

# Carrying the Family Forward: A Narrative Exploration of the College Journeys of First-Generation Graduates

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**Abstract**—This qualitative study explores how first-generation Filipino graduates reconstruct their college journey and how family influence shape these experiences. The study utilized a narrative inquiry design to understand the stories of eight first generation college graduates. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed within Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional spaces of temporality, sociality, and place. Emerging from the narrative themes are the Paradox of Education as an Inheritance (Mana), Synchronicity of Labor and Learning (Pagsasabay) as a Survival Disposition, the First - Born (Panganay) Syndrome and Investment (Puhunan) Narrative, and the Narrative of Upliftment (Pag-angat). The emerging Mana-Pagsasabay-Pag-angat framework reveals the college journey of first generation as a relational process through which inherited aspirations are enacted for the collective upliftment within the family.

**Keywords**—*first-generation college graduates, simultaneity of work-study, family influence, low-income families, first-generation as family investment, education as inheritance*

## Introduction

First-Generation college students generally refer to individuals whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). The definition varies across literature and is shaped by various interpretations of parental and familial educational attainment. Some researchers apply the term to those whose parents or guardians have never pursued postsecondary education, while others have broadened the scope to include students whose parents may have attended some college but did not complete a degree (Vue, 2021; Rosales et al., 2024). For this study, first-generation students are defined as individuals who are the first in their immediate family to enter or graduate from a university, with parents or primary caregivers, whether biological or adoptive, who are lacking any formal postsecondary education (Bharucha, 2021; University of California, 2019, as cited in Rosales et al., 2024).

First-generation students' educational journeys are shaped not only by structural challenges but by the enduring influence of family. Despite financial constraints and institutional barriers, their persistence is deeply rooted in family expectations, values, and shared aspirations. Their motivation to succeed is often anchored in a commitment to uplift their families, transforming personal achievement into a collective goal (Li, 2023). Family members, especially those who model educational striving, serve as protective anchors that reinforce resilience and determination (Rosales et al., 2024). In this way, students' strengths such as perseverance, responsibility, and adaptability are not solely individual traits but relationally formed capacities grounded in family life. Recognizing this dynamic is crucial for developing educational practices that meaningfully support first-generation students and the families who guide their journeys.

## Literature Review

Studies reveal the critical role that parental support, both emotional and aspirational, can play in shaping these students' motivation, resilience, and educational outcomes. Findings from global and local contexts draw connections between family background, institutional support, and student agency to understand what hinders and enables first-generation students to thrive and succeed.

### *Familial capital*

First generation college students begin their college journey without the same level of cultural and educational capital as their peers whose families have college backgrounds (Watts et al, 2022). This lack of parental educational experience often translates into limited ability to provide academic support for students as they navigate the complexities of college life (Cota, 2024; Rosales et al., 2024) intersecting with poverty, language barriers, and limited guidance (Brown et al., 2020; Rosales et al., 2024). They typically lack inherited knowledge and experience within their family systems related to higher education (Brown et al., 2020) which increases their vulnerability to academic failure. This deficit-thinking approach places first generation college students as the "other," labeling them as non-traditional, unprepared (Chun-Hua &

Yang, 2023), and lacking the cultural capital needed to succeed in higher education (Weisen et al., 2024).

#### *Low economic status*

First-generation students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown et al., 2020). The parents' low socio-economic status (SES) impacts not only access to resources but also long-term educational outcomes (Bharucha, 2021). Students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to experience lower retention and graduation rates and often take longer to complete their degree programs compared to their peers from more privileged backgrounds. First generation students struggle financially (Gonzales & Deng, 2023; Holliday & Anderson, 2022) or may experience some level of economic distress and take on income-generating activities to support their academic goals (O'Shea et al., 2021). They are more likely to view college as inaccessible and expensive. Financial stress due to worrying about college and regular expenses, being unable to purchase books and other requirements, and not participating in class activities detract students from academic success (Bennett et al., 2021).

#### *Burdens and Expectations*

In addition to financial constraints, the emotional and psychological burden of navigating college as low-income first-generation college students can be profound. They often report lower levels of social support from family and friends, reduced life satisfaction, and increased vulnerability to single-event traumatic stress (Brown et al., 2020). Many experience achievement guilt, pointing to a deep sense of remorse for their relative comfort and opportunity in the college while their families continue to struggle with unemployment, poverty, or unsafe living conditions. Even as they strive to succeed, many first-generation college students continue to feel out of place in academic spaces, highlighting the ongoing challenge of "fitting in" (Marvell, 2022). These students are not only navigating unfamiliar academic territory but also often carry the expectations of improving the socioeconomic situation of the family. When students are implicitly or explicitly framed as lacking due to their demographic and socio-economic background, it can negatively shape their sense of self, leading them to feel less capable or valued compared to other students (O'Shea, 2021).

