

# A Critical Cultural Wealth Model of First-Generation and Economically Marginalized College Students' Academic and Career Development

Journal of Career Development

1-16

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DOI: 10.1177/0894845319826266

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## Abstract

First-generation and economically marginalized (FGEM) college students are attending higher education institutions with increasing regularity. The unique experiences of these students call for career frameworks that capture their specific strengths and challenges. This article outlines a new model from which to conceptualize FGEM college students' academic and career development with a focus on structural, environmental, and intrapersonal factors previously shown to predict their academic and career success. Social-emotional crossroads and career self-authorship are positioned as central constructs in the model and proposed as critical pathways to FGEM students' academic and career development. Cultural wealth is offered as a form of capital that may promote FGEM students' academic and career success. Implications for future research, practice, and policy with FGEM students are described.

## Keywords

first-generation college students, socioeconomic status, social class, cultural wealth, critical theory

Close to one third of 5- to 17-year-olds in the United States qualify as a first-generation college student or student whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). First-generation college students tend to be members of economically and racially marginalized groups and comprise increasingly large numbers of the college-going population (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Although research has identified factors that contribute to first-generation and economically marginalized (FGEM) college students' success, much of this literature is limited by its reliance on existing academic and career theory, which was not developed to specifically address the needs of FGEM students.

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For example, prior research has used Nora's (2003) student/institution engagement model, Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT), and Lent's (2004) normative model of well-being to predict academic and career outcomes among first-generation and college students (Allan, Garriott, & Keene, 2016; Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015; Garriott, Navarro, & Flores, 2017). Although applicable, these models are not comprehensive in their inclusion of sociopolitical factors that have been identified as important to FGEM students or how these factors may interact to reproduce or disrupt marginalization. Additionally, hypothesized associations in previously tested models have only garnered partial support with FGEM students (Allan et al., 2016; Garriott et al., 2015). Career development scholarship in this area could be improved by integrating cross-disciplinary research and theory guided by the personal narratives of FGEM students (e.g., Davis, 2010).

The shifting focus of programmatic efforts from social capital to social-emotional-based interventions to promote FGEM students' success in higher education also calls for theory refinement that is compatible with programming goals. Early programs focused on FGEM students tended to hone in on academic support, financial assistance, and adapting to college cultural norms (Crockett, 2017). Lacking in these approaches was attention to the social and emotional adjustment FGEM students often encounter in college environments. Newer programmatic interventions for FGEM students are now beginning to place a greater emphasis on students' social-emotional and identity development (Jehangir, 2009). Improvements to existing career theory are needed to keep pace with innovations in practice with FGEM students and position social-emotional experiences at the forefront of understanding their needs.

### *Who Are FGEM College Students?*

Who qualifies as a "first-generation college student" is not agreed upon. Indeed, there are many ways one could define a first-generation college student, including but not limited to a student with two parents who never attended college; a student whose parents completed associate, but not bachelor's degrees; or a student whose parents attended but did not complete college. Research suggests that no matter how "first-generation" is defined, students with parents who have not completed a bachelor's degree are disadvantaged compared to their continuing-generation peers. Additionally, the association between parental education and academic outcomes is dependent upon the academic or career stage of the student (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018).

It is also critical to acknowledge the overlap and distinctions between first-generation college students, students from families with lower incomes, and "working-class" students, as these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. While many first-generation students also come from lower income families or could be characterized as working class based on the educational and vocational backgrounds of their parents, this is not always the case (Davis, 2010). However, it is true that first-generation students are much more likely to come from households with lower levels of family income, to be students of color, non-traditional-aged learners, immigrants, non-native English speakers, and to have a disability (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Given the complexities and challenges of placing FGEM students into a discrete category, the new model presented in this article attempts to synthesize and apply concepts that appear to span across the experiences of FGEM students while accounting for individual differences within this broader group.

