

“Échale Ganas” (Give it Your All): Experiences of Stress in First-Generation Undergraduate College Students (FGCS), 2024

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Background/Introduction

College students are highly subjected to stress, with **45.1% reporting higher-than-average stress levels**.¹ Similarly, the 2023 APA survey found two-thirds of 18-34-year-olds described their stress as “completely overwhelming”, **impacting daily functioning**.² The National Institute of Mental Health defines stress as the **mental or physical response to external factors**,³ and prolonged stress is linked to psychological and physical health issues, including an **increased risk of chronic diseases**.⁴ Experiences of prolonged stress are associated with **higher risks of premature mortality**.⁴

First-generation college students (FGCS) face unique challenges contributing to higher stress levels compared to their continuing-generation peers.^{5,6} FGCS often deal with **imposter syndrome**,⁷ **lack of familial support**,⁵ **financial stress**,⁹ and therefore also face **higher dropout rates**.⁸ Considering the obstacles and disparities faced by FGCS, this population has the **most to gain from receiving a college degree**.¹⁰ With nearly 8 million FGCS in the U.S., addressing the barriers to their mental and physical health is crucial. FGCS are more likely to experience academic failure and illness compared to CGCS (continuing generation college students), yet the influence of stress on these outcomes is not fully understood.⁶