#### *College Journey*

First-generation college students often experience the college-going culture as a complex and unfamiliar ecosystem shaped by their interactions with family, school, and community environments, all of which influence their aspirations and personal agency (Holliday & Anderson, 2022). Unlike students from middle- to upper-class families, first generation college students typically lack consistent exposure to the unspoken norms and expectations of college life. Their journeys often involve balancing academic

responsibilities, cultivating relationships, participating in campus life, and shaping their goals beyond college. College-going culture, which is defined as the cultivation of aspiration alongside the structured support needed for application, enrollment, and success, is often transmitted in more privileged families as part of their social and cultural capital (Rosales et al., 2024). Without this dominant capital, first generation college students must navigate the transition into higher education with limited guidance, making their adjustment more challenging and requiring targeted institutional support to bridge these cultural gaps.

Research underscores that building supportive connections within the university is essential to academic achievement and persistence (Raghavan et al., 2024). Without these connections, first generation college students may struggle not because of academic shortcomings but due to a lack of access to the social structures that help other students thrive. Narratives from first generation college students highlight the emotional and social uncertainty they experienced in college that can lead to an internalized self-doubt and questioning of their place in the academic community. This uncertainty often stemmed from concerns about financial stability and the lack of a genuine sense of belonging within the campus context (Vue, 2021).

#### *Strengths*

While the intersection of low-income status, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers complicates the educational journey of first-generation students, these challenges may allow students to draw on deep-seated values and experiences that strengthen their resilience and determination, enabling them to navigate both personal and academic challenges in their pursuit of higher education. First generation students rely on individual understanding of learned survival strategies to persist until graduation (Bellamy, 2023). They also engage in reflective practices to adapt their approaches, embrace continual learning for both academic and personal growth, and adopt a growth mindset by reframing negative perceptions as motivation for self-improvement (Foulkes, 2024). They often demonstrate strong motivation, responsibility, and perseverance that are inherent in their commitment to succeed not just for themselves, but for their families as well (Li, 2023). These students also tend to display greater curiosity and a willingness to take risks and explore new ideas, contributing to their adaptability in unfamiliar academic environments. Their resilience, work ethic, and drive make them not only capable learners but also powerful role models within their communities (Li, 2023).

The assumption that first generation students belong to a group of 'at risk' population, based on lack of parental education and low economic status, has been challenged by research that aimed for a more

strengths-based perspective, rather than a simplistic, binary perspective. Three groups of first-generation college students emerged from a study describing how first-generation students utilize resources within their communities to seek advice and guidance on their college journey. Inheritors benefit from a family member who have pursued higher education other than a parent. Opportunists, having no family members with college background, rely on non-familial connections that they have formed within their schools and communities. These connections serve as advisers in the first-generation students' field of study. The outsiders, the most vulnerable among the three groups in terms of social capital, have no connections within and outside of the family who can provide any help in the pursuit of college aspirations nor share any knowledge about college life (Patfield et al., 2022).

#### *Family Involvement*

While family involvement in the college search process may vary, all first-generation participants in the study by Holliday and Anderson (2022) reported that they themselves made the final decision regarding college choice. This autonomy should not be interpreted as a lack of parental interest, rather, it reflects the trust that families place in their children to make decisions that will benefit both the individual and the family. Parents' framing of their children as responsible adults marks a pivotal shift in the family dynamic from a collective decision-making structure to one that emphasizes emerging independence. These findings highlight the importance of engaging families in the college-going process in ways that value and integrate their nontraditional forms of knowledge and support (Holliday & Anderson, 2022).

Strengths-based research portrays the family as a vital source of support and a key contributor to the personal and academic assets of first-generation students (Ion, 2022). An exploration on family relationship experiences of first-generation college students as they transition to and persist through college showed that parents, despite lacking college experience, offered support in the form of education opportunities, financial assistance, and encouragement. These forms of support were considered by college students as essential to their success (Capannola & Johnson, 2020). Family members who serve as role models in the college process and pursuing academic goals can also serve as protective factors for college-going journey of first-generation students (Rosales et al., 2024).