In sum, extant scholarship on FGEM students has been limited by reliance on frameworks that are nonspecific to this group as well as discrete analyses of what it means to be a first-generation student. The purpose of this article is to outline a new framework from which to conceptualize FGEM students' academic and career development. To broaden and develop a more empowering framework from which to understand FGEM students' experiences, the model presented here describes FGEM students' academic and career development using the following four

dimensions: structural/institutional conditions, social–emotional crossroads, career self-authorship, and cultural wealth. These dimensions are described in relation to several outcomes relevant to the academic and career development of FGEM students: academic persistence, career or major choice satisfaction, and well-being.

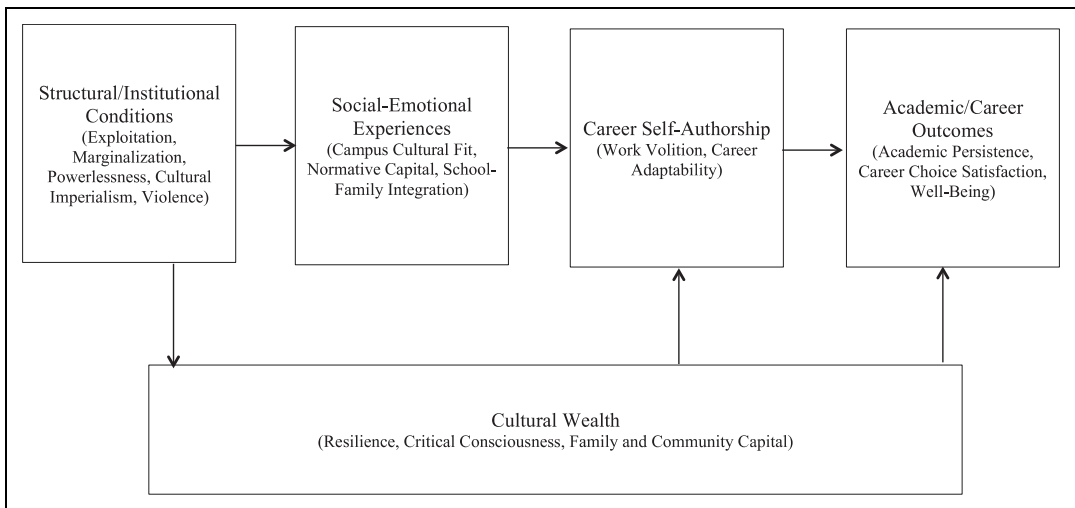
Academic persistence is included as an outcome, as it is of particular interest to college personnel and critical to FGEM students' social mobility. Career or major choice satisfaction is also included as an outcome, given the model presented in this article is less concerned with the specific career a FGEM student chooses than how that choice fits within their aspirations and values. FGEM students may often make career choices based not only on their personal interests but also on the desires or needs of their family and community (Tate et al., 2015). Therefore, it is critical to assess how a FGEM student's career aspirations fit within their broader sociocultural context. Finally, well-being is included as an outcome in the model due to the strong connection between FGEM students' academic and general life satisfaction (Garriott et al., 2015).

### *Theoretical Framework*

*Integration and critique of existing theory.* The propositions offered in this article draw from several important earlier theoretical contributions to the academic and career development of marginalized groups. The psychology of working theory (PWT; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016) has garnered recent attention as a framework for understanding the work experiences of economically marginalized groups. The roles of marginalization and economic constraints within the PWT are applicable to the experiences of FGEM students. Additionally, work often plays a central role in FGEM students' lives due to their need to work to financially support their education (Ward et al., 2012). Although the PWT represents an exciting new development in the study of social class in vocational psychology, it was not developed for the purpose of understanding academic persistence, which is a critical outcome in the study of FGEM students' academic and career development.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural and social capital is also relevant to FGEM students and has been applied in research on their academic adjustment (e.g., Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Specifically, FGEM students are thought to possess lower cultural and social capital than their continuing-generation peers, which places them at a disadvantage in accessing and persisting in higher education institutions (Pascarella et al., 2004). Interpretations of Bourdieu's theory have been critiqued for focusing on a narrow range of normative forms of capital as well as positioning marginalized students as "damaged" in comparison to their peers (Yosso, 2005). Similarly, Tinto's (1987) student integration model has been applied to economically marginalized college students and served as a grounding framework for the examination of first-generation students' experiences (Allan et al., 2016). Although this theoretical framework applies the concept of integration, or to what degree a student has an affinity for and feels they belong at an institution, it does not extend to career choice. Furthermore, Tinto's (1987) work has been critiqued for incorporating overly broad constructs, an overemphasis on individual adjustment to normative higher education practices, and inattention to structural forces that may push students out of college (Metz, 2004).

