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## IT IS ALL RELATIVE: INTERGENERATIONAL POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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IT IS ALL RELATIVE: INTERGENERATIONAL POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION  
AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

by

Leslie Jean Barrett Brown

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Coastal Carolina University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
with a specialization in Higher Education Administration.

Education Sciences and Organizations

Coastal Carolina University

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Doctoral Committee:

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the intricate relationship between intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility by focusing on the nuanced themes of environment and exposure, encouragement and expectation, and experience and equal opportunity. Drawing from the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), this research seeks to unravel the nuanced mechanisms through which familial and societal influences shape individuals' educational trajectories and economic outcomes across generations.

The study is conducted through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in which 10 participants provide meaningful insights of their interpretation of experiences in an eight open-ended question interview. Participants are postsecondary education graduates in the age range of 29-60 and are from various backgrounds and regions of the United States. This multiperspective approach allows triangulation and intersectionality across educational and economic backgrounds.

By synthesizing the findings across the themes, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility. Insights acquired from this research can inform policy interventions, institutional practices, and community initiatives aimed at promoting equitable access to education and enhancing socio-economic mobility for future generations.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the resilient spirit and unwavering determination of first-generation, low-income families and students who were the first to defy the odds in pursuit of economic mobility through postsecondary education with courage and strength. Your stories illuminate the path forward, reminding us of the transformative impact of perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity. May this work honor your experiences, amplify your voices, and contribute to a future where every individual regardless of education and income status has access and equal opportunity to the transformative power of education.

Additionally, to the change agents and advocates in the field who tirelessly champion equity and justice in education to dismantle systemic barriers and empower underrepresented individuals, families and communities, your dedication and passion are driving forces for positive change. This dissertation is also dedicated to you, with heartfelt appreciation for your spirited efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. May this work contribute to the ongoing endeavors to create a more inclusive and just society for all.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational mobility, the capacity of a single human being to advance their general welfare beyond that of the previous generation, is a foundational gauge of equal opportunity in society (Steele, 2022). An individual's education attainment level is critical to economic mobility possibilities, particularly in present-day societies. The pursuit and persistence of postsecondary education attainment, advanced learning that exceeds a high school diploma, is considered an essential medium to ascending an individual's opportunity for generational socioeconomic mobility (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Postsecondary education can equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that bring forth financial freedom and stability to not only themselves but also to future generations (Sabol et al., 2021; Dubow et al., 2009). The intricate association between postsecondary education attainment and intergenerational economic mobility is multifaceted, as it is influenced by an extensive scope of cultural and environmental elements such as socioeconomic background, educational access, and societal systems that have the power to govern intergenerational advancement, (Duncan et al., 2017).

The Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 created more financial assistance for the first in their family to access postsecondary education; however, enrollment, completion, student loan debt, and lack of equal economic opportunity still leave equity in question for this group (Scott et al., 2022). Regardless of the federal financial assistance provided, first-generation students still wrestle with academic preparation, familial support, career and major choice selection, and student loan debt (Carrico et al., 2017).

Generations of cultures from low educational attainment and low-income backgrounds are not able to obtain economic mobility through postsecondary education due to personal and financial circumstances, academic and institutional barriers, and their perceptions, along with the reality, of potential possibilities (Cross, 1981). Parents and youth of this population comprise an intersectionality of demographics of race, age, gender, and economic status. They often live day by day focused on working to survive and provide for themselves and their families, as opposed to contemplating opportunities for education and economic advancement (Sabol et al., 2021). By neglecting the root of the challenges first-generation students face, such as parental education attainment and support, the cycle of inequity in education and economic mobility continues.

Through an interpretative phenomenological qualitative study, this dissertation aspires to inspect the passages of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and its influence on economic mobility. The findings of this study provide enlightenment on the workings that generations from differing educational and economic backgrounds encounter in pursuit of prosperous futures through postsecondary education.

### **Problem Statement**

Postsecondary education attainment that produces greater economic security and societal welfare is commonly passed from one generation to the next. Unfortunately, there are inadequate postsecondary education and economic opportunities available for those from low-education and low-income backgrounds, particularly for non-traditional students, ages 22 and older, (Ascend, 2016). The issue of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility is a critical concern in modern society that requires awareness, inspection, and intervention before improvement can take place (Duncan et al., 2017).

Despite noteworthy developments in growing access to higher education through federal financial aid, a considerable number of disadvantaged individuals continue to encounter informational, financial, and cultural barriers that bind their realization of rising economic mobility through postsecondary education. The cultural climate of generations from low-income backgrounds leaves individuals confined to patterns of limited postsecondary educational attainment, and as a result, low economic mobility (Hardy & Marcotte, 2022).

### **Problem in Context**

Generations of families who pursue, persist, and persevere towards postsecondary education attainment reap significant monetary and nonfinancial benefits over a lifetime. Postsecondary graduates in the United States with an associate degree or higher represent 57% of the top 60% of earners in the country and they are evidenced to live healthier and happier lives according to the Post Secondary Value Commission (2021). While there are clear financial benefits to postsecondary education attainment, there are also various non-monetary benefits linked to higher education, as well. Increased personal and professional mobility, improved quality of life, better consumer decision-making, and a greater pursuit of hobbies and leisure activities are all benefits associated with possessing a postsecondary credential. (Measuring Value, 2021). Graduates of postsecondary education also tend to be more open-minded, use more rationale in their thinking, are found to be less prejudiced, are typically more knowledgeable about world affairs and are physically healthier than their peers with high school diplomas (Porter, 2000). The economic value of the physical benefits for those with a postsecondary education who live healthier lives has been estimated to be comparable to, or even greater than, the value of education for their lifetime earnings (Krueger et al., 2019).

Postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility are a part of the cultural environment and expectations for individuals from more privileged backgrounds, and they tend to navigate seamlessly through their college education, career aspirations, and economic prosperity (Ladd, 2010). Like the generation before them, they also typically succeed in their education and economic endeavors with little to no financial debt. They are often established and elevated to live their best lives post postsecondary education attainment comfortably, as they are established physically, mentally, and financially (Scott et al., 2022).

There is another population, however, that is not historically founded, focused, nor afforded the opportunity to pursue economic mobility through postsecondary education attainment. A culture of continued intergenerational challenges keeps countless individuals from pursuing and attaining a postsecondary education that leads to economic mobility. Generations of low-income backgrounds tend to stay on the same path as the generation before them, remaining status quo in terms of contributing to and experiencing economic mobility through postsecondary education (Duncan et al., 2017; Vaisey, 2010).

Individuals from this population are often not equipped with the needed information nor student services support at either the secondary or postsecondary levels to have better chances of positive education and economic outcomes (Reid et al., 2008). The most challenging barrier for generations of low-income families is their lack of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of how postsecondary education can improve the economic status of not only their lives but also the lives of generations to come (Hardy & Mercotte, 2020).

A continuing postsecondary education attainment culture has strong intergenerational influences on an individual's opportunity for economic mobility through education. Although

research, programs, and services are becoming more pertinent in postsecondary education for first-generation youth, it is often too late to intervene in inherited challenges that have been passed on from previous generations (Hardy & Marcotte, 2020). Meanwhile, assessing and addressing equal opportunities for the previous generation of parents remains unnoticed and neglected (Duncan et al., 2017). Not only are parents of first-generation students ill-equipped to provide the necessary cultural and experiential expertise of postsecondary education to their children, but they are also more likely to be low-income and less likely to be able to provide needed financial support, as well (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

The generations that do work towards closing the gap of a low socioeconomic culture through postsecondary education attainment tend to have more student loan debt and adverse credit history, and earn lower wages (Scott et al., 2022). They are more likely to take on higher amounts of student loan debt to not only provide for their education but also for daily survival while they accrue additional debt for living expenses that their low-income families cannot afford to supply (Furquim et al., 2017). They are also less knowledgeable about career choices and the return on investment for their postsecondary education (Kitchen et al., 2021). Individuals from generations of low-income families are typically less financially knowledgeable than those from privileged families and make educational and financial decisions that turn out to be disadvantageous to their economic futures (Duncan et al., 2017).

### **Objective**

The purpose of this research is to explore how intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic status influence economic mobility for succeeding generations. This study aims to provide in-depth postsecondary education and economic mobility insight from the

shared experiences of postsecondary graduates from various educational and economic backgrounds. Understanding the lived experiences and perspectives from various backgrounds from a historical and cultural lens contributes to the indefinable knowledge needed to disintegrate barriers and patterns of generational disadvantage.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three research questions guiding the student include:

1. To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to the educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?
2. How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?
3. To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility?

These research questions seek to uncover the persistent inequality experienced by individuals from generations of low educational attainment and economic status. This research attempts to lay out the realization of this population's limitations and opportunities for postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility through a multidisciplinary approach of sociology, economics, and education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Through the theoretical framework of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this study explores cultural sources of rules, goals, behavior, activity, development, transformation, and reciprocity among individuals who have pursued, persisted, and obtained postsecondary education attainment and intergenerational influences on their economic mobility outcomes.

CHAT is a theoretical framework developed primarily by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and further expanded upon by his followers. It originated in the early 20th century but has gained prominence in various fields, including psychology, education, sociology, and human-computer interaction. At its core, CHAT focuses on understanding human behavior and development within social and cultural contexts. It emphasizes the interplay between individuals, their social environment, and the tools they use to engage in activities (Jenlink, 2013).

CHAT claims human interactions, experiences, and activities are part of a large human system regulated by sociocultural norms. Children who are not exposed to postsecondary education and affluent lifestyles early in life through family backgrounds tend to not expect anything different from themselves, and those who do, expect nothing less. The activity of pursuing, persisting, and attaining a postsecondary education, or not, is often passed down from one generation to the next, and breaking the cycle of inactivity can be complicated and challenging (Sabol et al., 2021).

CHAT suggests that cultural tools are used by prior generations to incorporate cognitive activities and social practices into their own lives and those of future generations (Jenlink, 2013). For generations from privileged backgrounds, these tools may be money, affluent neighborhoods with high-quality educational activity, higher-paying occupations, and social expectations (Hardy & Marcotte, 2022). The cultural tools for those from low education and low-income backgrounds typically consist of hard work, tough times, and seeking resources for immediate survival needs (Duncan et al., 2017).

CHAT implies that individuals seize goal-oriented activities, such as pursuing postsecondary education, going straight into the workforce, or relying on government assistance,

within cultural conditions, and reliance on the historical experiences of others, such as previous generations' (Irby et al., 2013). CHAT also indicates this activity can be reciprocal, in that collaboration among generations enables them to expand their predominant potential by establishing new mediating mechanisms and systemic structures, such as postsecondary education attainment (Irby et al., 2013). Through a values paradigm, values, norms, motives, attitudes, goals, ideals, morals, aspirations, preferences, wants and desires of postsecondary education and economic mobility can be culturally conditioned and changed (Vaisey, 2010).

Postsecondary education attainment is not historically a part of the cultural goals, behaviors, activities, or developments of generations from low-income backgrounds. This population is more often focused on family, finances, and using the cultural tools they have inherited to provide for themselves and their families the best that they know how, which tends to consist of manual hard labor and minimum wage paying jobs (Duncan et al., 2017; Vaisey, 2010). They often learn trades that have been passed down from one generation to the next, and may not have high economic expectations for themselves, or future generations. In some low-economic cultures, pursuing postsecondary education and economic mobility may even be shunned or rejected, as it is considered a betrayal of an already established way of life (Vaisey, 2010).

Parents often have the influential power to “bend” their children either to the cultures of the past or to that of something new (Sabol et al., 2021). Just as children from more privileged backgrounds are more aware of and likely to pursue and obtain postsecondary education and high economic status, those from less privileged backgrounds are likely to lack awareness of advancement opportunities and are more likely to continue the same path as the generation



before them. Actions of parental beliefs, behaviors, and expectations have a cultural influence on the future generations' beliefs, behaviors, expectations, and actions (Davis-Kean et al., 2021).

Parental education level and income have a strong influence on their children's decision to pursue postsecondary education and their choice of occupation (Dubow et al., 2009). First-generation students who pursue and persist towards postsecondary education attainment despite parental status still face economic mobility adversity in their attempt to transform cultural activities and behaviors of the past by having different perspectives on careers, finances, and the future (Hardy & Marcotte, 2022).

There is, however, an opportunity for transformation and reciprocity towards upward mobility between generations. According to Engstrom's Fifth Principle (2001), wide-ranging change is feasible in cultural-historical activity systems. As the denial of low education and low-income cultural-historical activity system is provoked, some individuals begin to examine opportunities for a better future and branch off from the traditional norms of accepting minimum education and wages. This allows for growth opportunities that can result in common goals and intentional efforts for cultural change. This comprehensive modification to intergenerational culture occurs when postsecondary education and economic mobility activities are reimagined to accept an open perspective of possibilities greater than that of previous activities (Isaacs, 2008). Parents who are provoked and provided the opportunity to pursue the activity of postsecondary education are more likely to change the cultural-historical activity of economic mobility through postsecondary education, and as a result, first-generation students, and the challenges they endure decrease (Vaisey, 2010).

According to this principle, the cultural-historical activity of pursuing postsecondary education and improving economic status should start with an individual who has the desire to change what has occurred in previous generations' activities (Irby et al., 2013). Whether it begins with the first-generation youth, the first-generation parent, or both, it is essential for this motive to be embraced and embarked upon for change to develop (Vaisey, 2010).

The lack of motivation and opportunity for postsecondary education and economic advancement for this population remains suppressed in a neglected societal set of cultural-historical problems (Hardy & Mercotte, 2022). The nature of the problem of intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility equality may appear inconsequential to expert policy and decision makers, as low-income members of society continue to remain in the caste system that they are expected to stay active in (Wilkerson, 2020). The need for the decision to focus more attention and allocate added resources to multiple generations of first-generation students involves dependence on available information, risk, irreversibility, and accountability (Bess & Dees, 2008; Ladd, 2010).

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study assumes that the data collected from postsecondary graduates are honest and truthful responses that provide an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences and perspectives on intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility. Bracketing the researcher's preconceptions and bias in this phenomenological qualitative study is critical in the accuracy of the analysis.

It is assumed that equal opportunity has been provided for participants to be involved in the study. Graduates from diverse backgrounds, levels of education, and generational categories

have all had the opportunity to participate to provide an intersectionality of voices. Factors such as race, gender, and geographical region were collected and considered for purposeful selection and triangulation; however, these factors are not assumed to be influential in the findings of this study, as the focus is on intergenerational postsecondary attainment only. This limits the study, in terms of the data on intersectionality.

Time period is also not being considered, which has the potential to compromise results on postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility based on the past and current labor market, economic policies, and generational attitudes. More time permitted for this study would have also allowed the researcher the opportunity to analyze more specified quantitative data on postsecondary education and economic outcomes such as of debt-to-income ratio, career choice, home ownership, and economic percentiles among various groups of postsecondary education graduates.

### **Scope**

The scope of this study focuses on the economic mobility of postsecondary graduates based on intergenerational postsecondary attainment. The study examines the postsecondary education and economic experiences and perspectives of postsecondary graduates in relation to their educational and economic environmental and cultural backgrounds. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is the primary research method that utilizes interviews to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of economic mobility based on intergenerational postsecondary educational attainment.