#### *Research Gaps*

There remains a notable gap in recent qualitative scholarship that specifically examines the lived experiences of first-generation college students from low-income families within the Philippine context. While international literature has documented both the challenges and strengths of first-generation students, these insights cannot be readily generalized to the

Philippines, where educational trajectories are shaped by distinct cultural values, strong familial interdependence, and persistent socioeconomic constraints. In a country where poverty continues to affect a large portion of the population, addressing this gap is both significant and timely, as it illuminates how education functions not only as an individual achievement but as a collective pathway toward social mobility for families who regard schooling as a vital means of overcoming hardship and securing a better future. By offering a culturally grounded understanding of how family culture and economic realities intersect to shape aspirations, persistence, and success, this study contributes to the localization of theory and provides empirical insights that can inform more responsive policies, family-engaged support systems, and contextually relevant interventions for Filipino first-generation college students and graduates. This study contributes to filling the gap as it investigates:

- (1) The college journey of first-generation graduates from low-income Filipino families
- (2) The ways that family influence shapes their academic aspirations and college experiences?
- (3) The strategies, resources, and support systems both formal and informal that Filipino first-generation college graduates utilize to achieve academic success

#### *Methods*

##### *Research Design*

This qualitative study aims to describe and understand the lived experiences of first-generation college graduates and their families as they navigated the journey through college until graduation and beyond. The participants' individual stories on their college and post-college experiences were generated through interviews employing the narrative inquiry approach.

Narrative inquiry brings attention to the stories of first-generation college graduates and their families and will help in exploring topics that may need further research. People tell stories about their lives and the lives of other people to make sense of their experience of the world. Experiences are interpreted through narratives or stories to make these experiences meaningful (Clandinin, 2013). The person telling the story and other people in the stories are considered as characters in the person's own stories and those of others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, as cited in Wei, 2023). Drawing from John Dewey's two criteria of experience, interaction and continuity, (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, as cited in Caine et al., 2022) formulated narrative inquiry as both a phenomenon to explore and a methodological approach. Narrative itself becomes the subject of study, and it must be understood not just as a personal account, but within its broader context which includes the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space namely, time (continuity), place (situation), and the social setting (interaction), considering when the

experience occurred and when it is told (Clandinin, 2013).

### *Participants*

Primary participants are eight Filipino first-generation college graduates who are the first in the family to finish college. The participants, six females and two males, completed four-year degree programs at state universities, community college and semi-private higher education institutions in Metro Manila between June 2020 and June 2024. All participants except one are currently full-time employed. All participants are single, have not been married nor have children. The narratives of the mothers enriched the narratives of the first-generation college graduates.

### *3.2 Recruitment*

Purposeful sampling was employed through the researcher's professional networks. Community leaders assisted in identifying potential and willing participants to arrange the schedule of the interviews. It was emphasized during recruitment that participation in the study is purely voluntary. Consent forms were provided to participants who expressed interest and willingness to participate in the study.

### *Data Generation*

Data gathering for this study concentrated on semi-structured interviews conducted among the selected participants. The researcher conducted one-on-one and face to face interviews with the primary participants followed by interviews with the parents. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants.

The initial questions of the researcher were open-ended questions to allow the participants to freely share their stories about experiences in the college journey as the first in the family to enter and finish college. More structured questions on family support and family involvement followed. Probing questions on how first-generation students successfully finished college were also asked for the purpose of eliciting deeper and thicker information on the experiences of the first-generation college graduates and their parents or guardians. All questions aimed to elicit storytelling, reflections and meaning making among the participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began with in-depth immersion about the stories of the participants. I read and reread the transcriptions, field notes, and while doing these, I began to write my reflections, insights, biases, connections to the stories, and feelings as I listened to the stories of each participant. I also took note of how the stories are told to include plots, the setting, and the characters involved.

The narrative analysis drew on the college experiences of eight (8) first generation college graduates and their parents. Narrative analysis investigates the content of what is being told as well

as the structure or how the story is told. Narrative analysis was used to understand how individuals create stories from their personal experiences while recognizing the influence of historical, cultural, and social factors on the storytelling. The stories shared by the primary participants will be analyzed as intertwined with the stories of the secondary participants to create meaningful illustrations of the experiences. From the narrative themes, resonant threads were discussed.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study strictly adheres to the principles and values of truth stated in the Miriam College Research Ethics Policy. The study upholds respect for the dignity of all individuals, acknowledging and honoring diversity among people and communities. Informed consents were sought from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of students and their parents. All data from recorded interviews and transcripts of interviews are kept confidential and stored securely.

## **Results**

### *Narratives*

#### *Rona: Education as Key Out of Poverty*

Rona had doubts on her choice of program but eventually told herself to just continue because she has already started her studies. As the first born, Rona thought then that it would be difficult to just withdraw and stop. She did stop school but returned after two years once she was able to save enough. Rona's mother relied on loans to raise five children since her husband did not have a permanent job. Seeing the determination of Rona, she sacrificed her personal needs to make sure that Rona had enough allowance for commuting to school. She hopes that all her children will be able to finish college because she believes that education is the key out of poverty. For Rona, it did not matter that her parents did not have a college background as long as they could support her morally and that they believed in her.