Finally, although SCCT (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and Lent's (2004) normative model of well-being include environmental supports and barriers as well as background contextual factors in their conceptualization of academic and career development, neither capture the nuances of specific supports, barriers, or affordances that appear to drive FGEM students' success. Specifically, these theories do not offer hypotheses regarding the associations or interactions between ecological layers of contextual supports and barriers (e.g., systemic and individual barriers). In contrast, the framework presented in this article proposes relations between various ecological systems that contribute to academic and career outcomes. Furthermore, although self-efficacy for completing the tasks and demands of college is highly relevant to FGEM students' success, social cognitive



**Figure 1.** The critical cultural wealth model of academic and career development.

frameworks do not capture the unique psychological experiences that may be strongly associated with FGEM students' academic and career outcomes. For example, first-generation students have described developing awareness of their social class positionality as critical to their college success (Orbe, 2004). Finally, SCCT frameworks were developed to capture domain-specific career decision-making processes and approximation toward goal-directed behavior (Lent et al., 1994). The model presented in this article offers a different perspective. Instead of focusing on how one's career choice is influenced by perceived domain-specific ability and interests, this model hones in on "the ability to successfully negotiate external influences and engage in life choices... that reflect one's values and principles" (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012, p. 268). This shift in focus is intentional and meant to honor the unique context of FGEM students' career decision-making process. Despite the noted conceptual shortcomings in the section, the aforementioned frameworks have helped inform and provide a valuable foundation from which to build frameworks specific to FGEM students.

*Critical theory as a guiding framework.* Although a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the influence of critical theory on the model presented in this article. Specifically, the predictions offered later and epistemological assumptions inherent in them are more precisely aligned with *QuantCrit*—the merging of quantitative methods and critical theory (Garcia, López, & Vélez, 2017). Several guiding principles of *QuantCrit* informed the delineation of propositions offered in this article: (a) Quantitative methods are not value neutral and historically have promoted deficit-based narratives of people of color and other marginalized groups while elevating advantaged groups, (b) quantitative methods should be informed by the experiences and knowledge of marginalized groups, (c) quantitative analyses should incorporate structural conditions and interrogate their role in promoting equity for marginalized groups, and (d) quantitative methods can play a role in promoting social justice (Garcia et al., 2017). The framework presented in this article also draws from critical theory in its delineation of how structural barriers are navigated and resisted via the strengths, assets, and wisdom FGEM students carry with them into the academy (Yosso, 2005). What follows is an explication of individual propositions within the critical cultural wealth model (CCWM) of academic and career development (see Figure 1).

## *A CCWM of Academic and Career Development*

The following sections present the four primary dimensions (structural and institutional conditions, social–emotional crossroads, career self-authorship, and cultural wealth) of the CCWM (see Figure 1). Intersections between these four primary tenets are delineated to better capture the complex identities and experiences of FGEM students.