### **Delimitations**

This study is limited to postsecondary graduates who responded to the invitation and chose to participate in the study. There are also no limits to the various degree levels, majors, careers, and individual skills sets the participants bring with their experiences and perceptions. Those who started and did not complete a postsecondary credential, and those who never even pursued postsecondary education are not included in this study.

### **Significance of the Study**

Through the perceptions and experiences of postsecondary graduates, this study equips educators and policy makers with the insight to perceive how intergenerational postsecondary attainment influences succeeding generations' economic mobility, and work towards implementing improvements. Obtaining a greater realization of the economic outcomes of graduates allows us to unravel the value of postsecondary education attainment for graduates from various backgrounds and reshape the outputs of future educational systems (Vaisey, 2010).

The imbalance of postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility opportunity and outcomes for individuals from various backgrounds and ages is revealed and recognized through this study. The findings serve to identify and address issues of inequity across an intersectionality of demographics of race, age, gender, and economic status in education and economic mobility, and empower us to act strategically towards equal opportunity among multiple generations.

Establishing opportunities to set more students up for success through multigenerational approaches and programming will also minimize the need for debt through student loans for numberless students (Furquim, 2017). By focusing intentionally on the parents of first-generation students before or during the timeframe that their children reach postsecondary education, first-

year students will be better prepared and spend less time and money pursuing and completing a postsecondary education. This research can contribute to implementation studies that can show program designers how best to serve parents and youth together, starting with programming for parents (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). The study will provide an interactionist, bidirectional perspective that can be used to foster educational progress and life opportunities of parents and children simultaneously (Sabol et al., 2021; Sameroff, 2010).

The experiences and perspectives of postsecondary graduates explain the effectiveness of current policies that are in place to improve access to postsecondary education attainment and economic outcomes, as well as address those that are not in place. This type of interpretation assists and advises policymakers with data-driven evidence based decision-making expertise to implement improvements to current policies and escalate the development of new ones (Ladd, 2012).

In addition, tuition and student loan debt continue to increase. Institutions are being monitored closely on their graduation, employability, and student loan default rates, and institutions that continually have high rates of student loan defaults are in jeopardy of losing federal financial aid (Kelchen & Li, 2017). Without federal financial aid, an innumerable number of students from all backgrounds, including the middle class, may not be able to enroll in postsecondary education. Determining factors contributing to graduation rates and socioeconomic mobility for first-generation low-income students will help institutions be more accountable and successful in delivering on their missions to contribute to society.

Higher postsecondary education and economic mobility opportunity and outcomes contribute to an overall healthier society. Cultural inclusion, community safety and engagement,

social justice, and economic equality can decrease societal distrust, unrest, and division (Duncan et al., 2010). Through a multigenerational approach, the cultural-historical activities of families and communities can be positively transformed by addressing the issues disclosed in this study. Intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility equality also have the power to reorientate the welfare system, alleviate the need for government assistance, and improve the overall quality of life for generations of low-income families (Mannon, 2018; Ladd, 2010).

An increased understanding of postsecondary graduates' experiences and perceptions from an intergenerational perspective improves informed labor market decision making, as well as the quality of professionals in the workforce (Davies et al., 2013). Administrators, families, and individuals gain an insightful disposition into career choices and occupational needs, while employers reap the benefits of a more skilled society when intergenerational postsecondary education expands.

A stronger understanding of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility increases the likelihood of a better future for individual citizens, and the country's long-term economic potential. Long-term postsecondary education and economic growth improves the country's measure of innovation and productivity, and the country's competitiveness in a global context (Ladd, 2012). It will also decrease the amount of national debt.

The United States has the potential to gain \$956 billion (about \$2,900 per person in the US) more in tax revenue and health care savings per year by investing \$3.97 trillion (about \$12,000 per person in the US) to close the socioeconomic gaps in college degree completion

according to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (Measuring Value, 2021). By investing in more first-generation low-income students of all ages to assist in degree completion and socioeconomic mobility, the national economy notably benefits, as well.

### **Conclusion**

For economic mobility through postsecondary education to be considered an equal opportunity for all, equity for those from low economic backgrounds cannot continue to be overlooked and undervalued (Chen, 2017). By continuing to focus on only one generation at a time through first-generation programs and services for youth only, a generational gap is being overlooked. Closing this gap will result in fewer first-generation students, as non-college going cultures begin to transform their postsecondary academic activities and achievements and economic advancements (Sabol, 2021).

Understanding and advancing parental postsecondary education attainment can have short-term positive repercussions on their own personal financial and economic wellbeing, but most importantly, it provides future generations with better economic stability and preparation for postsecondary education performance and persistence, as well (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). To transform equal educational opportunities for cultures that have not been historically exposed to postsecondary education, informational services, intentional programming, and financial support need to be more readily available to first generations of all ages, starting with parents.

Administrators and policy makers can best utilize the data from this study through a multigenerational approach to understand and increase intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility. Heightened programming and support for both traditional

first-generation students and for the preceding generation of parents will increase postsecondary education exposure, attainment, and overall economic advancement.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation students from low economic backgrounds who break cultural boundaries to pursue postsecondary education and progress toward economic mobility do so with disadvantages. In addition to the absence of a college going culture, many students in this population also lack the postsecondary preparation, career choice consideration, and wise financial decision-making skills that are required to reap the advantages of a postsecondary education in its entirety (Lee & Mueller, 2014; Furquim et al., 2017). Although there are some perceptions of genetics' influence on future generations' abilities to attain postsecondary education credentials and economic mobility, research shows that outcomes of economic intergenerational mobility can be mostly modified by changing the cultural environment of parental education attainment (Liu, 2018).

The purpose of this research is to explore the influence intergenerational postsecondary education attainment has on economic mobility opportunities of succeeding generations. The questions for this study are:

1. To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?
2. How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?
3. To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility?

In answering these questions, a better understanding of the significance intergenerational postsecondary education has on economic outcomes for individuals, families, and society

emerges. A more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon empowers parents, students, educators, and policymakers with awareness, appreciation, and aspiration to increase parental postsecondary education attainment, and decrease the number the first-generation students struggling to pursue and persist through postsecondary education and prosperity.

The following review of the literature on intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility presents enlightenment on this issue and highlights the factors that contribute to the inequality of societal advantages and disadvantages for various populations. Beginning with an explanation of the cultural-historical activity framework and continuing with the historical context of postsecondary education and economic mobility, this review focuses on accessibility, barriers, opportunities, outcomes, and policy intervention opportunities to better serve an intersectionality of populations. Finally, the review concludes with gaps in the current literature and recommendations for future research.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

For the context of the literature reviewed for this study the following definitions of terms will be used (Open AI, 2023):

- Intergenerational:

Intergenerational refers to interactions, relationships, or phenomena that occur between different generations within a family, community, or society. It often involves the exchange of values, knowledge, traditions, and resources among individuals of varying age groups, such as children, parents, grandparents, and beyond. These interactions can have a significant impact on the transmission of culture, values, and experiences from one generation to the next and can

influence societal dynamics and the well-being of different age groups.

Intergenerational relationships and connections are integral to understanding how societies evolve and how individuals learn from and influence one another across generational boundaries.

- First-generation:

A first-generation student is the first in their immediate family to attend college or university and is often the first among their family members to pursue higher education beyond a high school diploma or equivalent. The immediate family typically includes parents or legal guardians, and sometimes siblings.

- Non-traditional

A non-traditional student typically refers to an individual who does not fit the traditional profile of a college or university student. Non-traditional students are often older than the traditional college-age population (18-24 years old) and may have different life circumstances, experiences, and educational goals.

- Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary education, also known as tertiary education, refers to the level of education that comes after a person has completed their secondary (high school) education. This phase of education typically includes a wide range of programs and institutions that provide further education and training, often leading to diplomas, certificates, or degrees.

- Economic Mobility

Economic mobility, also known as social mobility, refers to the ability of individuals or families to improve their economic status or move up and down the socio-economic ladder within a society. It reflects the degree to which people can change their financial circumstances over time, typically from one generation to the next. Economic mobility is an important measure of equality and opportunity within a society and is often used to assess the overall health and fairness of an economy.

- Human Capital Development

Human capital development refers to the process of enhancing and investing in the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes of individuals within a society or organization. It recognizes that people are valuable assets, much like physical capital (e.g., machinery, buildings) and financial capital (e.g., money). Human capital development is essential for individual and societal well-being, economic growth, and overall progress.

### **Historical Context**

Economic mobility through postsecondary education was not always as accessible as it is today. Postsecondary education was delivered through religious and private institutions and attainment and prosperity were primarily restricted to the privileged elite (Sorber, 2018). Heritage and societal class status mostly determined an individual's educational and economic opportunities prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Industrial Era, and there were limited opportunities to break free from a middle or low class status (Sorber, 2018), Although there have been policy

reforms and some cultural and societal shifts in accessibility and inclusiveness over the last several decades, postsecondary education and economic opportunities for low-income individuals are still unequal today. A brief history of the role higher education has played in economic mobility in the United States helps us to better understand where we have been, where we are currently, and the direction we need to go to improve equitable economic mobility through postsecondary education for all.

### **The Land Grant Act of 1862**

The Morrill Act, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862 and named after its sponsor, Vermont Congressman Justin Smith Morrill, dispensed federal land to states to establish permanent higher education institutions, specifying that the land-grant colleges provide educational opportunities in the areas of agriculture, mechanics, and engineering (Sorber, 2018). Opposed to private and religious institutions at the time, land-grants were aspired to offer more accessibility and educational opportunities to all citizens, not just the privileged elite.

In addition to postsecondary opportunities offered through the higher education institutions, the Morrill Act also established Extension Services to serve rural communities throughout the states. The Extension Service not only provided agricultural advice and support to farmers, but also offered an interconnectedness between the land-grant institutions and the people throughout the states (Sorber, 2018). There are numerous land-grant institutions and thriving Extension offices serving communities throughout the United States today due to the Morrill Act of 1862.

### **G.I. Bill**

The G.I. Bill, also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, was signed into law on June 22, 1944, by President Roosevelt. This Public Law supplied veterans who had served 90 days or more, or those discharged early through service disability, postsecondary education benefits upon their return from World War II (Bound & Turner, 2002). Contingent on the terms served and age, benefits expanded from a minimum of 1 year up to 4 years, with many men receiving the maximum benefits. The G.I. Bill has been considered one of the greatest educational and social changes in history, as it bestowed unprecedented federal sponsorship for veterans to attend college assessed by neither affluency nor aptitude (Bound & Turner, 2002).

For an overlying number of reasons, however, it was not probable for veterans who turned 18 years of age before the U.S. entered war to go to go back to college once the war was over and they returned home. Veterans who had already been in the workforce preceding enlistment into the military usually returned to their jobs. The age of veterans predicted their return to education upon return from the war, as they were likely to have other familial and financial responsibilities (Bound & Turner, 2002).

### **Higher Education Act of 1965**

The Higher Education Act of 1965, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, is a remarkable component of legislation in the United States that has had a deep-seated influence on postsecondary education and its correlation to economic mobility. The purpose of this act is to broaden access to higher education, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds through financial aid, work-study programs, loan programs, and institutional support (Fuller, 2014). Considerable contributions made to improving economic mobility by extending access to postsecondary education though the Higher Education Act have not been established without

obstacles. Rising costs of postsecondary education, student loan debt, and inequities in educational and economic outcomes continue to be areas of disturbing disparities (Fuller, 2014).

### **War on Poverty**

Due to the gaps in college access, enrollment, and completion by income level, many government programs were developed to provide financial support to low-income students during the days of the War on Poverty in the 1940's through the 1960's. Most of these programs, however, targeted youth between the ages of sixteen to twenty-five, who still faced barriers of lack of information of and preparation for college culture, as well as affordability, even with financial assistance from the government (Long, 2013). First-generation students from low-income backgrounds still rely heavily on student loans as the dominant form of aid today, which contradicts the original objective of the War on Poverty to increase equality in college attendance and economic mobility for low-income families.

Although not traditionally targeted by higher education institutions, non-traditional students, ages 25 and older, are more likely to have a better understanding and take greater advantage of government assistance in the form of grants (Long, 2013). For non-traditional first-generation low-income students to be able to take full advantage of government financial assistance opportunities, improved access through policy, practices, affordability, recruitment, community engagement, and flexible programming for this population should be addressed by higher education institutions.

### **First-generation Accessibility and Barriers**

In a 2012 study done by the Center for First-Generation Success, it was reported that 20% of the first-generation college students, the first or only in their family to attend college,

compared to 42% of continuing generation students, students with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, had completed a college degree. Only 3% of first-generation students had earned a master's degree, compared to 13% of continuing generation students (USDE, 2017). Students with limited college culture exposure also have limited tools to enroll in and complete a college degree to transform their socioeconomic status. Students in this population are also more likely to enroll in non-credit developmental courses, change majors frequently, lose financial aid eligibility due to lower GPAs, and withdraw or repeat classes, all resulting in slower accumulation of credits over time, and higher student loan debt (Furquim et al., 2017).

College readiness is typically measured by high school rigor, grade point average (GPA), test scores, and other academic performances. There are also non-academic factors, however, that are not considered in determining equal educational opportunities for today's youth.

Although early college program opportunities are increasing in high schools, students from all backgrounds continue to enter postsecondary institutions unprepared for the expectations and environment of college life, if they choose to enter at all. Although the American ethos poses education as the key to socioeconomic mobility for young people, regardless of background, the United States is no longer even considered as one of the most educated societies in the world, as more than a dozen other countries now take the lead in college graduation rates (Bastedo et al., 2016).

Perceptions, roles, responsibilities, and partnerships vary between secondary schools, students, parents, and higher education institutions, and they all contribute to the preparation, or lack thereof, of today's high school graduates' college readiness and success. Mixed ideological and political perceptions on what college readiness is also makes defining it a challenging task



(Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). Stronger partnerships and collaboration among secondary schools, students, parents, and higher education institutions can improve preparation opportunities for college readiness, especially when implemented with intentionality towards achieving common goals early (Nunley & Gemberling, 1999).

The National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) developed eight components that indicated college and career readiness, which include (a) college aspirations, (b) academic planning, (c) enrichment and extracurricular engagement, (d) college and career exploration and selection process, (e) college and career assessments, (f) college affordability, (g) college and career admissions processes, and (h) transition from high school graduation to college enrollment (Gilfillan, 2017). First-generation students must often rely on teachers and high school guidance counselors alone to develop these components of readiness, due to the lack of parental knowledge and involvement. Although guidance counselors accept their roles and responsibilities in fulfilling these eight components of college readiness, research shows that they do not perceive themselves as receiving the adequate training, nor time, to deliver these much-needed services to all students in need (Novakovic et al., 2021).

Despite the high student to counselor ratio and lack of preparation services, most high school students perceive themselves as being academically ready for college, based on the curriculum provided at the secondary level (Conley, 2005). These perceptions, however, vary based on backgrounds and demographics. First-generation students have different perceptions and tend not to take as many rigorous courses in high school; they also lack the advantage of having parental knowledge of the college and career selection process and may see college only as a means out of poverty, with no direction on how to get there. For these reasons, they may not

have the insight nor ability to choose the appropriate programs of study or higher education institutions that fit them best (Reid et al., 2008).