#### *Sheila: Continuation and Disruptions*

Sheila had wanted to be a teacher but followed instead the advice of her mother to take a finance course which can find her a more rewarding job. When her father advised her to work, she questioned why she had to change the path she believed was the right one. She never thought of giving up on her goal to help her family and to fix the house. She endured the long walk up and down the hilly Barangay instead of riding the *habal-habal* (motorcycle) to save some money for other basic needs of the family. When the pandemic happened, she decided to stop because of fear of using mobile gadgets and online technology for virtual classes. After two years, she decided to continue her studies with the resolve to pay back the sacrifices and hard work of her parents. Sheila's mother promised that

none of her children would stop school. It would be like her own breathing had stopped if any of her children were not able to finish school. A college degree will open possibilities of finding good jobs, according to Sheila's mother. Sheila is currently taking 18 units of Education with the hope of fulfilling her first dream of becoming a teacher. While she is able to help the family now, she refuses to be called the breadwinner, recognizing the continuing sacrifices of her mother.

#### *Jona: The Weight of Expectations*

Jona enrolled late when she started college because she had wanted to find a job. Her father did not allow her or any of her siblings to work with the belief that they would not want to study anymore once they have started earning money. He wished all the children would be able to get out of poverty through good education. Jona's mother supported this saying that education is the only thing that they can give the children. Both parents hope that their children will be in better circumstances before they grow old. While Jona understood that she needed to finish college as the eldest child and the first in the family to enter college, she felt overwhelmed by the pressure. Her parents would constantly remind her to finish college, to get a job, support her siblings' schooling and fix the house after she graduates. Jona felt that she was being used as an investment. Her active participation in the parish has become her refuge from the pressures at home up to the present. She is proud of being able to invest in a gadget and shoes and considers these purchases as achievement.

#### *Grace: Education and the Person's Worth*

Grace had to forego her preferred course in architecture due to high cost of tuition. She took Psychology instead for the wide career opportunities the program offers. Grace was determined to finish school believing that it would be a waste of time if she did not pursue her studies and would be haunted by what if's. She also expressed that without a college degree, she would feel incomplete as a person. She knew he had to find a job to be able to sustain her studies however her parents were concerned that working while studying would make her lose the motivation to continue with her studies. Grace believed that she needed to focus on the goal in spite of the difficulties of being a working student. When classes shifted to online modality during the pandemic, Grace liked the set up that allowed her to work and study at the same time. Grace's mother witnessed how her daughter faced the challenges of working and studying simultaneously and was proud of what her daughter had achieved as an honor student. She motivated Grace by affirming that, as the first in the family, she must persevere and endure.

#### *Pam: Personal Sacrifices*

Pam shared about her dream program that got away as she chose a program that would immediately provide additional income for the family. She

witnessed the constant fear of her mother about not being able to pay utility bills. Pam did not start college right away after graduating from High School to prioritize work for the family's survival. She convinced herself that she did not need to study if she is gaining income already. After a gap year, she realized that having a college degree is still important as her parents expressed that education is the only inheritance they can pass on to their children. During the pandemic, she worked as a house helper and recalled doing house chores while attending her online classes using mobile phone. She felt envious of classmates who did not need to work to support themselves and their families. Still, she considers her family as her motivation to finish college and to fulfil her dreams for herself and her family.

#### *Keno: Practical Paths to Progress*

Keno embraced his role and responsibilities as the first-generation second child. While his father did not want him to work while studying, he found means to earn income to cover expenses for commuting and some school materials. He enjoyed the benefits of a scholarship grant on his first-year college, but when he failed to comply with the conditions set by the donor, he engaged in selling perfumes, serving in catering events, and even collecting reusables in dumps for selling to junk shops. He experienced hunger, exhaustion, and depression but with the help of friends and classmates, he was able to finish college. He almost stopped on the last year in college when the youngest brother he had been taking care of died of a serious illness. With the prodding of his teachers and classmates, he navigated through senior year to graduation. He refused to be called the breadwinner recognizing that it is too big a responsibility that he also shares with his father.