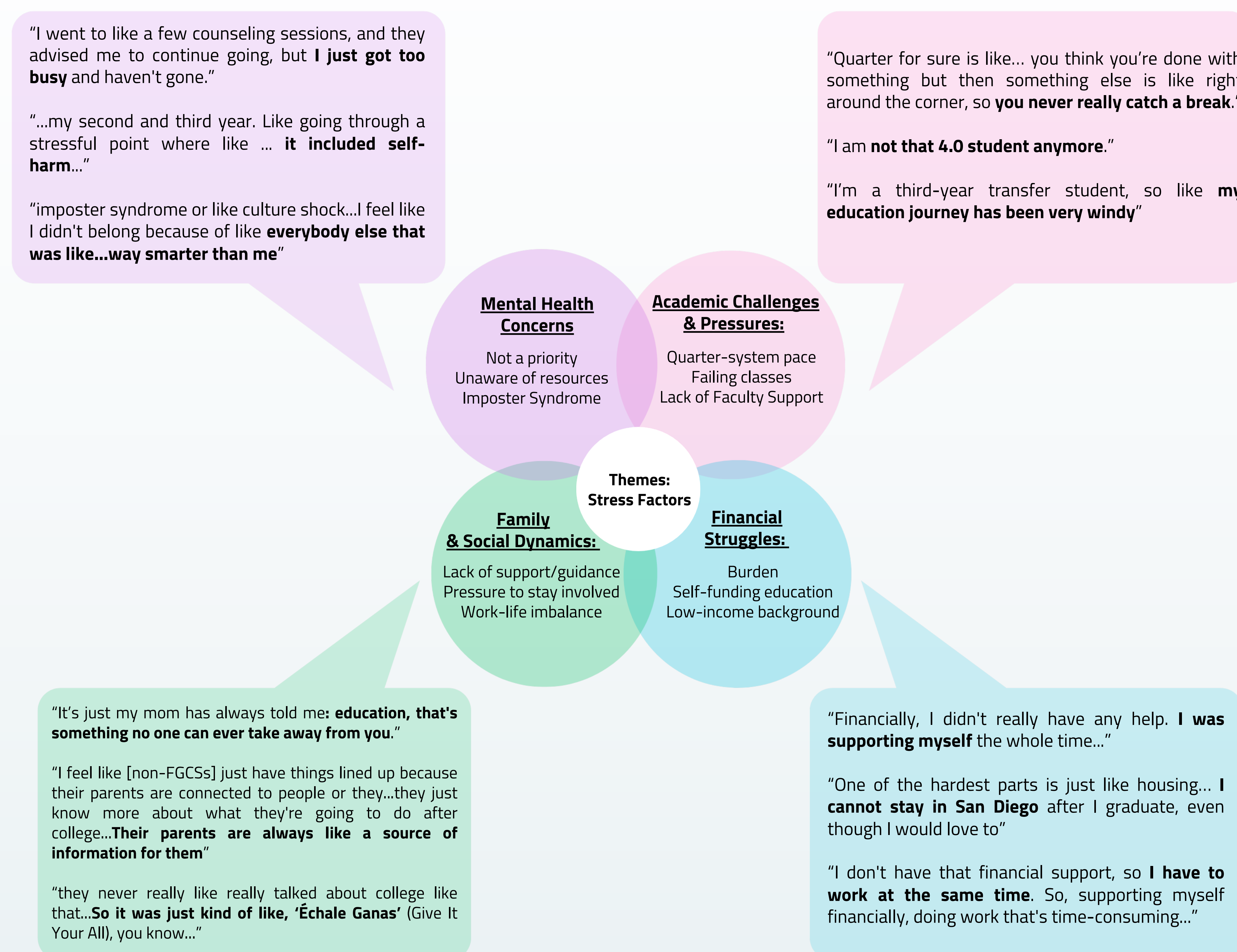
Objectives

This study aims to **explore the unique factors contributing to perceived stress** among first-generation college students (FGCS) through qualitative interviews. While **previous research indicates higher stress levels in FGCS**, our focus is on understanding participants' perceptions of stress through their **lived experiences**. By examining individual college experiences, we seek to identify common patterns underlying stress among FGCS at UCSD.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Demographic Breakdown of Interview Participants:					
Interviewee	Ethnicity/race	Gender	Graduation year	Housing status	Transfer status
1	Hispanic/Latinx	Cis-Female	2026	Off-campus	Yes
2	Asian	Cis-Female	2024	Off-campus	No
3	Hispanic/Latinx	Cis-Female	2024	Off-campus	Yes
4	Hispanic/Latinx	Cis-Male	2025	Off-campus	No

Results: Figure 1. Themes, Common Subcodes Across Participants, and Quotes



Methodology

We conducted a qualitative analysis of 4, 30-minute Zoom interviews to give participants opportunities to speak about their experience with stress as an FGCS. We used **semi-structured guiding questions and probes** to facilitate the conversation. Each researcher coded each interview transcript, and then **key themes across codes were identified** using human collaboration and AI technology. We conducted our **initial screening** through a Qualtrics survey distributed on the UCSD campus, social media, and email. In the survey, we **collected demographic information** about participants and determined if they met inclusion criteria—being FGCS and **rated their experience as a student at UCSD as “somewhat stressful” or “very stressful”**. We defined FGCS as those whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience.¹¹

Conclusions

This study revealed some of the key themes that contribute to stress for FGCS, specifically **academic challenges, financial struggles, family and social dynamics, and mental health concerns**. We were surprised to find family dynamics and academic challenges were factors noted among all interviewees, but **financial concerns varied by participant** since some received full-ride scholarships or sufficient FAFSA awarding. Further, there was **variability in how aware each participant was of resources** specifically for FGCS that depended on their own initiative to seek them out. There was continuity among the interviewees **lacking guidance** from family and faculty contributing to reduced academic performance resulting in **failing their first class** in their academic careers. Overall, participants agreed as FGCS there was **greater personal responsibility** for their own outcome, no matter being a non-traditional transfer student or entering as a freshman on scholarship.

Policy Implications

From our interviews, we could infer some gaps in resources and barriers to utilization. Overall, some of the interviewees were aware of the existence of affinity groups on campus but **were only involved if they had taken the initiative to find them** on their own. Besides just having community and affinity groups, UCSD could better meet unmet needs by **bolstering groups to conduct more outreach**. There was awareness of mental health resources on campus, but they could not always be utilized, so UCSD could help by **continuing to fund and encourage outreach**. Another gap we identified was financial burden, specifically related to whether the student was receiving scholarship funding for tuition/living expenses, or if they had to work, adding stress to their already busy lives. UCSD could bridge gaps between scholarship and non-scholarship FGCS by **allotting more financial resources such as grants to FGCS**. Overall, higher resource availability would hopefully lead to higher resource utilization- reducing stress among this demographic.

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