Parental education attainment and expectations affect high school graduates' aspirations to pursue higher education, along with family income, academic preparation, school culture, and beliefs about college affordability. Studies have found that family involvement benefit students from specific instruction on the logistics of college life prior to high school graduation, including how to select and register for courses, communicate appropriately with professors, budget money, and navigate the college environment (Rosa, 2006).

Parents of students from all backgrounds find it surprising that only a small amount of high school graduates are genuinely college ready (Conley, 2005). As high school teachers rely heavily on guidance counselors to provide high school students with college awareness and accessibility, parents of first-generation students must rely on both teachers and counselors to provide the preparation, information, and motivation required to support their child's college readiness and success.

High school curriculum is more directed at required courses, opposed to developing time management skills and the mental and emotional maturity to consider career and college choices (Conley, 2005). Parents who have never attended college not only lack the understanding of college readiness, but also the access to resourceful information to gain this knowledge and develop better understandings to assist and support their first-generation students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

### **Non-Traditional Accessibility and Barriers**

The term itself “Non-traditional Adult Learner” (NAL) is continually misused, misunderstood, and misinterpreted in postsecondary education. Many institutions only associate non-traditional adult learners with non-degree seeking senior citizens, non-credit continuing education students, or lifelong learners, but not as degree seeking students. NALs, also referred to as contemporary students, can be described as having any of the following characteristics: 25 years of age and older, employed full-time, financially independent from parents, parents themselves, and have been out of high school for at least one year before attending college (Johnson & Melchiorre, 2017). These characteristics create accessibility barriers for NALs, especially for those that are the first in their family to pursue postsecondary education. The American Council for Education found that over 40% of institutions indicate that they do not identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs and services, or financial aid (Chen, 2017).

Three barrier categories for NALs identified by Cross (1981) are situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers are based on personal circumstances such as working full-time, family and home responsibilities, and finances. Institutional barriers are those controlled by higher education institutions and include aspects of access to flexible degree programs, student services support, and financial assistance. Dispositional barriers are the most challenging to overcome and include personality, confidence, doubt, and perceptions developed in early cultural childhood educational experiences, including parental influence on the importance of postsecondary education (Saar et al., 2014). Dispositional barriers also have the most potential for intervention for future generations by improving the existing institutional barriers. As NALs

experience opportunities to pursue and achieve postsecondary education, the disposition of the generation after them improves, as well.

Motivation for NALs to pursue postsecondary education varies. Although the majority of low-income NALs do not participate in postsecondary education activities, those that do are doing so to improve the intergenerational socioeconomic status for themselves and their families (Francois, 2014). In most cases, however, NALs from higher levels of education attainment backgrounds and income levels, are those benefiting the most from the opportunities that are available for NALs, as they know better how to pursue and take advantage of them (Chen et al., 2008). Low-income, full-time working adults with little or no postsecondary education are often left caught in the sociocultural trap of lacking awareness, resources, and opportunity to pursue postsecondary education and increase intergenerational socioeconomic status (Scott et al., 2022).

In addition to socioeconomic mobility, other motivating factors for NALs to pursue postsecondary education include professional development, interests, and educational preparation (Francois, 2014). These factors indicate that NALs are motivated by personal life changing opportunities for learning that they can apply to their current circumstances. Circumstances for parents also include opportunities to transform the current college going culture for their children and future generations.

In addition to the NALs who have never pursued postsecondary education, there are also those that started but did not persist and complete, also known as nearbies (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). These students have proven that they have the aspiration and ability to complete college credit, and some have even come close to completion; however, they were not successful at postsecondary education credential attainment. First-generation students who overcome the

barriers of lacking a college going culture to enroll and eventually earn credit typically stop-out due to challenges related to institutional fit, resources, and relationships (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

One relationship that causes students to stop-out is the relationship they have with their chosen program of study. Career and major exploration should begin early, which does not tend to happen, especially with first-generation students. A study conducted in 2012 (Jenkins & Cho) showed that more than 50% of the students that chose their program of study within the first year of college graduated with a bachelor's degree within five years. Career choice and college aspirations are conversations that are typically not happening in non-going college cultures as early and as often as they are in continuing postsecondary education cultures.

Deciding students, those that have not declared a major of study, typically represent one of the largest clusters of potentially at-risk students on a university campus (McKenzie & Reinheimer, 2011). Less than 25% of all students drop out because of academic failure, and more than 75% of students who leave college do so because of difficulty related to a lack of fit between the skills and interests of students and the organization of educational institutions, their formal structures, resources, and patterns of association (Bers & Scuetz, 2014).

A study conducted in 2009 (Johnson et al) asked more than 600 former students why they stopped out before attaining their degree, and 60% of stop-outs responded that they were working full-time, had no family financial support, and needed health care options. Changes that 80% of the respondents in the study shared that could have increased the likelihood of completion included additional financial aid and health care, and flexible degree programming for working adults.

In a mixed methods study conducted in 2023 (Barrett Brown & Weeks) it was determined that most students who withdrew during a five-semester span did so because of personal (19.8%), financial (15.5%), and mental health (12.5%) reasons. The data from this study also shows the need for additional financial literacy and support for students, as over 15% of students stated financial issues as the reason for withdrawal. Improved financial literacy for parents and students beginning in secondary education and continuing through each step of the academic career can help both generations better understand the costs of postsecondary education and assist them in how to balance work with academics and navigate financial challenges.

Nearbies, who are often first generation, have also reported that they were unclear on college practices and policies, and that they did not have a full understanding of required courses, their chosen program of study, or the value of their career choice (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). This often leaves this population with no degree, student loan debt, and in most cases in worse financial circumstances than what they started in.

### **Multigenerational Outcomes**

In addition to access and student services for first-generation youth, a more two-generational approach would be even more beneficial to help better prepare and equip parents to educate themselves, along with their children. Although two-generational approaches are new, and outcome research on program evaluations are still limited, practitioners, policymakers and researchers should act on the assumption that economic security and overall well-being passes from generation to the next, and that change starts with parents (Ascend, 2016). As parents advance their own education and socioeconomic status, their children become better prepared to

do the same, expanding life opportunities for all future generations (Chase-Landsdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

First-generation students cover an intersectionality of demographics including race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status. By neglecting the root of the challenges first-generation students face, such as parental education attainment, the cycle will continue. Intentional effort to improve postsecondary opportunities and outcomes for parents and youth will improve the socioeconomic status of one family and generations to come.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although there is an extensive volume of literature on first-generation youth, and a growing amount of research on non-traditional adult learners, there is currently little research on the interconnectedness of the two. The cultural-historic relationship between these populations contributes to both similar and unique intergenerational challenges and opportunities. Two-generational approaches to access and success for parents and youth are an emerging trend that still needs to be explored and assessed.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter summarizes the phenomenological qualitative research methodology used for conducting the study of intergenerational postsecondary education's influence on economic mobility. Lived experiences and perspectives of college graduates from diverse backgrounds are investigated and analyzed to determine how the cultural-historical activity of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment either leveraged or disadvantaged succeeding generations' economic mobility opportunities. A detailed description of the research design, role of the researcher, research questions, context of the study, ethical considerations, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis, and participants rights are presented.

#### **Research Design**

Phenomenological qualitative research design, with a hermeneutic approach, is the selected method for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility from the personal perspectives of college graduates from a cultural-historical activity theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phenomenological study explores, interprets, and illustrates the shared nature of postsecondary graduates' life-world experiences with intergenerational postsecondary education attainment, and its influence and intentionality on economic mobility. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is best suited for this study through a hermeneutic approach as participants interpret their personal experiences within the contexts of their worlds, and the researcher interprets the participants' interpretations (Smith, 2004). Experiences from first-generation students, along with those of continuing generation



students, allows the researcher to analyze multiple perspectives on the single phenomenon of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility (Larkin et al., 2019).

The objective data of the phenomenon that intergenerational postsecondary education equals economic mobility is typically defined by measurable, tangible, and quantifiable realities (Kim et al., 2019); however, phenomenological qualitative research dives deeper into the essence of the subjective lived experiences from a cultural-historical activity theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This framework not only relates to the cultural-historical activities of generations of families, but also that of higher education institutions, and how they have historically served students of all ages in the past and are serving diverse age groups today.

Postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility within cultural systems varies and are contingent on background and circumstantial conditions where constituents are established in connection to other components of the system, such as the prior generation (Jenlink, 2013). This research approach empowers the researcher to gain insight into the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility. Gaining a deeper understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of this activity links participants' perspectives to conceptual theories (Kim, 2019).

### **Role of the Researcher**

I, as the researcher, for this methodology, interpret life-world perspectives and perceptions of others, while considering my own personal and professional experiences that guide the topic, research questions, methodology, and analysis. As an enrollment counselor at a large institution, I volunteered to mentor first-generation, low-income, first year students out of

high school. This experience was a reminder not only of what it was like to be a low-income student among more privileged peers, but it also provided a personal perspective on the role and responsibility of policy makers and institutions to better understand and serve this population.

In addition to working with the first-generation youth, my experiences as both a student and as an academic advisor for non-traditional adult learners in degree completion programs at a small institution helped me to realize the necessity of access for non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds. In addition to financial support, and course credit for life experiences to shorten time and cost to degree completion, it was crucial for students in these programs to have access to available programs outside of traditional, on-campus, 9am-5pm schedules. Low-income students, especially parents, have no choice but to work full-time to survive while pursuing a college degree and require better access to education.

In addition, I am also a first-generation college graduate from a low socioeconomic status background who utilized financial aid to obtain degree credentials and increase socioeconomic mobility. It is acknowledged that this positionality may influence this research and that it is important to remember that not every first-generation, or continuing generation student, has the same experiences and outcomes.

I also passionately believe that although postsecondary education may not be for everyone, the access and ability to obtain it should be available to all. There are instances that families experience socioeconomic mobility with and without postsecondary education; however, it is my belief that education changes lives in more ways than only monetarily. From first-year students out of high school, to adult learners, transfers, and graduates, my commitment

to decrease challenges students face from low socioeconomic backgrounds is personal, professional, and profound.

Beginning a postsecondary career as an Academic Advisor in 2003, it became clear that an occupation in higher education could have the biggest influence on breaking down the barriers that others have fought the hard way to overcome. Recognizing the many factors that contributed to the difficulties I experienced in my early college career, the challenges I personally endured as an at risk, first generation, low-income college student are now appreciated. Terms that I did not know existed as an 18-year-old struggling to survive have become my inspiration.

I am interested in links between first-generation, low-income students and the college going culture of the previous generation. I am concerned about the lack of college preparation for low-income students in urban and rural high schools who have parents with no postsecondary credentials, nor knowledge thereof. I am motivated by parents and students that have the desire to build a better life than the generation before them through education, and I feel a responsibility to contribute to their successes and socioeconomic mobility. I am also inspired by academic professionals who put students from all backgrounds first by genuinely looking out for their best interests.

In my current role in higher education, I continue to search for networking and collaboration opportunities to build partnerships for better academic accessibility for all. Experiencing various aspects of university departments, faculty, staff, and students throughout 20 years of career experiences allows me to view climates and cultures from many populations'

perspectives, which is essential in being able to develop research and deliver results as a change-agent in the field.

### **Context**

Social media posts with a link to a survey were shared across Facebook and LinkedIn platforms, targeting alumni of both two-year and four-year institutions to determine criteria for participation in the study. The post stated the study's purpose, an introduction to the researcher, and expectations. Demographic information on the survey included age, current location, ethnicity, highest degree earned, and first-generation status. Participants self-defined their education attainment, along with their first-generation status based on their perceptions and meaning of understanding. Self-defining these data points not only allows the researcher to purposefully select interview participants with multiple perspectives, but also to do so based on survey respondents' understanding of the construed understanding of their past and current realities (Larkin, 2019). Those who completed the brief survey were then purposely selected to be sent an invitation email. The email further explained details of the study and ensured the confidentiality of participants at all levels of the study, along with the Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval.

### **Participants**

The survey was given a deadline of one week to submit, and participants were then selected by purposeful sampling and invited to participate in a one-hour interview based on the responses to the survey. IPA studies are generally conducted on small-scale samples of five to ten participants to capture a complex comprehensive analysis (Smith, 2004). Ten participants were selected for this study in the range of postsecondary degree attainment from an associate

degree to a doctoral degree. To ensure data triangulation, participants include those who are first-generation graduates, and those who are not. Participants are also from various programs of study, locations, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This is important, as it provides the researcher with more in-depth knowledge of multiple diverse backgrounds and perspectives. By gaining insight to the experiences of not only graduates from first-generation low-income backgrounds, but also those of continuing generation affluent backgrounds, the researcher is able to analyze and synthesize within and between samples to gain a multi-dimensional perspective (Larkin, 2019).

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom, and consisted of eight open-ended questions that were completed within one hour. The questions were developed to discuss the meaning of postsecondary education and economic mobility experiences and the influence that previous generations had on those experiences. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to probe and delve into meaningful matters that arise during the interview in real-time (Smith, 2004). Although bracketing is maintained throughout the study, the researcher does share minimal personal experiences to develop rapport and equality in questioning, interpreting, and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview will explore the following critical areas:

- Participants' motivation to pursue postsecondary education.
- The impact of postsecondary education on participants' economic mobility.
- Intergenerational elements' influence on postsecondary education and economic mobility.

- Challenges, barriers, and opportunities experienced in pursuit of postsecondary education and economic mobility.
- Participants' perspectives on the position of postsecondary education in disrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty or enhancement of economic opportunities.

These areas in inquiry will be explored to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?
2. How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?
3. To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility?

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the eight interview questions. The data from the interviews was first organized by zoom transcripts, and then reduced to themes through cleaning and coding in Dedoose. The themed codes, “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016, p.4) are then be represented in data tables, figures, and discussion. The analytic strategies used during the qualitative analysis included sketching reflective thinking, working with words, identifying codes, reducing codes to themes, counting frequency of codes, relating categories, relating categories to analytic framework in literature, creating a point of view, and displaying and reporting the data. The analysis was completed in the following steps (Creswell & Poth, 2018):

- Transcription: Zoom interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.
- Open Coding: Major meaningful categories of information are coded.
- Axial Coding: Participants' experiences are represented in themes and sub-themes by categorizing the opening codes.
- Selective Coding: Identified themes are consolidated into a systemic description of participants' life-world experiences.
- Member Checking: Summarization of researcher's interpretation and quotes to be used were shared with each participant following the interview for review for an opportunity to report back on credibility and dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Significant statements and quotes are also highlighted into themes that bring forth the knowledge of how participants have made meaning of their experiences through horizontalization, and clusters of themes that are developed into descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, analytic memos from the researcher's thoughts during the research process are analyzed and coded as supplemental data for the study. The notebook of memos reviews and reflects on "coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes and concepts in data possibly leading to theory" (Saldana, 2016, p. 44).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is approved through the Institutional Research Board (IRB), and the IRB approval was shared with participants. Each participant's informed consent was required prior to interviews ensuring their full understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and

benefits. Participants were also made aware of the study's voluntary nature, along with their rights to withdraw from it at any time without consequence. Confidentiality of participants was also protected by removing personal identifiers from data, therefore avoiding the disclosure of personally identifiable information. Survey responses were deleted along with interviews once the study had been analyzed and completed.