#### *Jerome: Driven by a Mother's Dream*

For Jerome's mother, a college diploma can never be stolen. She warned her sons that only two places are waiting for them if they do not finish college: the jail or the cemetery. Jerome believed that her mother only wanted the best for him and his two siblings and obeyed the direction she set for her three boys to finish college. With his mother's persistence, Jerome was able to graduate and get a degree. Jerome recalled how he struggled with hunger, exhaustion, and delirium while fulfilling roles as a son, a student, and a service crew in a fast food. His routine then was attending classes until midday and then going straight to work. To save some money for food, he helped classmates with school tasks. He also worked extra jobs as a barker in the jeepney queue, a bagger in a mall grocery, and helper in setting up tents in a cemetery. At present, he participates in online games for some prize money.

#### *Ava: Navigating Displacement and Dreams*

When Ava's family was forced out of the ancestral home, Ava was in the middle of finishing Senior High School and preparing for college. She attributed her

poor performance in the admission test for the program she wanted to pursue to the sudden change. The place where they transferred was not conducive to studying and this caused her to feel numb throughout her college journey. She only felt hope when she was already working on her thesis. When she saw her mother crying over their situation, she decided to put aside her own feelings of frustration and chose to move forward. Ava understood that her role as the oldest child meant that the family would rely on her to provide financially for the family. Her parents' unfulfilled dreams became her source of motivation. She did not want her parents to feel that their support was not enough. She felt heavy pressure but at the same time, she felt grateful that she would be able to provide for her family. For her father, it would be unacceptable if the siblings would not graduate and be looked down by their future spouses. Her parents' aspirations had become her own aspirations. Ava sees her college degree not only as a personal accomplishment, but as a shared achievement with her parents.

### **Narrative Themes**

#### *Theme 1: Multidimensional Scarcity (The "Place" of Poverty)*

This theme addresses Research Question 1, examining the lived experiences of first-generation graduates in deep poverty. The data suggests that poverty is not merely a lack of financial capital but the physical and digital "landscape" that the participants had to navigate.

#### Material and Spatial Deprivation

The home and school become places marked by hunger and the constant negotiation of basic needs. Jerome's account situates deprivation within the school environment, where he coped with hunger by pretending to sleep during breaks and excusing himself to go to the water fountain to fill up with water. Spatial deprivation is vividly reflected in the participants' accounts of their homes as sites of vulnerability. Ava's narrative illustrates how the forced eviction to a house still under construction directly disrupts educational trajectories at critical moments of transition. Place became a constraining factor that affected her ability to focus and prepare, ultimately shaping her performance in college entrance examinations and influencing her program choices.

#### Digital Poverty

Digital poverty emerged as a distinct dimension of scarcity during the pandemic, as the shift to virtual platforms reconfigured not only how learning occurred but also where it was situated. Sheila had to stop studying for two years during the pandemic due to lack of familiarity in using gadgets and online platforms. For first-generation students, the college experience was abruptly relocated from classrooms and campuses to domestic spaces, where participation depended on access to devices and

connectivity, and this shift in place and learning environment, coupled with limited infrastructure, disrupted the continuity of their educational participation.

#### Social Marginalization

Pam's narrative reflects how social marginalization is experienced through comparisons that are spatially situated within everyday environments such as the classroom, where inequalities become visible and personally felt. Her feelings of envy toward classmates reveal how the presence of more economically supported peers transforms the school into a place where difference is constantly observed and internalized. Within this shared educational space, she becomes aware of her position at the margins, not through exclusion from schooling itself, but through unequal capacities to participate in it without difficulty.

#### *Theme 2: The Weight of Being the First (The Society of Legacy)*

This theme captures how first-generation students experience education as a shared familial responsibility shaped by expectations, sacrifice, and relational obligations. Within the dimension of sociality, their college journeys are not purely individual pursuits but are deeply embedded in family dynamics, where aspirations and pressures on the first in the family to enter college are collectively constructed and negotiated across time.

#### Education as Non-Stealable Inheritance

The subtheme on education as a non-stealable inheritance defines education as a symbolic, nonmaterial legacy that families pass on as protection against poverty and as a lasting source of value. It reflects how educational attainment is framed as both inheritance and responsibility across generations.

#### First Generation as Family's Hope

The firstborn or first-generation child is positioned as the family's primary hope for upward mobility regardless of the birth order. They often internalize expectations to financially support and uplift the household. The narrative of feeling like an "investment" reveals the heavy psychological burden of being the family's hope that may lead to emotional burnout.

#### First Generation as One of the Breadwinners

This sub-theme captures how some participants negotiate or reject being defined as sole providers, revealing tensions between external expectations and shared family roles, as well as efforts to maintain relational balance. In refusing to be called the breadwinner of the family, first generation in the family convey the overwhelming burden of carrying full responsibilities for the family while recognizing the continuing efforts of the parents to provide for the family.

