentees tended to receive a referral to an academic advisor. Overall, participants found that some questions and concerns were resolved through bridging social capital. For instance, receiving links to obtain answers to general inquiries or being referred an advisor for assistance with degree-specific inquiries. However, participants felt that bridging social capital was not enough. They also discussed their desire for more hands-on and personal assistance from their peer mentors since they were new to the higher education environment. This relates back to the literature emphasizing the need for both bonding and bridging social capital, because they offer different uses to individuals. Bridging social capital could not assist first-year FGS mentees to form a strong relationship with or to learn directly from their peer mentors.

In terms of bonding social capital, there were only two instances found in this study. Both Maggie and Elle had the opportunity to listen to and learn from their peer mentor's past personal experiences. However, these personal experiences were not always relatable to the participants.

These first-year FGS mentees reported that they did not learn about their peer mentors' backgrounds. They tended to not know about the culture, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, interests, hobbies, or first-generation student status of their peer mentor. Therefore, it was difficult for first-year FGS mentees to build common ground and preserve certain backgrounds, interests, and characteristics. This in turn led them to avoid sharing their own personal experiences with their peer mentors. In other words, there was a lack of reciprocity and trust in their peer mentoring relationships. The lack of communication on feelings also hindered the opportunity for emotional support. Finally, all participants were never able to spend quality and casual face to face one-on-one time with their peer mentors.

When participants were able to obtain social capital, they in turn achieved returns, such as learning about things that they did not know previously and feeling more comfortable with the school. These returns involve instrumental actions, in which participants gain new resources from people who possess resources that they lack.

However, there were also missed opportunities of social capital. This relates back to Hauberer's (2011) view that when seeking social capital, individuals do not always achieve positive outcomes. In this study, participants missed the following opportunities: (1) sharing and maintaining background or interests in the peer mentoring relationship and (2) connecting with diverse others outside of the peer mentoring relationship. The former involved expressive action, in which individuals share and maintain resources that one already possesses. It occurs when individuals connect with people who possess similar interests and resources to their own. The latter involved instrumental action.

7.2.2. Forms of Support

Similar to Grabsch et al. (2021) and Moschetti et al. (2018), this study found first-year FGS mentees could receive academic, social, and emotional support from their

peer mentors. With regards to academic support, Grabsch et al. (2021) found that FGS were interested in receiving help with academic skills, academic goals, degree planning and progress and overcoming barriers to academic success from their peer mentor. In this study participants asked for similar assistance from their peer mentors. For example, choosing a degree, understanding programs, selecting courses, writing, studying, dropping courses, understanding degree requirements, and declaring part-time studies. Like Moschetti et al. (2018), this study found that some first-year FGS gained a better understanding of their major from their peer mentors.

For social support, Moschetti et al. (2018) found that FGS mentees were informed about events and were introduced to other people on campus (faculty and staff), by their peer mentors. Likewise, this study found that first-year FGS mentees were informed about events, which included faculty/program events and/or school wide events. In fact, Elle's peer mentor kept her up to date about her faculty's get-togethers and Serena's peer mentor assisted her with familiarizing with Clubs Day. However, participants in this study were not introduced to others on campus by their peer mentors. They tended to report a lack of tips on making friends and building relationships with faculty or staff.

Moschetti et al. (2018) found that FGS mentees could turn to their peer mentors for emotional support, and they felt that their peer mentors cared about them. In this study, some participants received reassuring or encouraging words, recommendations on maintaining well-being and links to mental health resources. Also, Grabsch et al. (2021) found that FGS mentees desired a personal relationship with their peer mentors, in which they could discuss their stressors and goals. Some participants in this study expressed this desire prior to entering the peer mentoring relationship, while others realized this desire upon reflecting on the peer mentoring relationship.

Overall, all participants in this study reported a need for more social and emotional support from their peer mentors. Unlike Grabsch et al. (2021) and Moschetti et al. (2018), this study uncovered possible reasons for insufficient social and emotional support. For example, being uncertain of the nature of the peer mentoring relationship, having difficulty seeking common ground and experiencing challenges in seeking a close relationship.