*Structural and institutional conditions.* At the root of FGEM students' academic and career trajectories are structural conditions that shape their opportunities, barriers, and success. Unfortunately, these barriers are often described in a manner that unintentionally pathologizes FGEM students (e.g., Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011) rather than critiquing the hegemonic practices of institutions that serve them. In the interest of challenging deficit-based narratives that have traditionally been used to describe FGEM students' experiences, the CCWM conceives of their challenges as symptoms of an oppressive system. Thus, structural conditions in the CCWM refer to institutionalized policies and practices that lead to the following five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 2013). These dimensions are not mutually exclusive and collectively may be used as a framework to capture the relative power, privilege, and oppression a student experiences. This is particularly important for FGEM students who have intersectional experiences of privilege and oppression that may not be sufficiently captured by education or income alone (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

Exploitation refers to the degree to which FGEM students' time and efforts are taken advantage of for the benefit of others. For instance, because FGEM students often must supplement their tuition and fees with off campus work or work–study positions (Ward et al., 2012), they may work long hours for relatively low pay. Although this places FGEM students at a disadvantage relative to their peers who may not rely on supplemental income to fund their education, it is a significant financial benefit to institutions of higher education and employers. Working long hours as a student poses challenges to meeting school responsibilities and can delay academic progress for FGEM students (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). The overrepresentation of FGEM students at for-profit colleges and in online degree programs represents another form of exploitation. Specifically, FGEM students enrolled in these institutions and programs often accrue large amounts of financial debt that far surpasses the market value of their degree. These profits may then be used to subsidize the salaries or funding of others (Tierney, 2011).

Marginalization captures exclusion from campus activities and resources as well as discrimination based on one's identity. For example, FGEM students may be the targets of negative comments from peers and faculty based on their social class status or be unable to participate in social activities due to cost or other obligations such as family (R. D. Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007; Sy, 2006). Higher education institutions may also hold events or lack adequate policy to affirm the needs of FGEM students with families. Furthermore, FGEM students may find their experiences and that people like them are excluded from curriculum and other forms of representation on campus (Jehangir, 2010a).

Powerlessness refers to one's perceived authority, status, and sense of self. It is reflective of one's ability to make influential decisions and their sense of respect from others (Young, 2013). FGEM students report lower subjective social status, feeling undervalued by their academic institutions, and lack of a voice in their educational experience (Allan et al., 2016; Tate et al., 2015). Due to rising costs of education, many FGEM students find their ability to freely choose where they will attend college as well as what they can do once they get there (e.g., explore different academic majors) is restricted (Davis, 2010).

Cultural imperialism is the imposition of dominant higher education norms (e.g., individualism and capitalism) on FGEM students. Research has shown that cultural norms of independence and

individualism negatively affect the academic performance of first-generation college students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Conversely, FGEM students who develop an awareness of how their unique backgrounds contribute positively to the culture of their institution outperform their peers (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Thus, research suggests the traditional cultural norms of higher education have a direct and deleterious effect on FGEM students' academic success.

Finally, violence captures the actual experience and fear of violence based on one's identity. This may include physical violence as well as "harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members" (Young, 2013, p. 46). The U.S. Department of Education documented a sharp rise in hate crimes on college campuses after the 2016 presidential election. These crimes included vandalism, destruction of property, intimidation, and assault motivated by race, religious affiliation, and gender identity (Bauman, 2018). FGEM students, who may face oppression on the basis of intersecting identity characteristics, often must deal with the realities of violence driven by racism, xenophobia, sexism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of oppression.

Capturing FGEM students' challenges along these five overlapping dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression may better contextualize their experiences. For example, a FGEM student attending a predominantly White institution, who is also a student of color, may have a unique experience with felt sense of belonging on that campus should they experience racial marginalization as well as institutional classism. Similarly, a White student who is the first in their family to complete college but whose family possesses a large amount of wealth may not experience the same level of powerlessness, marginalization, or cultural imperialism as does a first-generation, low-income, Latinx student who is undocumented. Therefore, a student's intersectional experience is related to structural conditions that create advantage and disadvantage.

Structural and institutional conditions are shaped by state and federal policy as well as institutional supports and barriers. For example, institution-sponsored FGEM student programming that provides financial and social support could decrease students' feelings of marginalization. Prospective studies examining the historical effects of policy changes and experimental research examining the effects of need-based grant programs show that increased access to financial aid is associated with higher rates of college attendance and completion (Dynarski, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). Conversely, institutional classism may exacerbate the marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism imposed on FGEM students. Using cross-sectional correlational research designs, researchers have shown that experiences such as not being able to participate in student activities due to time or cost, inability to afford textbooks, and inability to take a class or switch majors due to financial constraints are associated with FGEM students' subjective social status, life satisfaction, and academic satisfaction (Allan et al., 2016).

