Do They Think Alike?
Immigrant First-Generation Students' Decisions and Parents' Preferences for College Major and Career

INTRODUCTION

✓ Immigrant first-generation college students are individuals whose parents do not have a college degree and family recently migrated to the United States.1
✓ These students face challenges in college due to limited English, math, and study skills.2
✓ Students’ decisions about school are collective endeavors influenced by their parents.3
✓ Students experience stress and pressure from familial obligations to succeed academically and contribute financially.4
✓ Little information is known about immigrant first-generation college students and the role their parents play in their major, career aspirations, and their perception of family support.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) Are immigrant first-generation college students’ goals and ideas about major and career choice similar to their parents’?
2) How do students and parents perceive family support in regard to students’ major and career decision-making?

METHODS

✓ Secondary data collected from May 2012 - November 2012 as part of a master’s thesis research project.
✓ 30-60 minute semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim.
✓ Used thematic analysis5 to analyze interview data to identify themes.
✓ Sample: 3 student-parent dyads

RESULTS

Four Primary Themes Found

Students’ desire to work with people in their chosen career
Parents’ desire for career choices that provided status and financial security
Parents’ desire for their children to maintain cultural roots
Students’ and parents’ understanding of family support

Students’ desire to work with people in their chosen career

✓ All three students wanted to pursue a major that allowed them to express their passion for working with people.

✓ Pa entered college as a pre-nursing major, but found the coursework was difficult. She eventually found a major that better fit her interest: child psychology.

Parents’ desire for career choices that provided status and financial security

✓ Parents felt that a college degree provided status; people are seen as worthy and prestigious.
✓ With finances that were scarce, parents wanted their children to attain high-paying jobs and long-term financial stability.

✓ Parents recognized the importance of keeping their root culture, heritage, and language alive.
✓ Mai’s mother explained that her daughter must maintain their mother tongue. She also expressed her concern that her children’s generation is less capable of doing basic traditional skills such as cooking or chopping meat.

Parents’ desire for their children to maintain cultural roots

✓ Family support for students’ success came in two forms: tangible giving money, providing food, or preparing lunch.
✓ Intangible giving advice, encouragement, or motivation.

Students’ and parents’ understanding of family support

✓ Jia’s mother prepared meals for her daughter day every day to show her support.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Discussion:
✓ Students’ and parents’ goals and ideas about major and career choices do not align. This is not a tug-of-war situation, but more of a give-and-take negotiation.

✓ Students respect their parents’ desire when selecting a major and career.

✓ Parents have their own expectations for their children. Ultimately, happiness, financial stability, and preservation of cultural roots are more important.

✓ Families vary in the types of support they provide for their students depending on the situation.

Implications:
✓ This study provides 3 cases illustrating the highly varied and complex experiences of both immigrant first-generation college students and their parents.

✓ Higher education student affairs administrators should create programs that encourage parental and community engagement in their students’ college experience.

✓ High school and postsecondary institutions should offer programs that introduce families and communities to the wide range of career possibilities.

FUTURE RESEARCH

✓ Ask additional interview question: “What motivates the student to attend a 4-year university?”

✓ Incorporate longitudinal design to study students from high school to their collegiate experiences.

✓ Interview siblings to understand their impact on academic major, career choices, and family support.

REFERENCES: