

APPLICATION FORM
Seed Grant Proposal Cover Sheet

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Signature of PI(s)

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Seed Grant Proposal

I. Proposal Title

Enrollment Continuation Needs of First-Generation College Students

II. Abstract Paragraph of Project (200 words maximum)

The proposed project will serve to build upon insights from the researcher's previous qualitative studies, which included first-generation college students. The studies' findings point to the emergence of dominant psychosocial needs and concerns about the future related to meeting those needs. Employing a phenomenological research design, the researcher will conduct a comparative study of first-generation subgroups. The purpose is to document, describe, and compare their lived experiences as they relate to their needs and decisions about continuing their enrollment in higher education. Participants' experiences will be explored using 30 open-ended interview questions aligned with this study's three research questions. The research questions are centered around (a) exploring first-generation college students' beliefs about their needs (individual and contextual) for continuing their enrollment in higher education, (b) exploring their decisions about continuing their higher education experiences and how they may be influenced by their individual and contextual needs, and (c) exploring their views of the projected fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of their needs (individual and contextual) and how they affect their continued enrollment decisions. This project supports the discovery of new knowledge, which can impact higher education in terms of improved support programs and interventions leading to higher student retention rates.

III. Proposal Narrative: (Five pages' maximum)

Statement of Need and Rationale

First-generation students make up a third of all college students. Still, only 27% will attain their degrees within four years. (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2018). This statistic highlights a problem that extends *beyond college access*. To begin to address the problem, a focus on intersectionality — students' whole identity — is vital as educational leaders consider how students' first-generation status intersects with other aspects of their identity. This focus is crucial as college administrators, faculty members, student affairs staff, and key higher education partners determine how best to help meet the needs of a diverse student population.

An Inside Higher Ed (2018) report offers a note of caution that “assuming that first-generation students are all the same -- that they are all low income or members of minority groups -- can leave those who don't fit that picture without support (para. 5).” Correspondingly, the term “first-gen plus” refers to various first-generation student subgroups. First-generation students can be *first-gen plus* minority, *first-gen plus* LGBTQIA, *first-gen plus* low-income, and more. Higher education institutions need to know how different students think about their needs, perceive their needs, associate one need with another, and link them to potential enrollment decisions. Firsthand perspectives and experiences of first-generation students should be an asset. Key findings may be used to improve support programs and interventions leading to higher student retention rates.

Dr. Wilson conducted two studies previously (main and comparative studies) with groups of students from low-income families, many of which were first-generation college students. The main research study was conducted to document and describe high-achieving, low-income freshmen community college students' lived experiences related to their needs and decisions about continuing their enrollment in higher education (Wilson, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Subsequently, a comparative study of other low-income, college freshmen groups was conducted to better understand the extent to which need differences exist among various low-income college freshmen groups (Wilson, 2019). The target population of these studies included three low-income college freshmen groups: 1) high achievers at the community college study site, 2) average achievers at the community college study site, and 3) high achievers at the four-year university study site. Whereas academic achievement prior to college entry and socioeconomic background were examined in these previous studies, further data such as family and student characteristics may be useful. The common denominator among all three groups is their low-income socioeconomic background (defined as a student who meets federal low-income eligibility criteria).

The findings of studies with *first-gen plus* low-income college students point to the emergence of dominant psychosocial needs and concerns about the future related to meeting those needs. Students made decisions to address this need in different ways, but they also considered leaving or giving up their college experiences when they

projected about the lack of fulfillment of their psychosocial development needs. This phenomenon suggests that college students from low-income families might need strong support for psychosocial development (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Schmertz, 2010). These students may be discontinuing their enrollment in higher education because their psychosocial needs are not being met. Suppose this is true for a broader population of students. In that case, institutions must focus on supporting students' needs for psychosocial development.

While these studies helped to define the variables of needs, decisions, and concerns, they did not include ways to discover the relationships among the variables. Also, because these studies were exploratory, they were not designed to provide data to generalize results. Notwithstanding, these studies resulted in the documentation of the needs and decisions, concerns, and experiences of college students from low-income families, many of which were first-generation (referred to as *first-gen plus* low-income). Further study that builds upon these insights might include a comparative study of first-generation college student subgroups.

Methodology and Capacity

Sherell D. Wilson, Ph.D., has a proven capacity to effectively carry out the project as principal investigator. Dr. Wilson's own lived experience as a *first-gen plus* minority and low-income student turned Ph.D. affords authenticity via a set of unique insights and experiences that inform and direct her work as an educational leader. She has a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, M.Ed. in Educational Leadership, B.A. in Special Education and Teaching plus, more than two decades of progressive expertise in administration and consulting spanning K-12 and higher education sectors. Dr. Wilson's research and interests are centered on underserved (minority, low-income, and first-generation) student groups. She currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership for doctoral and master's degree programs at National Louis University (Florida Campus). Dr. Wilson is also the founder and CEO of Beyond College Access LLC, an educational consulting company, with a mission to inspire, educate, and empower educational leaders to support underserved students — so that together they can maximize their college success outcomes from access to attainment.

This is a proposal to conduct a comparative study of two first-generation student subgroups at the four-year university study site (possibly, National Louis University). This study will serve to build upon insights from previous studies of *first-gen plus* low-income college students by conducting a comparative study of first-generation college student subgroups. The purpose of the project is to document, describe, and compare the lived experiences of first-generation college students as they relate to their needs and decisions about continuing their enrollment in higher education.

The target population of this study is two first-generation student subgroups:

1. **Ten (10)** *first-gen plus* minority college students who are currently enrolled at the HEI study site.

2. **Ten (10)** first-gen non-minority college students who are currently enrolled at the HEI study site.

The two groups will potentially increase understanding of the extent to which need differences exist among the various first-generation student subgroups. Given the intersectionality focus, further data such as family and student characteristics will be examined.

For the purpose of the project, the qualitative methodology is most appropriate. A phenomenological research design will guide the data collection and analysis in trying to understand the students' realities about their needs for continuing their enrollment in higher education. Meanings will be derived from the perspective, time, and history of the participants. Interviews will be conducted in person via a video and audio-conferencing platform such as Zoom. With the participant's consent, we will record the interview to enable accurate transcription and analysis. Participants' experiences will be explored using 30 open-ended interview questions aligned with the studies' three research questions.

The general research questions (RQs) for this study are as follows:

- **RQ1: What are the first-gen college students' beliefs about their needs (individual and contextual) for continuing their enrollment in higher education?**
- **RQ2: What first-gen college students' decisions about continuing their higher education experiences may be influenced by their individual and contextual needs?**
- **RQ3: How do first-gen college students' views of the projected fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of their needs (individual and contextual) affect their continued enrollment decisions?**

These research questions are appropriate for the problem and the purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study.

Outcomes

A potential outcome of this July 1, 2021– June 30, 2023 project is the utilization of theory and overall findings to improve student support programs and interventions to achieve higher retention rates.

Successful completion by the end of the grant period is defined as follows:

1. Completed project along with a written summary of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended submitted to National Louis University (by June 2022)
2. Plans for continued convening and work through the dissemination of key findings via scholarly journals and professional development trainings such as workshops and

- conferences and the exploration of potential external funding opportunities (by June 2023)
3. Raised visibility of NLU as a site of strong practice and innovation in the implementation and examination of the effectiveness of various strategies to support underserved higher education students (ongoing)

Sustainability

As the principal investigator, Dr. Wilson acquired external funding by way of a NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Region III Research Grant for \$500 in June 2017 to help fund the completion of a previous project. The funds were used to purchase and issue \$25 gift cards to each of the 20 study participants. As an organization, NASPA is devoted to and guided by four guiding principles --- Integrity, Innovation, Inclusion, and Inquiry. Each of these principles was incorporated into the research design, particularly “inclusion,” and its focus and potential impact on aligning resources to address persistence and attainment for first-generation college students. A written summary of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended was submitted to NASPA Region III Board of Directors in December 2018. Additionally, she disseminated the results to higher education leaders using several methods. An article that included a summary of findings and implications entitled *The Unmet Psychosocial Development Needs of the High-Achieving, Low-Income Student* (Wilson, 2019) was published in *The Community College Enterprise*. She delivered professional development trainings by way of workshops and annual conferences in 2020 and 2021 in collaboration with NASPA to share key findings and strategies to improve college success outcomes for these historically underserved students.

The mission of National Louis University (NLU) is to provide access to quality higher education that nurtures opportunity for students through innovative teaching, scholarship, community engagement and service excellence. Consistently, this project encompasses plans for the possible continuation of the work --- in support of NLU mission.

Plans for possible continuation of work during and after the seed grant funding include further study of underserved (minority, low-income, and first-generation) student groups to better understand the extent to which need differences exist among them. Along these lines, potential external funding opportunities will be explored, starting with Dr. Wilson’s existing professional memberships and associations such as NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), American Grant Writers’ Association, Hillsborough School District Equity & Diversity Task Force, and National Council on Black American Affairs will be explored. Opportunities to join the Center for First-generation Student Success at NASPA in advancing a national narrative via their annual National First-Generation College Celebration will also be explored. Additionally, opportunities to further disseminate key findings will be explored, starting with Dr. Wilson’s existing involvement as faculty as well as participation on editorial review boards for academic journals such as *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, and *Global Journal of*

Business Pedagogy, and National Louis University's home-grown NCE journal *Inquiry in Education* journal. In addition to teaching and scholarship activities, Dr. Wilson's interests include expanding on her service activities with National Louis University through its "First-Generation for College (FG4C)" initiative. Presently, this initiative is a mentorship program implemented between high schools in the Chicagoland area and National Louis University (NLU), wherein a group of NLU first-generation college students coaches current high school students through their transition from high school to college. This initiative might be enhanced to give the initiative more impact and greater reach as well as expanded to the NLU Florida Campus.

References

- Napoli, A. R., & Wortman, P. M. (1998). Psychosocial factors related to retention and early departure of two-year community college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(4), 419-455.
- Schmertz, B. A. (2010). Bridging the class divide: The qualitative evaluation of a summer bridge program for low-income students at an elite university. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 2010).
- Whitford, E. (2018). Maximizing Success for First-Gen Students. Article published by Inside Higher Ed.
- Whitley, S. E., Benson, G., & Wesaw, A. (2018). First-generation student success: A landscape analysis of programs and services at four-year institutions. Report published by the Center for First-generation Student Success at NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- Wilson, S. D. (Fall, 2019). The Unmet Psychosocial Development Needs of the High-Achieving, Low-Income Student. Article published in *The Community College Enterprise*.
- Wilson, S. D. (Fall, 2016). Lack of Persistence in College and the High-Achieving, Low-Income Student. Article published in *The Community College Enterprise*.
- Wilson, S. D. (2014). Enrollment Continuation Needs of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students in Community Colleges. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix, 2014).

Appendix I
Project Outcomes, Timeline and Benchmark
Measures

Project Outcomes: A potential outcome of this project is the utilization of theory and overall findings to improve student support programs and interventions to achieve higher retention rates. Successful completion by the end of the grant period is defined as follows: 1. Completed project along with a written summary of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended submitted to National Louis University (by June 2022) 2. Plans for continued convening and work through the dissemination of key findings via scholarly journals and professional development trainings such as workshops and conferences and the exploration of potential external funding opportunities (by June 2023) 3. Raised visibility of NLU as a site of strong practice and innovation in the implementation and examination of the effectiveness of various strategies to support underserved higher education students (ongoing)	
Benchmark Activities	Timeline
<i>1. Completed project along with a written summary of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended submitted to National Louis University by June 2022</i>	
Write and submit an IRB application for qualitative study	July 2021
Connect with NLU's Undergraduate College about the project and obtaining permission	August - September 2021
Locate study participants through purposive sampling	September - October 2021

Qualitative Data Collection and Transcription: • Ten (10) <i>first-gen plus</i> minority college students who are currently enrolled at the HEI study site. • Ten (10) first-gen non-minority college students who are currently enrolled at the HEI study site.	September 2021 – February 2022
Develop mid-year report of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended and submit to National Louis University	March 2022
Analysis of Qualitative Data	March – May 2022
Develop end of year report of findings and a detailed account of how the funds were expended and submit to National Louis University	June 2022
2. <i>Plans for continued convening and work through the dissemination of key findings via scholarly journals and professional development trainings such as workshops and conferences and the exploration of potential external funding opportunities</i>	
Prepare full draft proposal(s) for external funding opportunities Execute plans for continued convening and work through the dissemination of key findings via scholarly journals and conference presentation	July 2022 - June 2023
Submit Final Report and External Funding Proposal	June 2023

Appendix II
Seed Grant Proposal Budget Form

2021-23 NLU Seed Grant in the amount of \$5,000 to help fund the completion of the proposed project. The funds sought from NLU will only be used to fund costs related to conducting the research project. In FY1, the funds will be used to cover the cost of a graduate student to assist in qualitative data collection via conducting the research interviews @ \$25/hour x 40 hours (\$1,000), the cost of transcription services @ \$25/hour x 80 hours (\$2,000), and the cost of participant incentive thank you gifts (i.e., NLU merchandise) @ up to \$50 value x 20 study participants (\$1,000). In FY2, funds in the amount of \$1,000 will be used to cover the costs related to conference attendance, including travel costs and conference registration fees.

Proposal Title	Enrollment Continuation Needs of First-Generation College Students	
Principal Investigator(s)	Sherell D. Wilson, Ph.D.	
Additional applicants		
EXPENSES	Y1 Budget: \$4,000 July 1, 2021– June 30, 2022	Y2 Budget: \$1,000 July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023
Personnel – students and/or temp. labor	\$ 1,000 (graduate student @ \$25/hr. x 40 hours)	\$
Communications	\$	\$
Resources (e.g., purchased publications costs)	\$	\$

Travel	\$	\$ 1,000 (conference attendance and travel)
Incentives for Non-NLU Research Participants	\$ 1,000 (incentive thank you gifts @ up to \$50 value x 20 students)	
Supplies	\$	\$
Meeting costs: facilities, other	\$	\$
Other (Transcription Services)	\$ 2,000 (transcription service @ \$25/hr. x 80 hours)	\$
Total for each Year	\$	\$
TOTAL Request (Track 1: not to exceed \$5000. Track 2: not to exceed \$10,000)	\$ 5,000	