Interestingly, role modelling was not addressed in Grabsch et al. (2021) or Moschetti et al. (2018). However, in this study first-year FGS mentees tended to listen to and learn from the past personal experiences of their peer mentors. In other words, participants saw their peer mentors as role models when their peer mentors shared experiences that they could potentially encounter in the future.

7.3. COVID-19 Context

Although the COVID-19 context did not emerge as a major theme in this study, participants did discuss some influence it had on their experience of receiving support from a peer mentor. For instance, Maggie, Ora Lee, and Serena had issues connecting with their peer mentors primarily over text messaging. Maggie and Ora Lee stated they were uncomfortable sharing their feelings with strangers over text. Also, Serena explained that speaking with her peer mentor over text was like online customer service support. In other words, she felt like she was talking to a machine. Most of the first-year FGS mentees wished they had one-on-one casual in-person meetings with their peer mentors. In fact, Maggie and Ora Lee would have liked to have casual conversations and/or study dates with their peer mentors at a coffee shop. Unfortunately, these kinds of face-to-face interactions were not possible during the pandemic.

7.4. Limitations

This study was subject to several limitations. The first group of limitations involved sampling. To clarify, during recruitment I had the difficulty of findings FGS who participated in a peer mentoring during their first year of university. One reason was that the Canadian university from which I recruited participants did not have a method to identify FGS. Also, I only utilized emailing to recruit participants. In hindsight it would have been a better idea to have used multiple mediums like social media.

In the end this study had a small sample size of five participants. All participants were female and studied Psychology or Education. Majority of the participants were White domestic students. Finally, they all studied from the same university. Therefore, this sample was lacking in size and diversity.

The second group of limitations were related to methodology. This study did not perform triangulation, I only conducted interviews with first-year FGS mentees. I lacked the perspectives of peer mentors and peer mentoring program managers. Moreover, I did not execute theoretical sampling, such as interviewing other participants based on previous participants' data. Furthermore, I did not conduct follow-up interviews with participants due to time constraints. Finally, I did not administer timely pre- and post-interviews with my participants. In other words, I did not investigate my participants' experiences of peer mentoring as they occurred. Rather I interviewed them after a year of completing their peer mentoring programs. As a result, some information could have been lost from the significant gap in time.

7.5. Future Research

Future research should focus on examining a larger and more diverse sample of first-year FGS mentees. For instance, both Arts and STEM students should be recruited. Moreover, there should be more diversity in ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, immigration status and student status (domestic, international, traditional, non-traditional and transfer). This could be achieved by recruiting participants from multiple Canadian universities. Consequently, researchers could tackle the issue of intersectionality for first-year FGS mentees as they seek support from their peer mentors.

Researchers could also investigate the peer mentors' perspectives. They could ask peer mentors about their experience of providing support to a first-year FGS mentee. This would provide another perspective on the forms of social capital available to first-year FGS mentees. Additionally, researchers should conduct timely pre- and post-interviews to assess if and how support was given by peer mentors or received by first-year FGS mentees. This will allow peer mentors and mentees to express their experiences without forgetting or misremembering information.

Since this study involved five first-year FGS mentees' experiences of peer mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to also investigate FGS' experiences post-pandemic. It would be interesting to see if the themes from this study would differ in the post-pandemic setting. For instance, it could be that first-year FGS mentees were more reliant on connecting with a peer mentor on a deeper level, because

of the inconvenience of meeting people during the pandemic. As a result, the sub-theme, seeking a close relationship might not be as significant post-pandemic.

Finally, this study only investigated FGS' experiences of peer mentoring. It would be interesting for future research to compare FGS' and continuing-generation students' perceptions and experiences of obtaining support from peer mentoring to determine the extent to which the experiences of FGS are unique among first-year university students.