### Family First Before Self

Finally, the sacrifice of self-interest reflects how students set aside personal aspirations in favor of more practical or financially viable pathways, demonstrating how educational and career decisions are shaped by temporal negotiations between past dreams, present constraints, and future family responsibilities.

Jona's account exemplifies the theme, as she describes feeling like an "investment" for her family, with expectations to work, support her siblings, and improve their living conditions after graduation. While she recognizes her role as the eldest, she also questions who will take care of herself, revealing the emotional weight of carrying collective aspirations alongside personal aspirations.

### Theme 3: Striving and Surviving

This theme captures how first-generation graduates navigate college through the simultaneous demands of study, work, and survival, revealing that educational success is not solely academic but rooted in endurance, resourcefulness, and collective support systems.

### Synchronicity of Labor and Learning

The integration of work and study as a continuous, lived strategy is shaped by necessity and future aspirations. Rather than separating roles, participants experience learning and earning as overlapping realities. For example, Pam attended online classes while working as a house helper, describing it as her only way to remain enrolled while earning for daily needs.

### Informal and Kinship Capital

Students rely on family, peers, community members, and informal networks to access resources when institutional support is limited. These relationships function as shared investments in educational success. For instance, Sheila depended on a neighbor who allowed her to use their wifi for online classes, reflecting how community support enabled her continued participation in learning.

### Spiritual Resilience

Faith and spiritually meaningful places provide emotional strength, guidance, and refuge amid hardship. Spiritual practices become both personal coping mechanisms and socially embedded sources of support. Jona, for example, turned to prayer as her primary source of comfort, seeing it as the only space where she could express her burdens without judgment.

### Making Every Opportunity Count

Participants actively maximize available opportunities as a response to past sacrifices and as a pathway toward future mobility. Persistence is enacted through recognizing and sustaining these opportunities. Rona's realization to continue because the opportunity is already given to her illustrates how

she transforms her present position into motivation to complete her education.

### Emergent Framework

The narrative themes enrich an understanding of the journey of first-generation graduates through college and the role of family influence and support. The Resonant Threads of the Paradox of Education as an Inheritance (Mana), the Panganay (First-born) Syndrome and Investment (Puhunan) Narrative, Pagsasabay or Synchronicity of Labor and Learning as a Survival Disposition, and the Narrative of Upliftment (Pag-angat) are presented grounded in the participants' narratives that conceptualize the first-generation college journey as a culturally embedded, relational, and upward spiral process of transformation.

Figure 1 The Mana-Pagsasabay-Pag-Angat Framework

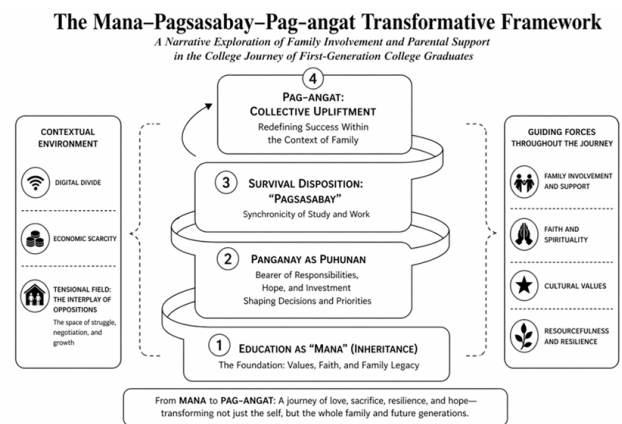


Figure 1 presents the Mana-Pagsasabay-Pag-angat Transformative Framework, illustrating the layered journey of first-generation college graduates from the foundational value of education as mana (inheritance), carried through the role of the panganay as puhunan (first-born as investment), realized through pagsasabay (simultaneity) of work and study, culminating in pag-angat as collective upliftment.

The framework also highlights how this process is shaped by contextual constraints and sustained by guiding forces such as family support, cultural values, and resilience, emphasizing education as a relational process for the family.

### Paradox of Education as Mana (Inheritance)

The paradox of education as mana is grounded in the framework's foundational layer where education is constructed not merely as a pathway for individual mobility but as a familial inheritance. As an inheritance, education serves as the moral anchor that orients the entire journey, reflecting deeply held cultural values in which learning is understood as a continuation of family legacy rather than a purely personal pursuit. This framing highlights how motivation among first-generation students is fundamentally relational, shaped by a sense of obligation to honor parental sacrifice and sustain collective aspirations. Drawing from Murray Bowen's (1993, as cited in Čepukienė, 2024) notion of

intergenerational transmission, education becomes a vehicle through which cultural and family values and expectations are passed across generations. The paradox emerges in the dual functions that, while education empowers the individual as a means of upliftment, it simultaneously binds them to the weight of familial survival. The pursuit of a college degree is not only an individual achievement but also a moral undertaking for the family.