The potential vulnerability of certain groups is considered, such as minorities, low-income families, or individuals with limited education. Power dynamics and cultural sensitivity are also considered in recruitment materials, selecting interview participants and interview questions so that research is conducted in an ethical and equitable manner.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has defined the research design, participant selection, data collection, the researcher's role, ethical considerations, and the data analysis guiding the study on intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility. The findings are presented in the following chapter based on the themes and narratives obtained through the data analysis.

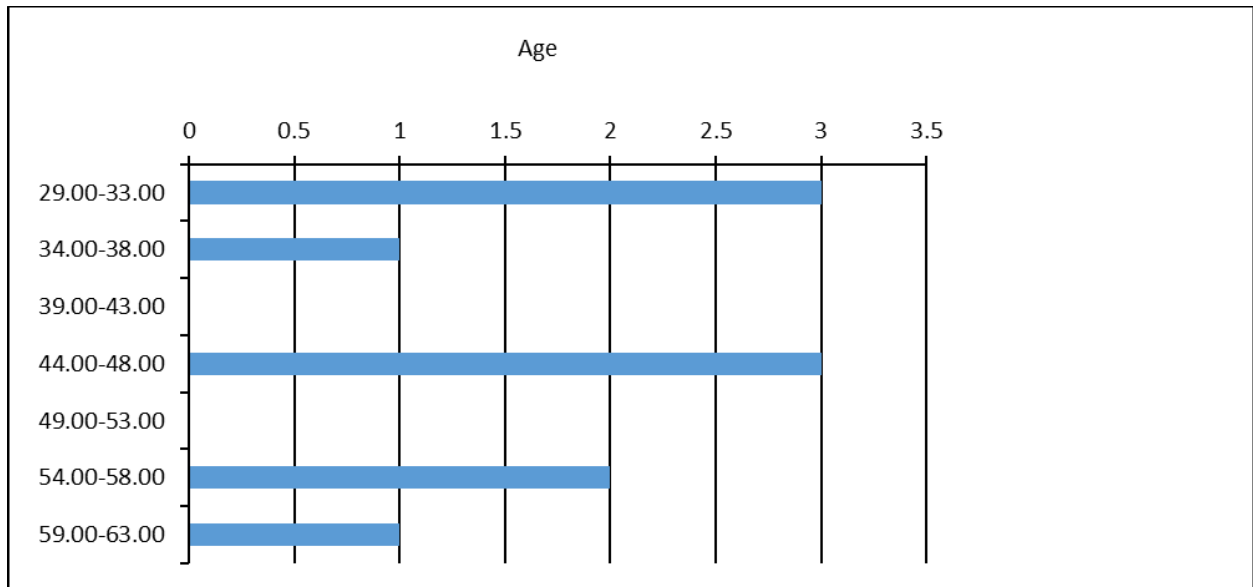


**Table 1**

## Participant Characteristics

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Education Level	Parent Education Level	Grandparent Education Level
#1	45	Female	African American	Professional Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Unknown
#2	33	Female	White	Master's Degree	Some College	Unknown
#3	44	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	Some College	Unknown
#4	60	Male	White	Doctoral Degree	High School Diploma	Unknown
#5	54	Female	White	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree	Bachelor's Degree
#6	45	Male	White	Associate degree	High School Diploma	Did not complete High School
#7	30	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Unknown
#8	50	Female	White	Bachelor's Degree	No High School Diploma	Unknown
#9	29	Female	White	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Unknown
#10	38	Female	White	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Unknown

\*Participants are in order based on the order in which the interviews were conducted.

**Table 2**

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence intergenerational postsecondary education attainment has on succeeding generations' attainment and economic mobility, and to determine how institutional factors play a role in intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility. Characteristics and experiences of individuals across multiple generations are examined and explained through an eight open-ended question interview. Upon the response to an invitation survey, selected participants were invited to participate and scheduled the interview, which was conducted, recorded, and transcribed by Zoom. The transcript was cleaned and was then coded and analyzed in Dedoose by code frequency. Four major common themes emerged from the codes including, environment and exposure, expectation and encouragement, experience, and equal opportunity to postsecondary education and economic mobility. The four common themes that surfaced from the data answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?

RQ2: How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?

RQ3: To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary educational attainment and economic mobility?

### **Participant #1**

Participant #1 is a 45-year-old African American female from the Southeast region of the United States who holds a professional Pharmacy degree and completed an undergraduate degree

in Chemistry. She shares that her mother completed a bachelor's degree, and that her father was in the military. She is not certain of the education attainment levels of all her grandparents, but she is aware that she at least had a grandmother who completed high school. Participant #1 is the only participant of the African American race to respond to the survey with interest in participating in the interview. Participant #1 comes from a cultural college-going background that encourages postsecondary education and economic mobility. She has successfully pursued, navigated, and persisted towards these endeavors, and now continues to pass these experiences and expectations on to future generations of nieces and nephews. In addition to the intergenerational influence of expectations and experiences she has passed on as an aunt, participant #1 also contributes to society as a resource of knowledge and service in the field of medicine in her community, and beyond.

### **Participant #2**

Participant #2 is a 33-year-old White female from the Northeast currently residing in the Southeast region of the United States. The participant has earned a master's degree, and both parents have some college, while the highest education attainment level for grandparents is unknown. Participant #2 pursued and persisted through postsecondary education attainment with supportive culture and self-determination. Although postsecondary education attainment was not obtained by either of this participant's parents, both parents pursued it and prepared the next generation through encouragement and support to complete it. The participant now works in higher education and assists other college students in pursuing their own career goals as a career counselor at a higher education institution. Regarding the influence her postsecondary education

attainment and economic mobility has on future generations, she states that, “Those are conversations we'll (she and her college graduate husband) will have with our kids.”

### **Participant #3**

Participant #3 is a 44-year-old White male from the Northeast currently residing in the Southeast region of the United States. The participant earned a bachelor's degree, one parent has some college, and degree attainment of grandparents is unknown. Participant #3 pursued and persisted through postsecondary education with the support of his parents and an athletic scholarship. Through the goal of pursuing a career in professional baseball, the participant made athletic connections while pursuing his degree to obtain the position he is in today. Regarding generational influence and equal opportunity, the participant shares:

I think it was just my parents wanting a better life for us than what they felt they had.

They wanted what's best for their children. I mean as a parent; I feel the same way for my kids. So, they were willing to do anything and everything to help make that dream of getting a college degree a reality.

### **Participant #4**

Participant #4 is a 60-year-old White male from the Northeast region of the United States. The participant has a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree, and neither parents nor grandparents pursued postsecondary education. Participant #4 pursued and persisted through postsecondary education to earn a Ph.D. degree with little experience and exposure to a college-going culture from his parents, although he did have an uncle who earned a Ph.D. His mother's strong encouragement and the introduction to postsecondary education from cousins and siblings was influential in his pursuit, although persistence was not achieved without barriers and

challenges. The participant changed his present circumstances through elevated levels of postsecondary education attainment, and in doing so, shifted the future generations of his family, and the students he currently teaches at a higher education institution.

### **Participant #5**

Participant #5 is a White 54-year-old female from the Southeast region of the United States. One parent earned a Ph.D., and the participant earned a master's degree and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. The participant also had a grandparent who pursued and persisted through postsecondary education to become a Nurse. Participant #5 was exposed to and experienced postsecondary education early and at an extraordinary level as the daughter of a university professor. Postsecondary education was a way of life where economic benefits were not even the main goal, but a given. Following in her father's footsteps, and reaching for higher elevations, she plans to continue the pursuit of her Ph.D., and her daughter plans on being a teacher. She and her college graduate husband have passed on the cultural-historical activity of postsecondary education attainment to their next generation of children, who have and continue to reap the benefits of her and her husband's and her father's pursuit and persistence.

### **Participant #6**

Participant #6 is a 45-year-old White male from the Northeast who now resides in the Southeast region of the United States. This participant has recently earned an associate in arts degree and is pursuing a bachelor's degree. He is the first of any in his family to pursue postsecondary education, and his parents were the first in his family to graduate high school. Participant #6 did not experience an environment where he was exposed, encouraged, or given

equal opportunity to pursue and persist towards postsecondary education and economic mobility based on his intergenerational background.

Despite the availability and utilization of federal financial aid funding opportunities, generations of hard workers and survivors in his family were never even given a hint of a postsecondary education possibility, until #6 tried, twice. Although the first part of his journey was treacherous and the second round is still in progress and challenging as an adult learner, he has already improved and transformed his financial and career outlook and overall quality of life for his family, and for future generations.

### **Participant #7**

Participant #7 is a 30-year-old White male from the Midwest region of the United States. He earned a bachelor's degree and both parents hold bachelor's degrees, as well. Participant #7 was a traditional college aged student pursuing postsecondary education under favorable circumstances as a first-year student out of high school. Even though he was supported by his family, he still experienced feelings of uncertainty regarding career and major selection, as well as the institution being the right fit during the first year. After taking a gap year to join the workforce and explore career possibilities, he returned as a transfer student to another institution and persisted towards postsecondary attainment, and economic advancement through the continued encouragement and support from his parents.

### **Participant #8**

Participant #8 is a 58-year-old White female who is originally from the Northeast and now resides in the Midwest region of the United States. She earned a bachelor's degree as a non-traditional student in her early 50's, and neither of her parents graduated high school. Participant

#8 began her postsecondary education journey in a non-college going cultural environment with no exposure, experience, encouragement, nor equal opportunity. Through persistence, patience, and perseverance, participant #8 not only gained professional opportunities that she would not have had without postsecondary education credentials, but she also accomplished a personal goal of economic independence that is exposed for future generations to observe, embrace, and pursue.

### **Participant #9**

Participant #9 is a 29-year-old White female from the Midwest region of the United States. The participant has a master's degree, and one parent has completed a bachelor's degree, while the other parent has some college. Participant #9 was a traditional first-year student out of high school from a strong postsecondary education environment of exposure and encouragement. Although the tools and resources were all in place for this participant, options and opportunities on major selection and career outlooks were not thoroughly addressed at any institutional level. She is currently in a corporate career setting and continues to explore opportunities for education and career advancement.

### **Participant #10**

Participant #10 is a 38-year-old White female from the Northeast, currently residing in the Southeast region of the United States. The participant has earned a bachelor's degree, and both parents are also college graduates. Although she had the advantage of educational exposure and was encouraged to pursue postsecondary education, participant #10 was not the traditional first year out of high school student that graduated in four years with little to no student loan debt. Coming from a middle-class family, additional financial resources were required, and



working full-time opposed to attending college full-time right of high school led her on a non-traditional student path. Although the path was not short in distance, nor challenges, participant #10 succeeded in pursuing her postsecondary education and professional career. She did so with student loan debt; however, she feels that the return on investment from her quality of life as an elementary school teacher is valued higher than the salary she earns.

### **Themes**

The following section discusses the development of common themes that emerged from the participants perspectives of their experiences. Themes are described and quotes from participants are discussed in relation to how they answer research questions.

#### **Environment and Exposure**

For this study, environment and exposure refers to the perceptions individuals from various backgrounds have of their experiences of cultural-historical surroundings, settings, conditions, relationships, and circumstances. This theme considers postsecondary education and economic mobility exposure from home, family, community, and institutional environments.

Participant #1 shares that she was and is still exposed to an environment of lifelong learners. She explains how her mother continues to pursue educational opportunities at the community college as a life-long learner, which motivates the participant to consider pursuing her own levels of higher education. She shares that her father is also still always learning new things. Participant #1 provides examples of the type of educational exposure and the influence it has on her perceptions and aspirations of education:

Even though, like right now, my mom, you know, she got her bachelor's degree, I think in '89ish somewhere there about, and even though she worked full time,

retired, and is in her retirement, she's still going back to the community college and learning and excelling. So, I feel kind of like a slacker, you know? Like, I'm not using my time wisely to learn new things. It doesn't have anything to do with what her jobs were before, but it's more of like a passion, or something that she enjoys. My father, the same thing. He likes to rebuild cars and different things like that. So, you know, he is YouTube and Google, those are his new tutors/teachers. I just feel that just from their examples that education, no matter at what level the community college, or advanced education, is still valuable, and it brings value to our everyday experiences, our conversations.

In addition to participant #1's parental exposure to education enthusiasm, she also shares the influence of her cousins'. This indicates that cultural exposure to postsecondary education expands past immediate vertical generations and has influence across horizontal generations, as well. The participant shares the influence her cousins had on her experiences in the following way, "I relied on my cousins, we relied on each other." Some of her cousins' professions are in the dentistry field, as she discusses the relation to her own profession in medicine.

Participant #2's undergraduate environment was in the Northeast where she pursued postsecondary education with supportive parents. Once she graduated with an undergraduate degree, it was determined that a higher level of education was required in her chosen career path, and she became less dependent on parental support throughout the graduate program:

I went to get my master's degree because I was not going to be able to move forward in anything that I wanted to do until I had a master's program. That was just kind of where I was in New York. In order to get a job in higher education you really did need to have a

master's degree. So, I knew I had to go right into it, because I knew I wouldn't, if I stopped, I wouldn't go back.

The participant's mother and father both pursued postsecondary education, so it was not necessarily unknown to their culture. The participant's mother's and father's experiences were both at the community college level, which they did not complete due to varying circumstances, such as starting a family. Once finishing an undergraduate degree at a four-year institution, the participant's first-hand exposure to the higher education environment itself led her to pursue a master's degree and a career in postsecondary education.

Participant #3 comes from an athletic environment where college was determined to be the next step in the pursuit of professional athletics. The participant relocated from the Northeast and to the Southeast in pursuit of postsecondary education through an athletic baseball scholarship. While being unsure of a major and career choice outside of professional baseball, family communication was a strong and influential factor in this participant's environment. He recalls his parents as being the "first level of listeners," and the importance of having "communication with Mom and Dad," regarding future education and career plans. Friends in the community did not typically go away to college and he shared that, "A lot of kids stayed local. So, I was kind of the oddball that I was looking at different places."

Participant #3 also had cousins and siblings who pursued and persisted through postsecondary education attainment, which provided some college-going environment exposure.

Although his parents did not have the same opportunities to pursue a four-year education as he did, his mom did attend some college, and his dad went to trade school. Participant #3 was

the oldest of the siblings to pursue and persist and parental postsecondary education exposure was limited, as the participant explains:

I just remember hearing their voices back then, saying when they were kids, just getting through high school was good. There were a lot of unknowns because my parents never truly experienced that. Being an athlete, I started getting recruited by colleges and universities throughout the country, and so the process was new to the three of us. We probably asked questions that seemed amateurish just because we didn't know any better.

This participant's geographical exposure and environment changed to postsecondary education and economic mobility grew through the opportunity of athletic scholarship, and it was also increased by cousins in the family.

Although participant #4 had many cousins who pursued postsecondary education, he was not initially inclined to do so:

I, personally, did not want to go to college because all my friends were not going to college, they were going to get jobs. I started working when I was about 16, so I just really thought I would do that. I would say that kind of working-class mentality was very strong in our family.