National education policy may also serve as a structural condition that affects FGEM students' success and well-being. For example, as of this writing, the House Committee on Education of the 115th Congress of the United States has proposed sweeping changes to financial aid including dismantling several student loan forgiveness programs (American Council on Education, 2017). Policies such as these may limit the degree to which FGEM students can fully participate in campus life, attend school full time, or pay for basic necessities such as textbooks and student fees.

**Social-emotional crossroads.** The psychological experience of being a FGEM student has been documented in academic texts (e.g., Jehangir, 2010a), peer-review journal articles (e.g., Orbe, 2004), and news media outlets (e.g., Pappano, 2015). Collectively, these works suggest that FGEM students must often navigate two worlds—those of the academy and of their family, home, and communities (Davis, 2010, Jehangir et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). The convergence of these contexts leads to unique social-emotional experiences for FGEM students. To date, however, there have been no attempts to integrate commonalities across this literature base to present an expansive, yet

coherent framework from which to understand the psychological experiences of FGEM students. The social–emotional crossroads described here are intended to capture common tensions FGEM students experience when navigating institutions of higher education. Certainly, the various experiences proposed may manifest to a greater or lesser degree depending on the student. However, the tensions that follow appear to cut across the FGEM student literature (e.g., Davis, 2010; Jehangir et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2012).

The first dimension of FGEM students' social–emotional crossroads is campus cultural fit or the extent to which a FGEM student feels they are engaged, welcomed, and belongs at their university. The tendency of higher education institutions to cater to White, middle- to upper middle-class people can be alienating to FGEM college students (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012). For example, the onus generally placed on college students to navigate campuses, as well as the structures embedded within them, may be perceived as unwelcoming to a FGEM student. Campus cultural fit has been assessed in previous research via instruments designed to measure perceptions of the university environment and the degree to which one's personal values and culture are congruent with those of the university. This research shows that more positive perceptions of the university environment and greater perceived congruence between personal values and the university are predictive of academic persistence (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009).

The second dimension of social–emotional crossroads is normative capital, which refers to FGEM student's subjective assessment of the degree to which their access to resources and knowledge align with normative forms of capital privileged by their institution. Consistent with sociopsychological models of career development (Astin, 1984), normative capital reflects the opportunity structures available to FGEM students, which promote or impede their progress through higher education. Normative capital in college may include knowing where on campus to go to resolve an academic concern, having a working understanding of what faculty office hours are, and how they may be used, as well as knowing what is expected in terms of class participation. Institutional supports, such as multicultural learning communities, may be one way that colleges supplement this form of capital to FGEM students (Jehangir, 2009). Sometimes referred to as "college knowledge" or the "hidden curriculum" (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006), FGEM students may have to engage in a process of social class and cultural code switching to adjust to the norms and expectations of higher education institutions.

The final dimension of social–emotional crossroads is school–family integration. This refers to a FGEM student's feelings of connectedness and support from their family in relation to their college attendance. Family relationships are often highlighted in FGEM students' personal narratives (Davis, 2010). In addition to the geographical distance that sometimes accompanies college attendance, FGEM students often grapple with psychological distancing from their families of origin. For example, research has documented the experience of family achievement guilt in first-generation college students, wherein they may experience guilt as a result of surpassing the achievements of family members (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Other first-person accounts suggest FGEM students may simultaneously perceive family members to support their college attendance while feeling tremendous pressure to make their family proud (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

One's intersectional experience of structural and institutional challenges may shape social–emotional experiences. For example, the more one experiences a sense of disempowerment and marginalization should relate to perceived sense of belonging at school and capacity to navigate institutional structures. It is also likely that having to live far away from campus or working long hours affects the degree to which a student experiences a sense of belonging at school or perceives their school and family lives to be integrated. Research has found associations between classism experiences, financial security, educational access, feelings of exclusion, concerns about time and money, and perceived differences between one's familial and institutional social class statuses and sense of belonging at college (R. G. Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

**Career self-authorship.** Self-authorship refers to the capacity to “analyze data, critique multiple perspectives, understand contexts, and negotiate competing interests to make wise decisions” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Research with FGEM students suggests that achieving a sense of self-authorship includes (a) the ability to critically analyze structural forces and how they shape one’s experience, (b) a sense of control and agency, and (c) confidence in one’s internal capacities to solve problems and make important life choices (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Jehangir et al., 2012).