7.6. Implications

There are a few implications that this study provides to peer mentoring programs in terms of better serving first-year FGS. First, peer mentoring programs should implement a broad and working definition of FGS. This will assist with identifying these students in the program. Also, the FGS identity should be outlined to both peer mentors and mentees. This way peer mentors can receive training to develop an understanding of FGS' mixed feelings, dual identity, and struggles. Also, first-year FGS mentees could learn to feel comfortable with sharing and expressing their FGS identity and using the FGS term in the university setting. Moreover, this study found that the first-year FGS mentees tended to struggle with building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. If peer mentors are informed of these beforehand, they will be more active in providing support in these areas.

It could be beneficial to develop peer mentoring programs for FGS specifically. From this study, it was evident that FGS have unique feelings and struggles when entering university. Also, participants tended to raise the need for connecting with a FGS peer mentor or building a FGS community. A university peer mentoring program that focuses on FGS might make it easier for FGS to achieve these needs.

This study found a gap between the first-year FGS mentees' expectations and lived experiences of peer mentoring. They reported struggling with understanding the nature of the peer mentoring relationship, finding common ground with their peer mentors, and developing a close relationship with their peer mentors. As a result, it could be worth it for peer mentoring programs to spend some time on educating first-year FGS mentees on what they can expect in the peer mentoring program. By doing so, these

FGS mentees could be more knowledgeable about what they could request from peer mentors and how to build a strong relationship with their peer mentors.

An interesting finding from this study was the first-year FGS mentees wanted more role modelling from their peer mentors. They wanted to hear more about their peer mentors past personal experiences. Also, they wanted their peer mentors to be more hands-on with their issues by providing step-by-step advice on how to perform a task. Only two participants, Maggie, and Elle, was able to receive both examples of role modelling from her peer mentor. Overall, the participants felt that more frequent and consistent role modelling would have been beneficial in their first year of university.

7.7. Conclusion

Although Canada has made some efforts in assisting first-year FGS in their higher education journey, there is a need for more research on FGS' perceptions and lived experiences. This study took preliminary steps in seeking FGS' voices and perceptions of undergraduate peer mentoring programs at a Canadian university. This study uncovered a previously unknown and complicated process that first-year FGS undergo when experiencing support from a peer mentor. It described how first-year FGS could obtain and miss different forms of social capital from their peer mentors.

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Appendix A.

Letter for Peer Mentorship Mentees

Dear past participant of the (Name of Peer Mentorship Program),

My name is Iris Yu, and I am an Educational Psychology Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU). In 2013, I began my undergraduate degree at SFU as a first-generation university student, meaning that my parents did not complete a four-year university degree. I became aware of some of the limitations this meant for me and since then I have been very interested in ways to support first-generation students in their transition to university. Now, as a graduate student, I am conducting a research project for my thesis titled "Understanding First-Year First-Generation Students' Experiences of Peer Mentoring at A Canadian University During The COVID-19 Pandemic", supervised by Dr. Lucy Le Mare.

First-generation students (FGS) are **students whose parents or guardians do not have a four-year university degree**. In other words, if one parent or guardian has a four-year university degree, then the student is not a FGS.

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how first-year first-generation students (FGS) experience academic, social, and emotional support from their peer mentors. Currently, there is little research on peer mentoring for FGS at Canadian universities. This study may help inform university peer mentoring programs on how to provide support for FGS.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in this study. To participate, **you must be a first-generation student who was in the Fall 2021 intake of the (Name of Peer Mentorship Program) during your first year at xxx.** This study involves completing a demographic questionnaire and an interview, which will be video-recorded and conducted on Zoom. The questionnaire will collect some background information on you and your family. The interview will involve questions on your experiences of receiving peer mentoring during your first year. We will schedule a time for the interview that is most convenient for your schedule. In appreciation of your time commitment, you will receive a $20 Starbucks eGift card.

Participation in this study is voluntary, it is your choice if you would like to participate or not. All data collected for this study will be coded and your identifying information will not be reported. If you change your mind about participating, you may withdraw from the study without any consequences.

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me at xxxx@xxx.ca or my supervisor at xxxx_xxxxxx@sfu.ca. You can also reach out to us if you have any questions about participating. Thank you for considering this request.

Kind regards,

Iris

Appendix B.