Despite cousins and siblings pursuing the opportunity of postsecondary education, this participant was still reluctant to deviate from the community culture:

I think a lot of people in our neighborhood wondered like, 'What are you doing? You? You're not a college person, you're not.' You know you had the local veterinarian, probably the banker. Not a lot of people where I grew up and, in the neighborhood, we lived in had college degrees, so I'd say I had to kind of push back. It was not easy,

because culturally, for me, at least, it seemed to go against everything in my so-called friend circle.

The participant shares that his dad had an eighth-grade education, and that for his mother, “It was just unheard of for any woman to go to college.” Regarding grandparents, participant #4 shares that, “They really hit really hard times during the Great Depression, and that sort of set my parents on their sort of path.” Although not direct exposure, the participant does speak of an uncle who had earned a PhD, and that many cousins and his sibling pursued and persisted towards postsecondary education, as well.

Participant #5’s experience and exposure to postsecondary education is extensive. The extent of her father’s postsecondary education attainment level (Ph.D.), along with his profession as a university professor, highly relates to her personal pursuit and persistence. In discussing this relationship, the participant states:

I don't think I ever considered not going to college. That was just what we were going to do, you know your father being a professor, kind of is it applied inference on how important education is, and certainly was for me.

As she explains it, “My Father taught at the university for 36 years, and so I've always been around a college environment.” Participant #5 comes from a strong college-going cultural background, where she was exposed to the campus community and postsecondary education environment early in life and pursued college right out of high school as a traditional college student and successfully persisted through multiple degrees and professions.

Participant #6 shares that environment and exposure experiences to postsecondary education and economic mobility was nonexistent, and the extent of the relationship it had on his

personal pursuit and persistence is evident. In describing his parents' postsecondary education attainment levels, he shares that, "College really wasn't even a starter, it was a nonstarter for them. Nobody even talked about it. So, college was a far reach, a fairytale." The type of environment and exposure participant #6 did experience in his culture was hard physical labor:

I just remember seeing my mom tired. My dad worked night shift, so he was always tired. It was like, really the only thing that I saw was hard physical labor, or the other side was no job at all, like I had a lot of people in my family who lived off the system, and you know who milked it, who just did nothing all day, and sat around and drank beer and lived off their welfare check. Between that and hard physical labor, I mean that when I was growing up it was almost like that was the only route.

Participant #6 did have the desire and drive to do more than previous generations; however, he shares that the only other options to pursue economic advancement outside of what he saw in his environment was pursuing the dream of becoming a professional athlete:

Back then you start thinking of ways to try to get out of it, and that was a more realistic way. I'll tell you what. It was more realistic to me to become a major NFL football player than it was to go to college when I was growing up.

Participant #6 describes both the urban and rural areas where he grew up as extremely poor, where most people do not leave. His father graduated high school in the late 1960's and was described as, "more of a working person. He wanted you to go to work." The participant's parents were both the first in either family to complete high school, and as #6 explained it,

College really wasn't even a starter; it was a nonstarter for them. Nobody even talked about it. My dad and mom are both gone, but in my whole life, I've never even heard

them mention one time that they were ever even thinking about going to college. I think it was something that they viewed the rich people having the opportunity to do, so college was a far reach. Nobody I knew went to college to be honest with you, so it was an unknown.

Participant #6's exposure and environment never included economic mobility through postsecondary education, nor did his parents'.

Participant #7 shares that his postsecondary education experience was similar to his parents', and to his brothers', as he explains, "My parents experience and my personal experience, I think they both kind of line up. So, I started off going straight out of high school with the freshman year." Although the participant took a gap year and transferred to another institution the following year, he indicated that he had family support all the way through and was exposed to an environment of economic mobility through postsecondary education.

Participant #8 is the youngest of an entire generation that came before her. All but one brother, who is five years older than her, were grown and had started their own families by the time she graduated high school. The culture she experienced growing up consisted of what was considered traditional female and male roles. As she describes it, "The females were homemakers, and that is where they stayed. Raise the children and stay at home, and then the men got into like the coal mines, or some sort of a trade."

The participant shares that graduating high school was the goal for her, as neither parent had, and they wanted that for her. Regarding plans after high school, she states:

Nothing about postsecondary education was really brought up. It's like graduate high school, graduate high school, but to continue after that, nothing was ever really brought

up, mentioned, no preparation was never put in place for that, and I think that's because it was generational.

She describes the environment she grew up in as a small coal mining town, where people without an advanced education went into the coal mines and were able to make a decent living for their families. In terms of postsecondary education, she goes on to share that:

There was not a lot of emphasis put on that, and there was not a whole lot of support there for that, and I'm not putting any blame on anyone, it just, it just wasn't part of the culture. There was a little bit of fear toward it, too.

Not only in her family, but even in the community, she shares that pursuing postsecondary education happened, but not by many in this small rural town. She indicates that for most people in the culture:

It was the same path, like the females, they didn't have a lot of autonomy or independence in their life. I don't think they were self-sustaining and with that I just thought, I didn't want to be put in that type of culture. That's when I knew that I had to do more and pursue more of a postsecondary education so that more doors would open for me just as an individual.

The generational and environmental lack of a college-going culture is apparent for this participant, and she perceived postsecondary education as the tool to break the cycle of female dependence.

Participant #9 shares that her postsecondary education experience was vastly different from her parents' paths. She was a traditional first-year college student right out of high school and persisted straight through, whereas she states, "My mom got her college degree later in life



and my dad did some college but didn't finish, so it was just kind of like an easy decision for me to go." She also shares that the postsecondary education institution she attended after transferring after her first year was an extension of her high school that many of her friends were attending, so the exposure and environment was strong at the institutional level.

In addition to being exposed to a postsecondary education environment early and often, participant #9 explains that she also experienced a family culture where, as she puts it, "You know that you have to work to get to a certain point and just like work your way up."

Participant #10 experienced exposure to a postsecondary education environment, as she explains, "That's just what they did. We grew up as a middle-class family, so, we had a good life. We were able to travel, have a lot of things that you know poor families couldn't do." Although both parents completed postsecondary education, she does distinguish a difference between her mother and father. "My dad's side of the family is very blue collar, very working class, so they did not really value education the way my mom's side did. Both of my mom's parents were college educated."

### **Expectation and Encouragement**

Participant #1 expresses multiple times that she was encouraged to pursue postsecondary education by her parents, as well as other family members, as she explains:

Like I said, education was always encouraged. I went locally, and I did that for about three years, and then, while I was working part-time, I was interested in pharmacy, so I was encouraged to apply to Pharmacy School. I had a couple family members that were at a university, and they encouraged me to apply.

Participant #1 indicates that family attitude “heavily” influenced her decision to pursue higher education as she explains:

It’s almost like, if you didn't go to college or something, you were kind of like, you weren’t in favor. Not that they were mean or anything to you like that, but when you complain about your job, or if you wanted to get paid more money, you’re going to have to do this. I had a part-time job, back in the day when I made \$4.25 an hour, I just knew that I could never live on my own. And then, you know, working part time in a pharmacy, it was always busy, and I'm just like man, I don't have enough money to move out if I wanted to. That was another motivating factor for me to finish college.

Participant #1 experienced encouragement to pursue postsecondary education and was expected to do so to experience economic mobility.

Although participant #2 did not express a lot of exposure to college going cultures from previous or concurrent generations, she did indicate that there was always strong encouragement from her parents. In planning the postsecondary education endeavor, the participant’s mother insisted on her daughter pursuing a four-year degree. As the participant explains it,

I wanted to actually start at a community college to save my parents some money, but my mom was like, ‘Nope, you're going to four-year school. You're going to get the full experience, and that's that. So, community college was off the table. I went to a four-year school and loved my experience. I think a lot of what I did stemmed from what my mom has done or didn't do in the past.

Neither participant’s parent obtained a four-year degree; however, the expectation and encouragement they expressed was critical in their daughter's pursuit and persistence. “It was

mainly just my parents. They were kind of at the forefront. They were just like, you just need to go to college, so, no matter what you go to school for but go to college kind of thing.” The participant also describes her own expectations as she states, “So I really wanted to make them happy. I am always a people pleaser. I saw what my brothers did, and they weren't really the most studious.”

Postsecondary education opportunities were limited for this participant #3's parents' generation, and they stressed even more the importance of it for their children. In addition to participant #3 sharing the strong communication shared between himself and his parents, their support seemed to be unwavering, as well. He describes their support in this way:

I would say once they once they heard, you know my plan, they were 100% supportive, and they did everything they could to help me. I think if I chose to do something other than college, they would have been supportive, too, but I think they're always cheering for us to, you know, to go that route, get it done. I think it just the way my parents spoke about it to my generation, it was just a way of life that this is something that you're going to have to do to succeed in the world.

Regarding other members of his family, he shared that:

Thinking of how my cousins were, it almost seems like everybody's parents within my family were just pushing you to pursue how you felt was going to help advance your life to make it a more quality life.

Participant #3 had some scholarship assistance with funding his postsecondary education pursuits, and parental assistance and involvement was needed, as well, as he shares:

I vividly remember Mom and Dad saying, let's get the school that's right for you, and we're going to figure out how to pay for it. I mean, I am very fortunate and extremely lucky I was able to get an athletic scholarship, baseball players do not get full scholarships, and that's true today. So, you would get a partial athletic scholarship, and I took out a student loan, Mom and Dad took out I guess they probably applied through FAFSA back then. So, they went through that route and we all just kind of carried the burden of it.

Encouragement and expectation were strong for participant #3 and the institutional support of scholarship along with his parents provided favorable circumstances and outcomes.

The postsecondary education and economic mobility cultural and family expectations for participant #4 was minimal; however, hard work was evident in both realms of his reality. In describing his cultural experiences, he shares:

Where and how I grew up, making a living is everything, and there's no inheritance.

There's no big, you know, pot of money that's going to help people when they need it.

And so, I've always felt this very strongly and I think a lot of that came from my parents and their experience being children during the Great Depression. They just really instilled this idea that you have to have a job and so, it took me a while to understand that going to college would help me be able to provide not only for myself, but then for our family.

Although hard work was a cultural staple in the community and the family of this participant, it did take family expectations and encouragement to pursue and persist through postsecondary education for this participant, as he describes the strong influence of his sister and his mother:

My sister was four years older than I was. I think my mother always, you know, dreamed of going to college, but it wasn't possible for her. So, I think they just assumed that I would want to go. I would say for her it was very important. and she wanted my sister and I to do really well. I'd say that was the assumption that if you went to college you'd do well, and it definitely was seen as a way to get out of you know our circumstances.

The expectation and encouragement the participant received from his immediate family members has since passed on the next generation, as he explains:

Then the assumption for our kids was that they'd definitely go to college, and there was no discussion about that. It was just the assumption. And I would say, most of my cousins, now that they have had kids, they're all sending them to college.

The lack of postsecondary education and economic mobility over generations was broken by this participants' persistence to pursue and persist and pass on the benefits to the next generation.

Participant #5, who grew up the daughter of a university professor, explained that not only was she expected and encouraged to pursue postsecondary education, but that she also had a strong desire to. There was never any doubt that she would pursue and persist through academic aspirations and achievements, as she explains:

I don't think I ever considered not going to college. That was just what we were going to do, you know your father being a professor, kind of is it applied inference on how important education is, and certainly was for me.

She also shares that the economic mobility aspect of postsecondary education was not as important or discussed as much in her family as the overall quality of life benefits that education

provides. This is also an aspect of postsecondary education attainment that the participant has continued to pass on her own children, as well, as she explains:

I try to relate to our children, too, not only for the economic benefits, but just how it's going to affect them in all aspects of their life, and the way that they interact with the world and with others. So, we talk about that a lot. We talk to our children about the economic benefits, but also just all the benefits economically within the community, and even health wise. We have a very well-grounded perspective that we give to our children.

Participant #5's grandparent started the cultural-history activity of encouragement and expectation for postsecondary education, and economic mobility has followed.

Participant #6 shares that he started to think about college in a tangible way during his junior and senior year of high school as a possibility. He also indicates that he really was not thinking of it as a possibility until he received the university acceptance letter and financial aid package from the submission his high school guidance counselor assists him with. He then began to see postsecondary education as a possibility, as he explains:

When I actually got the acceptance letter with my financial aid package, it actually became a reality that I was going to school, and my dad actually got mad, and tried to talk me out of it. So, like the barriers to bear were there. It was almost assumed that I was just going to get out of high school and go to work, instead of going to college. When I came home after that first year, his thing was I told you so, you need to go to work. I think I had a job within like a week after I got back. Everybody pretty much at that point thought what would happen did happen, and that's that I would flunk out, and it just wasn't for me.

Participant #6 continued to work hard labor, like the generations before him, for the next 21 years, with the perception that postsecondary education was not a possibility.

Participant #6, however, recently returned to pursue postsecondary education again at the age of 43, as a non-traditional adult learner, which he explains has been a totally dissimilar experience. He explained that his wife was a substantial influence on him pursuing postsecondary education for the second time and that he has taken it more seriously and has much more support. He has now earned an associate degree with a 4.0 GPA and is currently holding a 4.0 GPA as a junior working towards the bachelor's degree. With the continued encouragement from his wife and personal expectation, he plans to continue to graduate school.

It was expected that #7 would pursue postsecondary education and persist just as his parents and siblings had done. As he explains it:

It was just kind of always like, just assumed like, 'Hey, you're going to go to college.

What are you going to do if you don't go to college? It was just like the only option. I don't know, I don't think I would have been more like the black sheep of the family if I chose not to go, but I think that was part of the expectation.

In addition to the expectation, financial assistance also played a role in participant #7's encouragement from his family, as well, as he shares:

My parents covered most of my college. So, it was like, if we're doing this, you got to go, and you, got to put into it. Since they were, you know, involved in it, I think it helped kind of solidify that. You know you have got to go.

Encouragement and expectation for participant #7 to pursue postsecondary education and economic mobility as strong. Opposed to #6, who was expected to go straight to work and

neither encouraged, nor expected to pursue secondary education, #7 experiences were that there no other option for economic mobility but through postsecondary education.

Graduating high school was the expected goal for participant #8, which was a goal that her parents were not able to accomplish. When she had achieved that goal and started to consider pursuing postsecondary education to improve her outlook for independence and individual overall well-being, she recounts an older sibling from a previous generation's response:

As I was getting close to graduating high school, I was talking about maybe exploring postsecondary studies and moving on. Then, one of my siblings, actually a female who had the traditional husband and stayed at home with the kids, told me that I was probably getting above my raising. I don't think it was meant derogatory. It's just the lack of knowing. So, with that there wasn't a whole lot of support there.

When reflecting on how cultural and societal expectations influenced her postsecondary considerations, she shares:

I think my family background kind of hindered it, like I said, they come from a culture of working in the coal mines. You could make a decent living, and if you wanted to move away from that and pursue something else, you're kind of going away from that culture. I'm not saying it was frowned upon, but it was like, 'oh, what are you doing?'

Participant #8's experience of encouragement and expectation was strong to complete high school, which was advancement from the previous generation; however, little was known, nor explored past that in her family.