#### *The Panganay as the Puhunan (The First-Born as an Investment)*

Within the Mana–Pagsasabay–Pag-angat framework, the second resonant thread foregrounds the panganay (eldest child) as an embodied expectation, a role identity enacted through the college experience. The first-generation student is not simply a learner but a position within the family system where responsibility is organized regardless of birth order. Drawing on Olivia Carandang's (2001, cited in Tuazon et al., 2022), tagasalo (family absorber) concept, the first-generation student emerges as the one who "catches" or carries the family's burdens and aspirations, becoming a symbolic panganay even when not the eldest. Education that was received as inheritance is reconstituted as a puhunan or collective investment grounded in financial sacrifice, expectation, and hope for upward mobility. The first-generation student embodies both as the recipient of inherited hope and expected provider of future stability. The choices of the first-generation child are processed through this role, where personal aspirations may be deferred or realigned to reflect a commitment to reciprocate parental sacrifices. The student's journey becomes a continuous negotiation between self and family, as education is pursued not solely for individual advancement but as the fulfillment of a shared project of transforming education from a received legacy into a realized family expectation.

#### *Pagsasabay (Simultaneity or Synchronicity) as a Survival Disposition*

The third resonant thread of pagsasabay or the synchronicity of work and study functions as a survival disposition that translates inherited aspiration into lived practice, particularly among first-generation students from low-income families. Interpreted through Virginia Satir's self-esteem model, this simultaneity is not merely a response to economic necessity but an enactment of education as mana, where students actively sustain their schooling while contributing to family survival. The demands of balancing labor and learning reveal the interplay between external constraints, such as economic scarcity and limited resources, and internal processes of self-worth, emotional regulation, and meaning making. Satir's framework highlights that while such conditions may generate stress and psychological burden, students also cultivate resilience when they are able to align their inner experiences with their outward responsibilities and achieve a sense of

congruence. *Pagsasabay* reframes the struggle as competence, positioning working students not as passive recipients of hardship but as active agents who navigate and negotiate their roles within the family system. As the mechanism of movement within the framework, *pagsasabay* bridges the transition from *panganay* as *puhunan* to *pag-angat* which demonstrates how the endurance required to simultaneously work and study becomes a critical strategy through which individual effort contributes to the realization of intergenerational aspirations.

#### *The Narrative of Pag-Angat (Upliftment)*

The fourth resonant thread, *pag-angat* or upliftment, can be understood through Virginia Satir's humanistic model as a relational transformation marked by growing self-esteem and movement toward congruence within the family system. In this phase, Satir's notion of congruence, where inner experience, communication, and action align, helps explain how the earlier paradox of education as mana is reworked into a more life-giving form, as both students and families begin to see education not only as obligation but as shared growth. Graduation emerges as a relational milestone, symbolizing not just individual achievement but the family's collective movement toward improved, though often modest, circumstances. The narratives of first-generation graduates reveal that upliftment unfolds through incremental yet meaningful changes such as enhanced self-worth, more open and affirming communication, and gradual shifts away from rigid or pressure-laden family patterns shaped by poverty. In this way, success is redefined from mere repayment of sacrifice to relational fulfillment, where the benefits of education extend beyond the individual to siblings, parents, and future generations. Particularly in low-income contexts, *pag-angat* signifies not escape from the family but a collective redefinition of what it means to succeed, closing the cycle of the framework while simultaneously reinforcing education as an enduring and transformative inheritance.

#### *The Mana-Pagsasabay-Pag-Angat Framework Viewed through Virginia Satir's Growth Model*

The Mana–Pagsasabay–Pag-angat Transformative Framework can be theoretically understood as a relational process of family growth shaped by both emotional dynamics and socio-economic constraint. Satir's emphasis on self-worth, communication, and family rules provides a unifying explanation for how each layer of the framework unfolds. At the foundation, education as mana reflects the transmission of deeply held family meanings, where education becomes an emotionally charged inheritance tied to dignity, hope, and collective aspiration. As the framework progresses to *panganay* as *puhunan* and *pagsasabay*, Satir's concepts show how these inherited meanings are enacted through roles, expectations, and coping stances that help families navigate scarcity. The movement toward *pag-angat* aligns with Satir's notion of congruence,

where families begin to integrate these tensions and redefine success as shared upliftment rather than individual achievement alone. The framework extends Satir's model by situating these growth processes within conditions of poverty, demonstrating that family development is not only intrapsychic and relational but also structurally influenced. The framework positions Satir's Growth Model (Satir, 1988, as cited in Tuazon et al., 2022) as a lens for understanding how intergenerational values, emotional transmission, and realities converge to shape the college journeys of first-generation students, and how transformation occurs not in isolation but within the evolving life of the family system.