Choosing a career has been described as a provocative situation that requires systematic reflection on one’s strengths, values, and place in context (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Applied to FGEM student career development, career self-authorship is defined here as one’s ability to make career decisions that are self-reflective, account for context, and incorporate one’s capacity for agency and problem-solving in the face of challenges. These dimensions of career self-authorship align well with existing vocational constructs that have been examined with college students.

First, the capacity to account for context and feel a sense of control in career decisions has been articulated in existing conceptualizations of work volition. Specifically, work volition refers to one’s perception of their ability to make career choices despite structural constraints (Duffy, Diemer, & Jadidian, 2012). Research with undergraduate students has shown that social support, social class, and institutional support are associated with work volition (Autin, Douglass, Duffy, England, & Allan, 2017; Autin et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2012). Furthermore, the ability to self-reflect, account for context, and problem-solve issues related to career development has been described extensively in literature devoted to career adaptability. Research suggests that career adaptability includes *concern* about one’s career development, *control* over one’s career decisions, *curiosity* about one’s fit within the world of work, and *confidence* in one’s ability to execute academic and career choices (Savickas, 2005).

When FGEM students experience a sense of belonging at their school, believe they have the capital to succeed, and perceive their school and family lives are integrated, they are likely to experience higher levels of career self-authorship. Research suggests that being integrated on campus, access to critical pedagogy, and receiving emotional support from parents are linked to the development of general self-authorship (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011; Pizzolato, 2004). Additionally, work volition and career adaptability have been shown to predict career indecision, academic satisfaction, life satisfaction, and academic persistence intentions (Autin et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2012). Collectively, this research suggests that FGEM students’ social–emotional experiences should relate to their career self-authorship and that career self-authorship should be associated with academic persistence, career or major choice satisfaction, and well-being.

**Cultural wealth.** Cultural wealth includes the assets, strengths, and capital of marginalized groups (Yosso, 2005). Although structural and institutional conditions may capture very real challenges that FGEM students face, an overemphasis on these barriers and their association to deleterious outcomes such as attrition and low academic performance neglects the fact that approximately three quarters of first-generation students do succeed in college despite structural disadvantage (Ishitani, 2006). Recent contributions to the first-generation student literature have critiqued the unbalanced focus on what is *wrong* with first-generation college students rather than focusing on strengths that might explain their perseverance in the face of challenges (Jehangir, 2010a; Tate et al., 2015). Within the CCWM, FGEM cultural wealth is positioned as an individual–contextual factor that is associated with academic and career outcomes. Although not named explicitly, several facets of FGEM cultural wealth have been identified in research with FGEM students and are described below.

First, however, it is important to acknowledge the foundational literature that informs the concept of FGEM cultural wealth. The notion of cultural wealth originates from Yosso (2005) who developed the community cultural wealth model. Yosso’s work served as a reaction to deficit-based narratives and theoretical propositions put forth to describe racial(ized) differences in employment and



education among Whites and people of color. Grounded in critical race theory (Delgado, 1995), cultural wealth theory posits that communities of color develop forms of capital to cope with systemic oppression, which are not recognized in dominant narratives of social capital. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth framework explicates aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and linguistic capital as forms of capital vital to the health and well-being of communities of color.