Consent Form

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study called "Understanding First-Year First-Generation Students' Experiences of Peer Mentoring at A Canadian University During The COVID-19 Pandemic." This study is being conducted by SFU Master's student, Iris Yu and her supervisor, Dr. Lucy Le Mare in collaboration with the (Names of the Peer Mentorship Programs) at xxx.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how first-year first-generation students experience peer mentoring. First-generation students (FGS) are students whose parents or guardians do not have a four-year university degree. In other words, if one parent or guardian has a four-year university degree, then the student is not a FGS. Although peer-mentoring programs aim to provide academic, social, and emotional support to FGS, there is a lack of research on how well this is accomplished, particularly in the Canadian context. This study may help to inform university peer mentoring programs on ways to better support FGS who attend a Canadian university.

Study Requirements

Participation in this study will involve completing a demographic questionnaire (15 minutes) and taking part in a video-recorded interview conducted on Zoom (60 minutes) in English. In this interview, you will be asked about your experiences of peer mentoring in your first year of university. I am particularly interested in three types of support that you might have received from your peer mentor: academic support, social support and emotional support. This interview is intended to be conversational in nature, and you may share as much as you are comfortable with. The interview will be transcribed and sent to you to give you an opportunity to review the interview and make any changes you wish.

Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, meaning it is your choice if you would like to participate. Participation in this study is not a requirement of the (Names of the Peer Mentorship Programs), and participation or non-participation will not be reported to anyone or have any impact on the services you receive. You may withdraw from the study before, during, or after participation without any consequences. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all data collected about you will be destroyed. The deadline to withdraw will be after reviewing your interview transcript.

You can withdraw by emailing either Iris at xxx@xxx.ca or her supervisor at xxxx_xxxxxx@xxx.ca.

Confidentiality

All demographic questionnaires and interview recordings will be confidential, and password protected, meaning no one will be able to view them outside of the research team. The data collected will be coded, meaning your identifying information (such as your name, the city you live in, and your country of origin) will not be reported. You will choose a pseudonym to be used in reports to ensure your privacy. A list which links your name to your chosen pseudonym will be kept until the Master's thesis is completed and defended and will then be destroyed. All data including interview recordings will be destroyed after the successful completion and defence of the Master's thesis and the results of the study are published.

The interview is hosted by Zoom, a US company. Any data you provide may be transmitted and stored in countries outside of Canada, as well as in Canada. It is important to remember that privacy laws vary in different countries and may not be the same as in Canada.

Use of Data

The information you provide will be used to better understand how peer mentoring can provide support to first-year FGS. The interviews will be analyzed for common themes. As mentioned, names and other identifying information will be omitted to protect your privacy, but direct quotations of yours may be included in the write-up of

the findings. The findings of this study will be published in a Master's thesis. There may be subsequent publications of these same findings in an article or presentation.

The results of this study will also be shared and co-owned with the (Names of the Peer Mentorship Programs). The (Names of the Peer Mentorship Programs) may post the findings on their platforms.

The research team will retain your email address to send you the research findings and for future contact. Upon completion of the project, all participants will receive a one-page summary of the research findings via email. If you agree to be contacted for potential follow-up interview(s), the research team will use your email to contact you. Your email address will be kept in our records until the successful completion and defence of the Master's thesis and you have received the research findings.

Honorariums

Upon completion of the interview, you will be sent a $20 Starbucks eGift card via email as a thank you for your time and contribution to the research. To receive the Starbucks eGift card, you will need to provide your name and your email address. This information will be inputted into the Starbucks website.

Potential Risks

The potential risks of participating in this study are minimal. Although the interview questions are not anticipated to bring up uncomfortable emotions, discussing experiences of receiving peer mentoring as first-year FGS could bring up stressful memories for some participants. If you become emotionally distressed during an interview, you will be given the option to pause the interview (for a few minutes or the interview could be rescheduled for later), and you will be reminded of the option to withdraw from the study.

Potential Benefits

The potential benefits of participating in this study include sharing your thoughts about receiving peer mentoring as a first-year FGS, gaining insight on how peer mentoring did or did not assist you and contributing to research that may help to improve peer mentoring support for first-year FGS in the future.