Participant #9 contributes a strong component of the expectation to pursue postsecondary education to her attending a private elementary, middle, and high school where, "It was just kind



of like expected that you would go to college.” In addition to the educational environment, she shares that her family thought education was important, as well. She recalls the importance of the parental role by explaining:

Especially like once it came time to start applying to schools. They were very supportive, and, you know, helped me with my ACTs, and took me to them, and I took them twice. They were supportive of that, and just helped me look at schools being open to like whatever school I would be interested in.

The exposure and expectation of participant #9 to pursue postsecondary education and to continue the persistence of economic mobility was influenced by her parents who were able to provide a private education that prepared her to succeed. Parental involvement was also strong for this participant who went on to complete a graduate degree.

Participant #10 shares that while growing up, postsecondary education:

“...was something that was always just kind of expected. That was a staple in my household, so my parents strongly encouraged us to go to college. It was talked about very frequently in my house, and it was definitely encouraged by my parents. My parents encouraged pretty much college at all costs no matter what you had to do. That’s what you needed to do in life. As I said, it was almost expected for me and my sisters to all go to college. You always want to in a lot of ways, please your parents.

The education career path chosen by participant #10 to be a teacher was the same as her mother’s and required a four-year degree. She explains her motivation as, “For me, I knew if I wanted to do that, I was going to have to go to school.” The alternative she explained would have been to

attend a technical school, and that postsecondary education was considered a necessity that had to be done.

## **Experience**

Even with the exposure and encouragement to pursue postsecondary education from family, the experience needed to do so can still be limited according to participant #1:

So, I knew that I had to go to college, but I didn't have the guidance of the guidance counselor. They should have been more instrumental in this is. The time when we need to start filling out applications for college, this is how you fill out financial aid, those type of things. I relied on my cousins. I could rely on my friend circle in high school and then that is one of the reasons why I stayed locally to go to college, because I could stay home. Then, when I did look at going off to school, it was just like overwhelming. We had to think about housing, transportation, and all those other types of things.

The participant also explained the importance of mentors at the postsecondary education level and the influence they have on those from all backgrounds when describing her experience:

There was no instructor that I couldn't go to and talk to about a class or matriculation, you know it was not like, oh, just go see the counselor. Oh, no, they had time to help you figure out whatever it is.

The participant, as she states it “made it through” postsecondary education and then went on to gain extensive cultural and professional experiences as a result. She has worked in and traveled to multiple countries where she was offered the opportunity to learn and share new knowledge and experiences across different cultures.

Postsecondary education experience was something that participant #2 learned on their own through doing; however, economic mobility is an area that was strongly influenced by the previous generations' experiences. Participant #2 explains how she benefitted from the previous generations' experiences:

My parents did pretty well at making it in the industry. They've had multiple different jobs. My mom ended up working for the government and then my dad ended up in multiple positions. He worked for the post office but getting to where they were financially was a difficult route. So, they did state that I had to get a degree.

The environment, expectation, and encouragement to pursue postsecondary education was present for this participant, and although postsecondary education parental experience may have been limited, the parental guidance to ask the questions was present and essential for her to pursue and persist.

Participant #4 did not experience direct postsecondary exposure through his parents, nor through the community. He explains some of the struggles and challenges he experienced in his early collegiate career regarding feelings of belonging and career aspirations:

I always felt out of place in college. I'm you know, living in a dorm with people I didn't know, and most of them I didn't really like that much. I really had a bias against what I considered, I mean, it sounds ridiculous, but at the time it was rich people. I didn't like them, you know. I felt that they were privileged, and they seemed to know what I didn't. I was so naive, and I was just there kind of exploring through a rough couple of years. I didn't even understand it at the time.

Once the participant realized the desire to teach and pursue graduate school, a mentor strongly influenced his academic and career experiences moving forward. As he explains:

I had a couple of very good mentors. And that's something that I think is very important. That's probably the most important support that I had, and I hope that that is something that will continue. I remember my first mentor. He was a professor that really helped me understand what research was and how I could connect that research to a career as a faculty member, and he really helped me do that, and he gave me a job in the summer that I didn't think would mean much to me at all. He saw something, and then he was able to help me kind of connect that. And once again, I didn't come from a family where, Oh, yeah, that's a great job for the summer.

The participant goes on to explain how he now tries to do the same for students that he works with at the postsecondary institutional level, as he understands individual barriers and challenges.

Although participant # 5 was initially interested in pursuing law school, a paralegal job she experienced after she obtained an associate degree in history changed her education and career path. After obtaining the bachelor's degree, the participant went on years later to obtain a master's degree as a non-traditional student in a traditional classroom. Eventually, #5 found herself in the career of higher education:

I ended up in education like my father. The influence of my childhood and always being around a college campus and going to sporting events and being part of that college community was something that I actually enjoyed and, you know, feel comfortable in.

The experiences from early childhood made participant #5 not only comfortable enough to pursue and persist through postsecondary education, but it also influenced her career aspirations and socioeconomic status as a professional in higher education.

Participant #6 describes his first-year experience as a 17-year-old first-generation college student from a low-income background as, “I was completely unprepared. I had no money. I was poor, I mean my clothes weren't good. It was just a reality check when I got there, and I failed out terribly the first year.”

In explaining his perception of what his culture thought postsecondary education would be like, and how it was for him, he shared that:

What you see, and the way you thought it was, is what it was. I mean, it was almost impossible, and you just couldn't do it. It was everything was going against you to make it. It is economic, and even social, and nobody spoke of it.

In sharing the experiences of returning to postsecondary education as a non-traditional adult learner at a community and technical college and then transferring to the university, participant #6 describes challenges and opportunities with advising and faculty members. In speaking of his first two years of returning he shares that:

The advising department was not very good there. It almost seemed like when I first got there with my first advisor, it was just okay, here it is on a computer, this is what you got, and that's the way it is. Now, with faculty, it seems like they go above and beyond to help you. If everybody would get that help from the get-go, it would probably be better for everybody. If when you're in your first two years, you had the support you have when

you're in your last two years, I think a lot more students would succeed, and that by that I mean, like personalize.

Participant #6 goes on to expand on his experiences after completing the associate degree and transferring to the university and getting connected to the department:

Now that I'm with my faculty members, the support is tremendous, like I'm talking to them and they talk to me every day, almost. I see them every day. They have encouraged me to do stuff like a research project that I got coming up that I never would have done in the past, you know.

Participant #7 was not sure, nor focused on postsecondary education and economic mobility during the first year of college, despite the exposure, encouragement, and financial support he had received. As he describes it:

I thought college was supposed to be like more like a good time and I wasn't really there to like focus on my education. So, I don't know if the college could have done anything different. I think that was just like, the friends I was with, you know what you see in movies, you just go in there and have a good time and I didn't really know what I was going to school for at that point.

After taking a year off from postsecondary education and working, his parents continued to encourage him and forced him to question what he would do for economic stability and mobility without a postsecondary education. He recounts that time in his life:

My parents were like, “What are you going to do if you're not going to school? We'll help you if you do it, you follow this path.” Kind of like, here's a helping hand, but if you don't follow that path, good luck and we hope you make it.

It was at that point that the participant indicated that he decided to return to school to pursue postsecondary education to gain long term job stability.

Participant #8 was fully reliant on secondary institution support for postsecondary preparation and support. She indicates that she felt that she had received a decent high school education, although postsecondary education preparation resources were scarce. She recalls her experiences with the guidance counselor:

I think that our high school counselor served two roles. He was a football coach, and then he was also the counselor. There was nothing. When you got to that junior and senior year of high school. there were never one-on-one meetings, there were never, ‘What do you plan to do?’ conversations. I know with myself I saw a posting in the hall about taking the ACT test and that's when I went and made the effort, and went to him and said, “What is this,” and he said, “You know college, you know, ACT”. Then it was explained to me, and I was just given a form to fill out to complete.”

Continuing to make the effort, despite the lack of environmental exposure, experience, and encouragement, the participant did enroll in a small two-year institution around 50 miles from her hometown. Job opportunities in the area at the time were limited, and she felt motivated to pursue postsecondary education to increase her personal opportunity for economic advancement and financial independence. She explains her first postsecondary education experience and the outcome:

So, I started there and lasted maybe two months. Where I'm from there was no public transportation, nothing like that, and we didn't have a car. So, it's like, okay, I couldn't even get to the school. It was a challenge. I think I got some sort of a grant, too, it could have been a Pell grant, because like I said, there were some economic hardships there.

Participant #8 went on to pursue certificates and eventually a bachelor's degree as a non-traditional adult learner and is considering graduate work to elevate her career aspirations.

Participant #9 entered postsecondary education with the experience of exposure to and encouragement for postsecondary education. Like many first-year students, however, she had not decided on a major upon entrance to college and decided to transfer after the first year to a more familiar environment. She shared that she was uncertain on what certain majors meant, as her parents did not go through that experience, and that she, "...just chose Spanish because it was like, I guess, easy and also interesting, but mostly easy. Looking back, I probably would have changed my major." Her experience in major and career selection was challenging and still influences her career choices and aspirations regardless of the preparation and postsecondary education levels of attainment.

The postsecondary education exposure and encouraging environment participant #10 experienced early was crucial to her pursuance and persistence of a four-year degree in education; however, she was still not on an easy track. As she explains, "I worked in the restaurant industry before and during my educational and professional career and graduated college as a non-traditional student, with student loan debt."



## Equal Opportunity

Intergenerational postsecondary education attainment equal opportunity is two-fold for participant #2. Her mother pursued but was not able to persist through completion of her postsecondary education as she became a mother at 18-years old and there were no childcare options at the time. As a young mother, she was forced to stop-out prior to obtaining a postsecondary education credential. The participant's father pursued postsecondary education at the technical college but was also unable to complete the credential due to testing difficulties.

The participant shares that:

He wanted to be an X-ray technician. He took the majority of the classes, but he couldn't pass the exam itself. He tried multiple times and failed every time, and they basically kicked him out of the program, saying, 'You can't do this if you can't pass the exams.'

In this sense, institutional support, and quality leaves equal opportunity in question regarding non-traditional parent students and experiential learning and testing. Both parents' experiences, however, strengthened their desire to support the next generations' opportunities to go beyond their own. Regarding her parents' financial support, she shares:

My parents said, to never worry about money. They'll figure out a way. If it was something that I wanted to do, they would figure out a way. They helped me financially throughout college. They said, like, there wasn't any limitation that if I wanted to, I could.

This opportunity to pursue the tool of postsecondary education attainment for economic mobility was passed on from one generation that was not able to obtain it but worked through the experience to acknowledge the importance of it, to the next generation, who was then encouraged and supported to persist.

Participant #3 explains that his parents did not have the same opportunities in their generation that he and his siblings had in theirs. As he explains his mother's cultural background he states, "My mother's side of the family were immigrants, my mom's full-blooded Italian. I feel like her family was on the trade side in the world, and college was kind of an unknown." Although this participant's parents were able to make a good life for their family and support three children through the pursuit of postsecondary education, they had to do so with student loan debt, even with an athletic scholarship, all while navigating through unfamiliar territory.

Equal opportunity for postsecondary education was not a part of participant #4's parents' lives, nor his grandparents. He expressed that his mother aspired and dreamed of pursuing postsecondary education; however, was unable to do so during her generation due to lack of opportunity and gender roles and expectations. Although the opportunity and encouragement to pursue postsecondary education changed and improved for this participant, the cultural-historical activity of doing so still presented challenges. In reference to societal and cultural influences, the participant shares:

I would say when I was an undergrad, I really felt very uncomfortable around what I consider to be rich and sort of the students that had, you know, so much opportunity, and grew up in certain circumstances. I struggled as an undergrad for a couple of years, just trying to figure out something that I wanted to study. I think there's kind of a there's a bias against people from different backgrounds. The only word I can think of is shame. I felt shame in the academic world. I always felt a little bit of shame.

The participant overcame barriers and challenges to pursue and persist in earning a Ph.D. As a result, the cultural-historical activity trajectory for opportunity has drastically transformed and improved:

You know, my son, it took him a while to understand the value of education, sort of like it did me, but there was no debate about whether or not you were going to go to college. My daughter is doing a Ph.D., and my son is in computer science, and he's had a job now for several years. We were able to get our kids through college, and none of them have loans or anything like that. So, I think that is what is important.

Not only for future generations, but Participant #4 and his wife have also experienced financial well-being, as well as travel, relocation, and retirement opportunities. Regarding his current quality of life that is enhanced by postsecondary education and career aspirations and achievements, he explains:

Well, I mean, financially, it's made a huge difference in our lives, for sure. I think we're going to have a good retirement. It has also given me an opportunity to focus on what I was really interested in doing. We made a decision that we weren't going to be tied down anywhere. That's something I didn't think about when I was going through the moves, but when I look back and I think about where I came from, everybody that got a college degree is basically gone from there. And so that's maybe an unintended consequence of higher education that you know people are going to leave the area that they were born in and use it as a way to move. It's a good thing, and a bad thing, I guess, I don't know. I can look back, and I can say that higher education really was an escalator for me to get away from, I don't know what that life would have been like if I had stayed where I grew up. I

had no idea what I would have ended up doing, but this life has taken me to and given me a lot of opportunities.

Regarding the future generations and postsecondary education and economic mobility, participant #4 shared the importance for students to understand their options and opportunities. Sharing from his individual experiences and those students he now works with, he states:

I think there's a disconnect today between the reality of the job market for Ph.D.'s. in the fields that I was interested in, and you know the dream that you kind of go through that dreaming of what you're going to do with that Ph.D., the reality is very different. I'm kind of a believer now in Ph.D. students, institutions need to be talking to them about opportunities other than becoming tenured faculty members, because that's very hard to do these days, and I think you know that some of that that's going on. I don't know if there's a name for that movement, but it's basically exposing people to careers in industry and other opportunities.

While the participant emphasizes this need for the Ph.D. level of education, the same can be said for undergraduate and other graduate programs, especially with transparency on the return on investment in certain fields.

Participant #5's opportunity to pursue and persist towards economic mobility through postsecondary education was out of the ordinary:

Through the university my father worked for was it was paid for, so I went for free, and then I got scholarships on top of that. So, I, actually unlike some of my friends, was able to go to school and not have to have a part time job. So, yeah, absolutely, I was lucky that

my father had that benefit at the time and just growing up in that environment with my father teaching.

Even with strong postsecondary education exposure and experience, participant #5 still experienced challenges as a non-traditional adult student working towards her master's degree:

I was at a different campus, so I was not on the main campus. I was on their branch campus, so that type of community support wasn't exactly there. They made an effort, but there was not that same community type feeling. There was, of course, a library. There's not as many advisors or groups, so that was a challenge. I was even a staff member and was able to access the different support on the main campus, or I'm sure that would have impacted me even more. I put a lot of importance on those things as well.

Even though the participant expressed that her early experiences, encouragements, and motivations for pursuing postsecondary education encouragement was economically based, she shares that her master's degree was still worth it:

My MBA catapulted me into another level. So, I had a bachelors, and I was working in journalism and moving up through public relations, and that was fine. But when I decided to get my MBA, that opened all kinds of doors. So, yeah, my degree was an investment, and I'm a business type minded person. The return on investment was immediate.