#### *The Mana-Pagsasabay-Pag-angat Framework viewed through the lens of Murray Bowen's concept of Intergenerational Transmission*

The Mana–Pagsasabay–Pag-angat framework can be understood as a patterned flow of values, expectations, and emotional processes across generations, where education becomes a central vehicle of continuity and change. At the level of education as mana, the framework reflects how beliefs about schooling as the pathway out of poverty are transmitted as part of the family's emotional legacy, embedding both hope and obligation in the first-generation child. This transmission intensifies in *panganay* as *puhunan*, where the eldest assumes roles shaped by multigenerational expectations. In *pagsasabay*, the student's navigation of study and work reflects adaptive responses to these inherited pressures, demonstrating how patterns of sacrifice and resilience are reproduced under conditions of constraint. *Pag-angat* represents not a break from these patterns but their transformation, where the success of one generation reconfigures the emotional and socio-economic trajectory of the family. Applying Bowen's (1993, as cited in Čepukienė, 2024) perspective highlights that the framework is not merely developmental but intergenerational, showing how structural poverty and family aspiration are woven into enduring relational patterns that shape identity, decision-making, and the meaning of education across time.

#### **Conclusion**

This study advances an understanding of the college journeys of first-generation graduates by showing that education is not experienced as an individual endeavor but as a relational, value-laden inheritance enacted within the family. Through the Mana–Pagsasabay–Pag-angat framework, the findings reveal how education as mana becomes reworked into *puhunan*, embodied in the role of the *panganay* or symbolic bearer of family aspirations, and lived through *pagsasabay*, which is the simultaneity of work and study as a survival disposition under conditions of scarcity. These processes illuminate how students actively negotiate responsibility, identity, and aspiration, translating inherited hopes into sustained effort despite structural

constraints such as economic hardship and the digital divide.

The study further demonstrates that the outcome of this journey, *pag-angat*, is not merely individual success but collective upliftment, where graduation functions as a relational milestone that signals modest yet meaningful changes in family circumstances. In this way, success is redefined from personal achievement to shared advancement, reinforcing education as an enduring and transformative inheritance that extends to future generations. Theoretically, the study contributes by situating family processes within socio-economic realities, showing how intergenerational values, self-worth, and structural conditions converge to shape the experiences of first-generation students. Overall, the findings underscore that transformation occurs not in isolation but within the evolving life of the family, where love, sacrifice, and resilience remain central to the pursuit and realization of educational aspirations.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

A critical limitation arises from the dyadic composition of the interviews (first-generation and one parent). While primary participants narrated both parents' views, this approach may have excluded the views, influence, and involvement, or the lack of, of the other parent. This other parent might represent different forms of pressure, contradictory educational beliefs ("Mana"), or alternative forms of neighborhood support that are crucial yet missing from the data. Concepts such as the "Panganay Syndrome" which is modeled in the study's framework, relies solely on two generations to explain dynamics that are inherently multi-generational, potentially understating the horizontal (sibling-to-sibling) support.

#### **Practical Implications of the Study**

##### *Strengthen Family-Inclusive Support Programs*

Educational institutions should recognize the central role of family in shaping first-generation experiences. Programs that engage parents and guardians through orientations, financial literacy sessions, and communication platforms can reinforce the shared investment in education while alleviating pressures rooted in uncertainty.

##### *Institutionalize Support for Working Students*

Given the prevalence of *pagsasabay*, colleges and universities must design flexible learning structures. This includes adaptive class schedules, accessible academic resources, and policies that acknowledge the realities of working students.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may examine non-completion and interrupted pathways among first-generation students. While this study highlights narratives of survival and success, further inquiry into those who discontinue or delay their studies can provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of

structural barriers, coping mechanisms, and institutional gaps.

Variations in family dynamics and support systems may also be investigated. While constructs such as “mana” and the internalized panganay role emerged as significant, future studies can explore how different family configurations, expectations, or even the absence of support influence educational trajectories and meaning-making processes.

### Authors' Contributions

Angelina Bayaua Alcazar conceptualized and designed the study, conducted the data gathering, and carried out the narrative analysis. Deep appreciation is extended to Dr. Gail Frances R. Galang, research adviser, for her guidance throughout the course of the research and for her valuable insights on the methodology and theoretical framework. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest for this paper.

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