Contact Information

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. You can contact Iris at xxx@xxx.ca or Dr. Lucy LeMare at xxxx_xxxxxx@xxx.ca. about any questions or concerns you may have.

Complaints

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the SFU Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca or 778-782-6618.

Future Contact

Do you agree to be contacted for follow-up interview(s), if necessary?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Consent

If you would like to participate in this research, please sign below. Your signature confirms:

You have been given sufficient time to read and understand the information about participating in this study.

You have been given sufficient time and opportunity to ask questions about this study, and you are satisfied with the answers to your questions.

You agree to have your interview recorded over Zoom.

If you are not comfortable being video recorded, you can turn off your camera.

Your interview will be audio recorded and your microphone will not be muted.

You agree to the researcher using “anonymous” direct quotations in the write-up of the study.

You understand that you can review the transcript of your interview and make changes or deletions as you see appropriate.

You understand you can withdraw from the study up until you have reviewed your interview transcript without having to provide a reason and without any consequences.

______________________________ ______________________________

Participant Name **Date**

____

Participant Signature

If you are unable to provide written consent, there is also an option to provide verbal consent. Please check the box below if you would rather provide verbal consent over Zoom. Your consent will be recorded on Zoom instead. In this instance, we will also complete the demographic questionnaire verbally over Zoom.

☐ **I prefer to provide verbal consent on Zoom**

Appendix C.

Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for volunteering to fill-out this questionnaire. The following questionnaire will collect background information on you and your family. There is a total of 18 questions and the questionnaire will take around 15 minutes. Please answer each question as accurately as possible. Mark a ☒ to indicate your answers.

With which gender do you most identify?

☐ Man

☐ Woman

☐ Non-binary

☐ Prefer to self-describe:

____

____

☐ Prefer not to answer

What is your age?

☐ 17 or younger

☐ 18 – 20

☐ 21 – 25

☐ 26 – 30

☐ 31– 35

☐ 36 and older

What is your racial or ethnic identity?

☐ Black

☐ First Nations/Native American

☐ Middle Eastern

☐ Pacific Islander

☐ East Asian

☐ West Asian

☐ South Asian

☐ Southeast Asian

☐ White

☐ Multiracial or Multiethnic

☐ Other (please specify):

____

What is your country of birth?

____

What is your parents' country of birth?

Parent 1:

____

Parent 2:

____

What is your first language?

____

What is your immigration status?

☐ Non-immigrant/born in Canada

☐ Landed immigrant/permanent resident

☐ Non-permanent resident

Other (please specify):

____

____

Are you a domestic or international student?

☐ Domestic

☐ International

What is the highest education attained by your parents/guardians?

Parent 1/Guardian 1:

☐ No formal schooling

☐ Elementary school

☐ Some middle school

☐ Middle school completion

☐ Some high school

☐ High school graduate

☐ Some college/university

Other (please specify):

___

___

___

Parent 2/Guardian 2:

☐ No formal schooling

☐ Elementary school

☐ Some middle school

☐ Middle school completion

☐ Some high school

☐ High school graduate

☐ Some college/university

Other (please specify):

____

____

____

Do you have siblings who have attended university before you?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Which of the following socio-economic status designation would best fit your family?

☐ Very Low Income

☐ Low Income

☐ Lower Middle

☐ Middle Income

☐ Upper Middle

☐ Upper

How are you paying for university? Check all that apply.

☐ Athletic scholarship

☐ Academic scholarship

☐ Other scholarship

☐ Work study

☐ Job

☐ Parents/family paid

☐ Grants

☐ Student Loans

☐ Other (please specify):

Are you employed while attending university?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you selected "Yes" above, how many hours on average do you work per week?

☐ 1 – 8

☐ 9 – 15

☐ 16 – 20

☐ 21 – 30

☐ 31 – 40

☐ 41+

If you selected “Yes” above, do you work on campus (including work study)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Both on campus and another job off campus

Are you a part-time or full-time student?