Although the traditional classroom on a branch campus may have been challenging, as was a hybrid Ph.D. program in the middle of a career change, the participant still plans on continuing opportunities to go higher in her level of postsecondary education attainment:

The Ph.D., while some of it is sentimental that it would be cool to have that because my father had it, it's at the point of also pursuing one that that puts you on a whole different level of pay scale in the university system, and then you reach a pinnacle. You reach a top unless you keep getting those credentials, so it just kind of depends, if you want to move up the pay scale, or if you're happy where you are. I guess, I made that choice to move up a little bit and open that next level of doors and opportunities.

Participant #5's father's credentials and position in postsecondary education prepared her to pursue and persist towards a rewarding career and prosperous life that she is now passing on to her own children:

He (son) had more options, and can you draw a line back to my level of education?

Perhaps, who knows? Or the fact that both of us have a level of education, my husband and I, and my father? My daughter will have even more choices. Luckily, she will have the benefit that I did when I was young. We're lucky enough at my university, they pay for staff's children to go to school anywhere in the United States, and abroad up to the cost of their tuition, which is one of the highest in the country, so the world is open to her.

Being in the field of postsecondary education herself, participant #5 recognizes and addresses the reality that not all students are fortunate enough to have the opportunity and advantages that she, and now her children have had. In her daily work at the university, she shares that people are often asking for financial aid or special payments:

I see the sacrifices people make to ensure their kids get in programs that they think are important, and taking these early steps to make sure that they're getting a foundation where and when they apply to college, so that they have more opportunities and make pathways for students to education.

Participant #5 also shares that it is not only about encouraging students, but also making sure, they can see themselves as a person going to school once they pursue:

That sense of belonging, that so many don't have even with parents who would do anything for them to send them to school. They just don't see themselves there. How can we as a whole, or any university, or any educator, facilitate that mindset early on?

Participant #6's opportunities were strong due to her father's background and profession, as are they for her children. Her lens as an educator now allows her to better understand those with less opportunities and address those needs within her profession.

Participant #6 expresses that he had desires for economic advancement and mobility early in his life, but as he shared, felt like he had a better chance of achieving it through becoming a professional athlete than through postsecondary education attainment. In terms of how his cultural-historical background influenced his aspirations to achieve economic mobility through postsecondary education, #6 reiterates:

No one I knew in my family, nobody, went to college, so it was still an unknown on how far you can go and how well you can do. I mean for your family, money you can earn. Socioeconomics played a big role because I just didn't want to be like that. I didn't want to say I felt like I was too good, but I felt like I wanted more, and I didn't want to be the person who goes to work for \$12/\$13 an hour. That was good money back then, but to

raise six kids and struggle to make it on food stamps, that just wasn't for me. That wasn't who I was. I was on to bigger and better things.

Even without cultural or financial support and preparation, participant #6 did pursue postsecondary education against all odds. He gained acceptance and was awarded a financial aid package, like many other students this senior year, and he took advantage of it in an attempt to gain economic mobility through postsecondary education. His opportunities, experiences, and challenges, however, were not like most of his peers:

I didn't have the same clothes everybody else had. I didn't have food. I didn't. I had to take food from the residence hall, I mean from the dining hall system. I barely survived. So that's how my educational journey started. I received nothing, no support whatsoever, even from the school. I mean, my mom was more like 'Oh, I'm glad you're going. I'm proud of you for going,' but she didn't have any money either, so I didn't have any economic support at all. Money was a big factor, and I actually thought that I couldn't do it. It really turned out to be true. It was like a fairytale.

After years of making a decent living doing hard physical labor, participant #6 was reluctant to give postsecondary education another chance but did so with the encouragement of his spouse. Upon earning the associate in arts degree, he asserts that, "It has opened a few doors that wouldn't have otherwise. I don't know if it's going to continue to, but it probably will just from what I see and in the environment I'm in."



Although the participant receives some employer tuition assistance, to continue in his postsecondary education endeavors, he still relies on federal financial aid and scholarships to make up the differences:

I couldn't imagine doing it without some of the scholarships and stuff that I have because of my grades and everything. It would be really hard. I think maybe more monetary assistance and more scholarships should be put aside for the low-income students.

Participant #6 also has shares perspective of being a non-traditional student pursuing his bachelor's degree in his 40's:

The younger students benefit from having somebody like me in their class, and I've heard that. We bring a perspective to where it makes the instructor's job easier. There are more questions asked of us from the younger generation, and I just think it brings the overall health of the institution up.

In terms of equality as a non-traditional student, he shares that:

I am the definition of a non-traditional student, and like my professors saying that I'm a guinea pig. They call me a guinea pig? But why should I be the guinea pig? I should be a norm. I believe my age group and people, like I said, younger generation in class, it's not just does well for us, it is good for the other students as well. So, I think that there should be more of an emphasis on the older students and getting them back. There should be a whole department to serve this demographic.

In speaking of the benefits improved equal opportunities for non-traditional students could offer the community, he believes that:

The more people that have access to education the better the community is going to be and it's a the more educated your population is, and that population don't include just 18- to 22-year-olds. There needs to be more communication, more outreach. There needs to be a designated couple of people that just go to visit employers and make school relationships and partnerships to that level where workers don't have to feel that it's either work or school. There will be a lot more people that would do it. Start the discussion, get in these big companies, because not only does it benefit the person, but it also benefits the company. Then you have a more educated workforce as well.

Participant #6 did not start his postsecondary education with an equal opportunity, and sometimes still struggles to find it as a non-traditional adult learner working full-time. He is, however, not only changing his personal economic mobility opportunity through postsecondary education, but he is also improving it for future generations in family, and in the classroom.

Starting the postsecondary education journey with exposure, expectation and encouragement was beneficial to participant #7; however, he does share the challenge of career and major selection:

You know as a kid I wanted to be like an architect, or something like that. I figured they just draw stuff, and I didn't like know all the other facets of business that you don't see in movies and TV growing up so like, how's the kid ever going to know about that?

The participant discusses how the postsecondary education that he and his brothers were encouraged to pursue and supported to persist by their parents has improved their economic status and financial well-being:

The youngest brother, I'd say he's not really using his degree, but he's in a similar position as me, like doing a job I don't think you'd get without a degree. I'd say greatly it's helped open the doors to positions I don't think I would have been able to get without a degree.

Although #7 shares that postsecondary education has assisted him and his brothers with opportunities for employment, he also shares some frustrations on how institutions handle career and major choices, and post-graduation support:

I feel like colleges could do a lot better, you know, they can't just leave it open to you. Like what am I supposed to know as an 18-year-old? If I do this major here, my career options are what? Like, really put me in touch with, like an employer, you know. Being able to help get a job as I feel like that's a lot of purpose. I know it's like getting an education, but it isn't supposed to be to use that education and my mind like to be a productive member of society with this newfound knowledge that you have? And you know there's people that need your knowledge. I feel like they could do a lot better connecting and helping that transition post-graduation. Not just like, hey, come in, spend your money here, we'll give you a piece of paper, but then you're kind of left feeling more high and dry.

Equal opportunity for this participant in terms of major and career selection is perceived to be lacking at the institutional level.

Participant #8 shares her early background and experience of postsecondary education and economic mobility equal opportunity by stating:

I think that with the socioeconomics, you lived in a town where they have the haves and the have nots, and I think the people who come from a family where they had a postsecondary education background, they had that support, and so on, and so forth. So, socioeconomics is huge.

She goes on to explain that although some classmates from her high school pursued postsecondary education, there were not many because there were more “have nots” in the community than “haves,” in terms of financial well-being.

Goals of furthering her education for economic mobility continued for participant #8, and she went on to earn a business diploma, which she indicates took a year to complete and was essential in getting her into the corporate setting in Chicago. She reflects on this time in her career:

As an administrative assistant I was making a salary, and I thought, oh, this is very, you know, I'm doing okay. The diploma opened more doors for me. It gave me more opportunities. Then I was saying, well, to sustain myself, and a child, this is not going to do it. So, I just went on.

With her main goal set at getting an undergraduate degree, she continued to take small courses part-time, “here and there,” while raising two children with her husband. While pursuing her degree, she began work at a very renowned medical university where she had the opportunity as an administrative assistant to learn modern technology in the medical field, with a decent salary and good benefits. Once she had reached her salary growth opportunity in the position and was informed that she would never get another raise because she had reached the highest people ever get paid for this position, her motivation only increased. She shares, “I was doing and being

everything within that area. I could do everything everyone else was doing, but I did not have that paper to open that next door.”

Reflecting on her journey and experiences and equal opportunity for economic mobility through postsecondary education on an institutional level participant #8 shares:

They really need to take time to really know their students and to know what the barriers are. Not everybody coming through that door comes from the same background and has had the same opportunities. So, I think there needs to be really an area that looks at this student as a whole. Institutions should consider where students are coming from, why they are there, where they want to go and help put resources in place and supports for those that haven't had or will not have equal opportunities as they as they travel through their journey.

Participant #6 went on to a rewarding career that required the bachelor's degree that she completed in her 50's. She is now considering graduate school, and her daughter has earned a master's degree.

Participant #9 shares that knowing more about different majors and careers, “could have taken me somewhere else for my employment, or anything like that in the future, but it is not really talked about. In speaking of higher education institutions, she expresses that, “They're not like, well, think about this or this.”

Although participant #10 had opportunities of exposure and encouragement from college graduate parents that others may not experience, she still had to take out student loans for a career that monetarily does not always offer the return on investment. As she explains:

I came from a middle-class family. So, my parents really didn't have money just to pay for college upfront. They encouraged scholarships, even though they knew I was not close to the level of scholarship funding. So, I was more pushed into taking out student loans to pay for it with the intention of being able to pay them back easily. I think one thing that is pushing people off from school is the cost, and I think it's easy to just kind of throw this idea around to people like, Oh, hey! Come to this school because you'll be able to get this job. I think more financial aid, and I mean aid that's not loans that you have to pay back, so more opportunities for scholarships to help some of these people cut the cost of their education is needed.

From a generational standpoint, participant #10 has observed that the younger generations in her family are all pursuing college now, and that they are all pursuing secondary education degrees. She explains from her perspective, "Now, I think many more young people definitely look at postsecondary education like it's a possibility, whereas maybe in the past it was like a dream for some people."

Although participant #10 has student loan debt to bear with a career that is challenging to pay, she describes the many other nonmonetary benefits that she reaps from her career that required a four-year degree:

I get a lot of time off. I get more time with my family, and I value those things over money. So, getting a college degree allowed me to be a teacher and gives me the freedom to take advantage of 12 paid weeks off a year, holidays, and vacations. It's allowing me to live the lifestyle I want. I have seen first-hand the benefits of higher education and how pursuing it can really help you live the life you want to live.

## Conclusion

Environment and exposure, encouragement and expectation, experience, and equal opportunity all heavily influenced each participants' perspective on postsecondary education and economic mobility. Those who had it tended to pursue and persist earlier in life with less financial strain and debt, while those who did not still feel the effects today. Two first-generation students are still pursuing economic mobility through postsecondary education in their 40's and 50's, while a professor who is 60 "still doesn't feel entirely comfortable being called doctor." The data from this multiperspective approach indicates that intergenerational influences are powerful tools, and that the earlier that the cultural-historical activity of utilizing postsecondary education as a resource for economic mobility begins in a generation, the more beneficial it can be.

The findings also indicate a strong need for improved career and major exploration and selection for individuals from all backgrounds. All participants, with the exception of one, whose parent was a teacher which she also became, were unclear of what major and career opportunities were available and how to navigate that selection process at the institutional level. Regardless of the level of opportunity through environment and exposure or encouragement and expectation, the experience of equal opportunity changed for most participants depending on how they choose their program of study and career paths.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

This study on intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility focuses on the influence of cultural-historical activities on succeeding generations. To gain insight into multiple perspectives and experiences, the study was conducted by interviewing 10 participants from various postsecondary education and economic backgrounds. Unlike studies conducted on one specific population, such as first-generation, continuing-generation, or non-traditional adult learners, the findings of this research highlight the experiences, opportunities, barriers, and challenges for those from multiple backgrounds at once in answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to the educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?
2. How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?
3. To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility?

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Individuals from various backgrounds all come with unique sets of circumstances, advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and challenges. From academic preparedness to affordability, opportunities are not equal for all individuals. Intergenerational postsecondary education environments and exposure, expectation and encouragement, experience, and equal



opportunity all prove to be critical components to an individual's outcomes, and to that of future generations.

**To what extent does parental postsecondary education attainment relate to the educational aspirations and persistence of the next generation?**

The findings from the data collected indicate that intergenerational cultural and historical education and economic activities play an exceptional role in individuals' and future generations' education and economic aspirations and achievements. The participant whose father had a Ph.D. was strongly inspired and equipped to pursue and persist postsecondary education, whereas a participant whose parents did not graduate high school experienced vastly different expectations and opportunity limitations. While participants from college-going cultures were expected and encouraged to pursue postsecondary education after high school, others viewed this endeavor as a mere "fairytale." Those who do aspire and pursue postsecondary education despite their educational background and upbringing, typically do so with much difficulty and debt.

Participants in this study with proficient intergenerational postsecondary education backgrounds reported more familiarity and comfortability with pursuing and persisting through their own degree attainment and economic mobility. Those who encountered limited to no intergenerational postsecondary education environments and exposure disclosed tremendous social, emotional, and financial disadvantages and barriers in pursuing and persisting through postsecondary education, despite their personal goals, federal financial aid, and desires for economic mobility.

In addition to vertical intergenerational influences, grandparent to parent and parent to child, the findings also evidence horizontal intergenerational influences. Five out of the 10 participants expressed the relevance of cousins and siblings on pursuing and persisting through postsecondary education and economic mobility. The influence horizontal generational educational attainment has on succeeding generations is an area that future scholars can study to gain a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon within cultures.

Expectations and encouragement were instrumental for all participants, regardless of the intergenerational postsecondary education attainment culture they had experienced. Those who were encouraged were also expected to pursue postsecondary education, and never questioned their access, opportunity, nor ability to do so. Those who were not, and who were even discouraged, found it difficult to break the cycle of previous generations' education and career aspirations. Participants from both groups found intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to persist and pursue through postsecondary education attainment, and all participants experienced economic mobility and non-monetary value from doing so. This leads to not only stronger generational outcomes, but also workforce and societal benefits.

### **How does intergenerational postsecondary education attainment influence the economic mobility of succeeding generations?**

Experience among participants varied in terms of early education preparation and postsecondary education success and economic mobility. The seven participants with stronger early elementary school up to high school experiences were more likely to pursue postsecondary education right out of high school as a traditional first-year student. The three participants who

perceived less postsecondary education experience, but more work experience, typically took longer to complete and had less family financial support and accrued more student loan debt.

Equal Opportunity may have been available for all participants in terms of covering the tuition cost through federal financial aid student loans; however, the unique experience of each participant shows that overall equal opportunity varied greatly among them based on cultural backgrounds. Five out of the 10 participants from continuing postsecondary education backgrounds pursued postsecondary sooner and with smoother transitions than those who were not. They were more prepared and supported both financially and socially, and completed in less time, accruing less student loan debt.