Empirical research and published narratives reveal several forms of capital unique to FGEM college students. First, it has been shown that FGEM college students have high career aspirations prior to college and maintain comparable levels of work hope as their peers while pursuing their bachelor's degree (Garriott, Flores, & Martens, 2013; Thompson, Her, & Nitzarim, 2014). This aligns with the concept of aspirational capital, which refers to one's ability to maintain hope despite barriers (Yosso, 2005). FGEM students also exhibit high levels of resilience or ability to cope with institutionalized disadvantage. Often, FGEM students experiencing marginalization must be more intentional than their peers in finding a home on campus. This may include locating student organizations, student or faculty mentors, and FGEM student-specific support services to enhance one's sense of belonging on campus (Stuber, 2011). Quantitative research has shown that use of institutional supports, such as mentors, buffers the association between perceived stress and academic goal progress in first-generation students (Garriott & Nisle, 2017). This resourcefulness suggests the presence of social and navigational capital among FGEM students or ability to connect with supportive communities to successfully maneuver through higher education institutions (Yosso, 2005).

Familial capital may also facilitate FGEM students' success in college. Lack of family support for college attendance has been cited as a barrier to first-generation students' success (Phinney & Haas, 2003). However, research has shown a weak relation between family support for attending college and first-generation status (Garriott & Nisle, 2017). Instead, the emotional relationship between children and parents of FGEM students may be more important. For example, research has shown that Latina/o, noncitizen, first-generation college students draw from their desire to support their family and community to remain resilient in the face of institutional barriers (O'Neal et al., 2016).

FGEM students have also been shown to seek out institutional resources to cope with feelings and experiences of marginalization (Stuber, 2011). Published narratives of FGEM students are rich with examples of overcoming obstacles such as financial challenges, familial conflict, and trauma (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010b). The capacity to persevere likely plays a role in the relative number of FGEM students who *do* succeed in higher education institutions.

A final form of cultural wealth demonstrated by FGEM students is critical consciousness or "oppressed or marginalized people's critical analysis of their social conditions and individual or collective action taken to change perceived inequities" (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017, p. 462). Consistent with Yosso's (2005) operationalization of resistant capital as, "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80), FGEM students must rely on accumulated knowledge gained from resisting oppressive forces to take action and advocate for themselves and others. This also requires a degree of navigational capital, as it requires a knowledge of, and capacity to maneuver through institutions (Yosso, 2005). Supporting the notion that developing critical consciousness can be adaptive for FGEM students, research has shown that drawing from first-generation and working-class students' unique cultural backgrounds, histories, and positionality in the classroom is a liberatory and effective form of pedagogy (Jehangir et al., 2012). Research also suggests that fostering sociopolitical development, which includes honoring the wisdom that marginalized college students bring with them to college, promotes agency and psychological healing from the effects of oppression (Carmen et al., 2015).

The literature reviewed above intersects well with Yosso's (2005) description of aspirational, social, familial, navigational, and resistant capital in cultural wealth theory. Within the CCWM, FGEM cultural wealth specifically captures three associated facets of the broader cultural wealth

framework: family and community capital, critical consciousness, and resilience. Family and community capital may include the emotional support and encouragement one receives for pursuing higher education or a specific career path and the sense of pride, meaning, and motivation a FGEM student experiences representing their family and community in college. Consistent with existing definitions in the literature (Diemer et al., 2017), critical consciousness refers to FGEM students' awareness of how they are affected by power, privilege, and oppression and perceived capacity to take action to ameliorate inequality. It should be noted that whereas critical consciousness refers to one's orientation toward general structural oppression and injustice, it is distinguished from one's awareness of context in career self-authorship, which is specific to individual career development. In accord with previous literature, resilience refers to FGEM students' general perceived ability to adapt to and thrive in the face of stressors (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

An important conceptual distinction can also be made here regarding the normative capital described as part of students' social-emotional experiences and the capital described as part of FGEM cultural wealth. Specifically, while normative capital refers to knowledge and assets needed to navigate a student's *institution*, FGEM cultural wealth is capital derived from the student's existing background and experience. In this regard, FGEM cultural wealth draws upon personal funds of knowledge or "existing resources, knowledge, and skills embedded in students and their families" (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012, p. 3).