☐ Part-time student (enrolled in < 9 credits)

☐ Full-time student (enrolled in > 9 credits)

What SFU program were you admitted to? (Please specify):

____

When do you expect to graduate?

☐ in 3 years

☐ in 4 years

☐ in 5 years +

Thank you for your time ☺ Please remember to contact Iris at xxxx@xxx.ca to submit your completed questionnaire and to arrange an appointment for your Zoom interview. Please state a time and date that is most convenient for you.

Appendix D.

Interview Guide

Greeting:

Hi. Good (morning, afternoon, or evening). Thank you for taking your time to meet with me today. It's nice to meet you. How are you?

I first would like to introduce myself again. My name is Iris and I'm an Educational Psychology Master's student at Simon Fraser University. For my thesis, I am interested in understanding how first-year first-generation students experience peer mentoring. As a result, I am conducting this interview to gain more insight into the kinds of support you did or did not receive in your peer mentoring program.

Interview:

In today's interview, I will be focusing on four areas. This interview is intended to be conversational in nature, meaning I will follow your lead if there are questions on my list that you have particular interest in. Once again, you may share as much or as little as you are comfortable with, and you can pass on any questions that you do not want to answer. You are the expert here, and if there is any additional information that you think may be helpful to share, please let me know.

Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in the interview before we get started?

Are you ready for me to begin recording?

Topic	Questions
First-year FGS background and assumptions on peer mentoring	• To start, how do you feel about your first year of university? • In your first year, what did it mean to you to be a first-generation student? • What was your experience of being a first-generation student? • How did you come to be involved in the peer mentorship program? • Why did you want a peer mentor? • What were you expecting from your peer mentor? • What influenced your expectations for your peer mentor?
Peer mentoring and university experience	• In what ways, if any has your relationship with your peer mentor influenced your university experience?

Support from peer mentor	• In what ways, if any did you receive support from your peer mentor?
	• Tell me a time when your peer mentor provided you guidance in your academics.
	  ○ Individual guidance
	  ○ Referral for guidance
	  ○ Helpfulness of guidance
	• Tell me about a time when your peer mentor provided you with social support/guidance.
	  ○ Individual guidance
	  ○ Referral for guidance
	  ○ Helpfulness of guidance
	• Tell me about a time when your peer mentor provided you with emotional support/guidance.
	  ○ Individual guidance
	  ○ Referral for guidance
	  ○ Helpfulness of guidance

Mentor-mentee relationship	• Do you feel that the peer mentor who was assigned to you, was a good fit for you?
Closing	• To close, are there any other things you would like to share with me? • What pseudonym would you like to use?

Closing:

Thank you so much for participating. Over the next few weeks, I will be transcribing this interview into written form. I will then send you the written document to give you a chance to review the interview and make any edits or changes to the interview you wish. This will be to ensure you are comfortable with all of the information you have shared today. After that, you will be done participating in the interview portion of this research project.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we log off today?

Thank you again for sharing your story. It was nice to meet you. Take care.

Appendix E.

Member Checking Email

Dear [insert participant name],

Thank you for your participation in my research project “Understanding First-Year First-Generation Students’ Experiences of Peer Mentoring at A Canadian University During The COVID-19 Pandemic”.

As promised, your interview has been transcribed into written form and is attached to this email. Please review your interview and respond to this email with any edits you would like me to make. This can involve elaborating, deleting, or changing your responses. If you do not want to make any changes to your interview, please respond to this email letting me know you are comfortable with the transcription as it is. If you do not want your interview transcript to be included in this study and you would like to withdraw, please let me know. Interviews not withdrawn at this time will be included in the final write-up of the thesis.

Thank you again for your time and efforts.

Kind regards,

Iris

Appendix F.

Summary of Research Email

Dear [insert participant name],

I hope you are doing well. Thank you again for your participation in my research project, “Understanding First-Year First-Generation Students’ Experiences of Peer Mentoring at A Canadian University During The COVID-19 Pandemic”.

This project is now complete. If you are interested to know the results of the study, please find attached a one-page summary of the findings. You can also find the full report online by [insert instructions or link to the full report].

Kind regards,

Iris