Participants from generations of cultures that did not historically pursue postsecondary education found themselves in similar situations, struggling to advance educationally and economically. These participants eventually transformed their current culture into one that pursued and persisted through postsecondary education to experience economic mobility, although it was not done with equal opportunities. All participants from various backgrounds express the extent of generational influence on their personal pursuit of postsecondary education and economic mobility, as well as the influence they have on generations of the present and future. As generations of all ages continue to have insufficient opportunities to pursue and persist, they are left behind, whereas those with adequate access and available cultural-historical resources continue upward.

**To what capacity do institutional factors contribute to the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary attainment and economic mobility?**

The majority, nine out of 10 participants experienced doubt and uncertainty in career and major selection, regardless of their intergenerational postsecondary education status. This is crucial, as less than 25% of all students drop out of college because of academic failure. More than 75% of students who leave college do so because of difficulty related to a lack of fit between the skills and interests of students and the “organization of educational institutions, their formal structures, resources, and patterns of association” (Bers & Scuetz, 2014). This means that institutions at all levels and sectors have room for improvement in student preparation, outreach, K-12 integration, career exploration, and financial assistance.

Although today’s society may have doubts on the value of postsecondary education, research still shows those who attain postsecondary credentials tend to make higher salaries, are healthier, and have a better overall quality of life (Blake, 2024). This can, however, be contingent on career choice and program of study. Most of the participants in the study, nine out of 10, did not have a clear career path or field of study, regardless of their background. Many indicated the need for more exposure, experience, and direction in this area at levels of education.

Although it is not feasible to ensure that all students know what they want to study in college to pursue as a career as they work their way through high school and prepare for college, more and earlier exposure and experience to the options will improve guidance opportunities along the way. Interests, motivation, and academic preparation all have roles in understanding postsecondary adjustment, success, and timely degree attainment. Interest-major congruence affects timely degree attainment through two mechanisms: college major persistence and enthusiasm for coursework (Allen & Robbins, 2010). Institutional advisers, counselors, faculty

members, and tutors all play pivotal roles in motivating undecided students towards the appropriate programs of study, and more research needs to be done in these motivating factors.

This is another opportunity for greater collaboration between the K-12 sector, postsecondary education institutions, employers, and parents.

### **Program Objectives**

Postsecondary education equal opportunity begins with the experiences of one's environment, exposure, encouragement, and preparation at an early age. Postsecondary institutions continue to develop programs and initiatives for those that are the first in their family to attend right out of high school; however, it can often be too late in many cases. The generations before them continue to influence their cultural and financial circumstances, regardless of the institutional programs put in place for this population. A stronger institutional and governmental focus on parents and previous generations will decrease first-generational barriers and increase equal educational and economic opportunities across generations.

By communicating knowledgeable information regarding the postsecondary education processes and opportunities in early childhood education, parents become not only better prepared to provide support to their children, but they will also become more aware of postsecondary education opportunities for themselves. Often, parents of previous generations have the perception that they only have one chance to pursue and persist through postsecondary education and economic mobility. Postsecondary institutions that provide access and opportunity for all ages through flexible programming and employer partnerships can transform the approach to postsecondary education attainment and economic ability for an intersectionality of generations and demographics.

Although available information and accessible programming is essential, outreach and communication to cultures that have not been exposed to postsecondary education environments should not rely on postsecondary institutions alone. Community collaboration between government agencies, libraries, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, public transportation, and employers can have a profound influence on changing the cultural environment of individuals, families, and society (Gardiner, 2024). Postsecondary education and economic mobility opportunity should be equal for all, and these entities can all play a crucial role in improving outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Financial assistance is an area of opportunity that is needed for many families, including those from middle- and low-income backgrounds. As student loan forgiveness continues to be at the forefront of debate and discussion in higher education, initiatives to decrease the amount of student loan debt borrowed should be strongly considered in policy and postsecondary costs (Blake, 2024). The return on investment may be influenced by the program of study and career choice but is even more dependent on the time to degree and amount borrowed. In addition to flexible program access, adult non-traditional students will benefit from increased community partnerships that offer employer tuition assistance for their workers, and even dependents (Gardiner, 2024). As more adults have these opportunities that improve their education and economic outlooks, the succeeding generations reap the benefits, and first-generation barriers decrease.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Stakeholders for postsecondary education and economic mobility range from individuals to society and includes everyone and everything in-between. Data on crime and economic

development in communities with higher percentages of citizens with postsecondary education credentials should be dispersed and understood among citizens and institutions of all levels. This will increase awareness of the importance of equity and equal opportunity and develop a greater societal understanding and responsibility to economic mobility through postsecondary education.

District superintendents and postsecondary institutions should work closer together on information dissemination and postsecondary preparation across multiple generations, opposed to only packing it in to a one semester first-year experience course for first-year students right out of high school. Once first-generation students find the courage and resources to pursue postsecondary education, they often experience a stigma as low-income students and may be unlikely to participate in first-generation initiatives. Postsecondary institutions also need to acquire stronger employer partnerships to offer increased opportunities for recent graduates, as well as non-traditional current employees, who may also be parents (Gardiner, 2024).

Multigenerational policies and programs need to be considered and implemented by federal government funding agencies, employers, and postsecondary institutions, as this has the potential to alleviate costs and improve flexible programming for families across multiple generations. As a result, improved equal opportunity for individual and societal advancement will occur. Continuing to neglect the previous generations of parents leaves many students in a first-generation culture and status that results in consequential barriers and challenges that postsecondary institutions cannot change.

### **Recommendation for Further Study**

Although the focus of this study was to focus on the experiences of those who did pursue and persist through postsecondary education and economic mobility, it would also be valuable to

investigate the experiences and perceptions of those who did not. Understanding why and how individuals decide not to pursue postsecondary education and economic mobility based on their intergenerational cultures will provide another insight into the cultural-historical activity theory. It is also noteworthy to consider the experiences of those who experience economic mobility without postsecondary education attainment, despite their generational backgrounds.

Another area that needs further examination is how and when individuals choose their career and program of study at the postsecondary level. Intergenerational influences on these choices will provide educators at all levels with a better understanding of how to improve opportunities to explore options, identify strengths and interests, and understand the return on investment for certain fields of study and careers.

### **Reflection of the Author**

The author being a first-generation college graduate who experienced postsecondary challenges and accrued student loan debt is a possible personal bias. Preconceived ideas that cultures of privileged college going backgrounds navigate postsecondary education attainment and economic ability at an advantage was bracketed as the data was collected. The perception of what is considered privileged has changed the researcher's thinking in terms of financial postsecondary education equal opportunity. What one may consider poor in one culture may be considered privileged in another. A college-going culture is also not always commensurate with equal opportunity, as well. Middle-class families with generations of postsecondary education attainment still face financial obstacles and find themselves in student loan debt.

The effectiveness of encouragement was enhanced for the researcher as they considered their own personal postsecondary education experience. Although the researcher was a first-



generation college student who experienced extreme financial and preparation barriers and challenges, the encouragement and emotional support from their mother of the previous generation was vital to their pursuance and persistence to obtain economic mobility through postsecondary education. Experiences and perceptions of participants who were neither exposed, nor encouraged to pursue the route of postsecondary education and economic mobility gave the researcher new insight into the multitude of disadvantages this population has to overcome.

### **Conclusion**

The cultural-historical activity theory in this study is explained as participant experiences and perceptions illustrate the strong influence intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility has on individuals and future generations. There are some cultures that will never have the opportunity nor advantage to pursue postsecondary education and economic mobility without external intervention. External intervention to ensure equitable educational and economic opportunities for individuals of all socioeconomic backgrounds and ages is not only a societal responsibility, but also a societal benefit. The earlier generations of families can become better equipped with postsecondary education exposure, experience, and encouragement, the stronger future generations will be to embrace it and endure it towards economic mobility.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: IRB Approval



February 1, 2024

Leslie Barrett Brown  
Coastal Carolina University  
Conway, SC 29528

RE: It is all relative: Intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility

Leslie,

It has been determined that your protocol #2024.104 is approved as **EXPEDITED** by the Coastal Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Research Subjects Categories) #6 & 7,

- #6 - Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes
- #7 – Research on individual or group characteristics, behavior, or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval is good for one calendar year commencing with the date of approval and concludes on 6/1/2024. If your work continues beyond this date, it will be necessary to seek a continuation from the IRB. If your work concludes prior to this date, please inform the IRB.

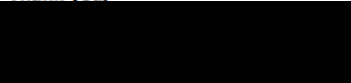
***Approval of this protocol does not provide permission or consent for faculty, staff or students to use university communication channels for contacting or obtaining information from research subjects or participants. Faculty, staff and students are responsible for obtaining appropriate permission to use university communications to contact research participants. For use of university email to groups such as all faculty/staff or all students, requests should be made to the Provost's Office after the research protocol has been approved by the IRB. Please allow at least one week to receive approval.***

Please note, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to report immediately to the IRB any changes in procedures involving human subjects and any unexpected risks to human subjects, any detrimental effects to the rights or welfare of any human subjects participating in the project, giving names of persons, dates of occurrences, details of harmful effects, and any remedial actions. Such changes may affect the status of your approved research.

Be advised that study materials and documentation, including signed informed consent documents, must be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the research and shall be accessible for purposes of audit.

If you have any questions concerning this review, please contact Patty Carter, IRB Coordinator, at [pcarter@coastal.edu](mailto:pcarter@coastal.edu) or extension 2978.

Thank you,



Stephanie Cassavaugh  
Director, Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services  
IRB Administrator

cc: Anthony Setari





## Appendix C: Research Invitation

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research on Intergenerational Postsecondary Education and Economic Mobility

Dear [Potential Participant],

I hope this message finds you well. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study examining the relationship between intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility.

**About the Study:** This research aims to explore the impact of family educational backgrounds on individual decisions to pursue postsecondary education and the subsequent influence on economic mobility. I am interested in hearing diverse perspectives to better understand the complexities of these intergenerational dynamics.

**Why Participate?** By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between education and economic mobility. Your insights can help inform future institutional policies and initiatives aimed at promoting educational opportunities and economic advancement.

**Who Can Participate?** I am seeking postsecondary graduates who have experienced the interplay between family educational backgrounds and their own postsecondary education choices. Whether you come from a family with a strong tradition of education or have navigated unique challenges in pursuing higher education as a first-generation student, your experiences are valuable to this study.

**What Participation Involves:** If you choose to participate, you will be invited to a confidential interview where you can share your experiences, perspectives, and insights. The interview is expected to last approximately one hour, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

**Confidentiality:** Your privacy is of utmost importance. All information shared during the study will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be anonymized and aggregated to ensure the privacy and anonymity of participants.

**How to Participate:** If you are interested in participating, please complete the short survey found [here](#) to be considered for selection. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Leslie Barrett Brown at [lbarrett@coastal.edu](mailto:lbarrett@coastal.edu) or 843-855-7950. I am happy to provide additional information and address any concerns you may have.

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to the possibility of working together to shed light on this important topic.

Sincerely,  
Leslie Barrett Brown

## Appendix D: Informed Consent



### **INFORMED CONSENT FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH PARTICIPATION**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Leslie Barrett Brown, and I am a graduate student at Coastal Carolina University. I also currently serve as the Associate Director of Transfer and Non-traditional admissions at Coastal Carolina University, as well. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study entitled, "It is all relative: Intergenerational postsecondary education attainment and economic mobility". You are free to talk with someone you trust about your participation in this research and may take time to reflect on whether you wish to participate or not. If you have any questions, I will answer them now or at any time during the study.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research study is to examine intergenerational postsecondary education attainment's influence on economic mobility for succeeding generations.

#### **Procedures**

During this research study, you will be asked to participate in a one-hour interview recorded and transcribed via Zoom. You will be asked open-ended questions and follow-up questions will be asked as needed.

#### **Duration**

For this research study, your participation will be required for the one hour interview, and follow-up, as needed.

#### **Rights**

You do not have to agree to participate in this research study. If you do choose to participate, you may choose not to at any time once the study begins. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing from the study at any time.

#### **Risks**

During this research study, no risks or discomforts are anticipated.

#### **Benefits**

By agreeing to participate in this research study, it is not expected that you would benefit directly. This research, however, may help gain a better understanding of others within your community or society as a whole as a result of finding an answer to the research question.

## Appendix E: Recording Authorization



### PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDING AUTHORIZATION

I hereby release, discharge and agree to save harmless Coastal Carolina University, its successors, assigns, officers, employees or agents, any person(s) or corporation(s) for whom it might be acting, and any firm publishing and/or distributing any photograph, video footage or audio recording produced as part of this research, in whole or in part, as a finished product, from and against any liability as a result of any distortion, blurring, alteration, visual or auditory illusion, or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in the recording, processing, reproduction, publication or distribution of any photograph, videotape, audiotape or interview, even should the same subject me or my to ridicule, scandal, reproach, scorn or indignity. I hereby agree that the photographs, video footage and audio recordings may be used under the conditions stated herein without blurring my identifying characteristics.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Leslie Barrett Brown by phone 843-855-7950 or lbarrett@coastal.edu.

The faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Anthony Setari and he can also be contacted by phone 843-349-2112 or email asetari@coastal.edu.

**The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing OSPRS@coastal.edu.**

I have read this authorization and have been able to ask questions of the PI and/or discuss my participation with someone I trust. I understand that I can ask additional questions at any time during this research study and am free to withdraw from participation at any time.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix F: Interview Protocol**

- Thank you for joining me on this Zoom virtual meeting that will be recorded for transcribing and notetaking purposes.
- Introduction of the researcher
- Unless you provide consent to the contrary, the confidentiality of your participation in this research study, your responses or any individual results will be maintained by myself, the PI.
- We will take about an hour to answer 8 open-ended questions. You are also welcome to follow back up at any time after the interview with questions you may have about the study. We will also discuss a summary of my interpretation of the experiences you have shared, and you will have the opportunity to provide feedback at that time.
- The results of this research will be available to you and will be shared with my dissertation committee and presented in a dissertation defense.
- Questions
- Closing: Thank you and please feel free to follow-up with any additional thoughts or questions you may have about this study.

### Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. Describe your own educational journey, and how it differs from that of your parents or grandparents?
2. How would you describe the level of emphasis your family placed on postsecondary education?
  - a. Did you receive any guidance or advice from older generations in your family regarding the importance of education for economic mobility?
3. How did your family's attitude towards education influence your decision to pursue higher education?
4. How do socioeconomic factors influence the ability to pursue higher education within your family?
5. How do cultural or societal expectations impact decisions regarding postsecondary education within your family?
  - a. Are there any cultural values that either support or hinder the pursuit of higher education?
6. Have you observed any patterns in the types of careers pursued by different generations in your family?
7. To what extent do you feel institutional support played a role in facilitating intergenerational postsecondary education and economic mobility?
  - a. Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see in the support systems for intergenerational education and economic advancement?
8. Please provide examples of how your education has impacted your career opportunities and financial well-being?

## Appendix H: Invitation Survey

**Intergenerational Postsecondary Attainment and Economic Mobility Study**

1. What is your age?

2. What is your race/ethnicity?

3. Where are you located (city, state, country)?

4. What is your highest level of postsecondary education attainment?

Associate degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctoral degree

Professional degree

5. What was your parents or guardians' highest level of education attainment?

- High
- Some
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctoral
- Professional Degree
- Other (please specify)

6. Please submit contact information below if you are interested in participating in a one-hour virtual interview regarding your postsecondary education experience.

N

E

Phone

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