Research shows that forms of FGEM cultural wealth described above may be associated with academic and career success in important ways. In a study with youth of color from poor and working-class backgrounds, researchers found that higher critical consciousness was associated with stronger vocational identity, career commitment, and work salience (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Higher familism in FGEM students has been shown to predict career-related self-efficacy and goals indirectly through perceived family support for career aspirations (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Zoma, Mackie-Hernandez, & Lavin, 2017). Qualitative research suggests that FGEM students' ability to bounce back from life challenges is critical to their sense of confidence and intention to persist in college (Jehangir, 2010a; Stuber, 2011).

## Discussion

Scholarship with FGEM students has been limited to date by the lack of a purposefully delineated theory to describe their specific needs, challenges, and strengths. The CCWM represents a first step in advancing FGEM students' academic and career success by integrating relevant interdisciplinary literature and the narratives of FGEM students (Davis, 2010). The conceptual model offered in this article holds several implications for future research, practice, and policy.

First, this model offers a novel framework from which researchers may conceptualize the experiences and challenges of FGEM students. Too often, foundational literature on FGEM students has located their challenges at the individual level. The CCWM challenges researchers to move beyond individualistic, monolithic conceptualizations of FGEM students' academic adjustment and career development. For example, instead of asking "Why do first-generation students fail?" (e.g., Mehta et al., 2011), the CCWM compels researchers to ask "Why do institutions fail first-generation students?" This critical perspective is a necessary shift for placing FGEM students' challenges in context and scrutinizing institutional factors that limit their success. The CCWM also responds to calls for incorporating intersectional frameworks in research by moving away from demographic-based descriptors (e.g., first-generation status) and positioning experiences of oppression as an anchor from which academic and career development take shape. This may allow future researchers to complicate the experiences of FGEM students and better capture individual differences.

Future studies with FGEM students could further contextualize or support constructs and suggested associations in the CCWM. Although many of the constructs integrated into the model fall directly

from narrative accounts of FGEM students, it is possible that the intricacies of these experiences are different when told from the perspective of a FGEM student attending a community college versus private school, non-traditional- versus traditional-aged student, or student attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution versus Predominantly White institution. That is, context is critical and should be captured in future tests of the model. Qualitative studies may also be helpful to elucidate nuances inherent in the CCWM that may not be captured well through quantitative research.

### *Implications for Practice and Policy*

The CCWM offers a novel conceptual grounding for those working with FGEM students. Specifically, the model suggests honing in on institutional and structural factors, cultural wealth, and FGEM students' social-emotional experiences as a way of understanding their academic and career plans. For example, career counselors and student affairs professionals may tailor interventions for FGEM students around cultural wealth. That is, rather than focusing on what FGEM students lack in preparation for college, practitioners should leverage their strengths and assets. For example, interventions designed to leverage family and community capital may strengthen FGEM students' perceptions of student-family integration. Empowering FGEM students to understand how their positionality affects their college experience while encouraging self-reflection on the factors (e.g., familial, financial, values) that shape their perceived career self-authorship may promote academic success, persistence, and career choice satisfaction. For example, career decisional balancing interventions may be adapted to focus on the self, significant others, systems, and how cultural wealth can be used to navigate challenges.

Although social-emotional experiences are positioned as a key explanatory variable in the model, this does not imply that FGEM students' success is entirely contingent on improving their subjective experience. Importantly, the CCWM requires that practitioners attend to environmental, structural, and political influences on FGEM students' well-being and success. This means that college personnel and career counselors must step out of the confines of their one-on-one roles with FGEM students and intervene at institutional and policy levels. The American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies serve as a useful framework for what this systems-level intervention might look like with FGEM students on a continuum ranging from student empowerment to social/political advocacy (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

For example, at the student empowerment level, career counselors might provide FGEM students with a menu of options for campus resources devoted to empowering and supporting FGEM students. Exposing FGEM students to the lived stories of other FGEM students (e.g., Davis, 2010) could also be an effective one-on-one intervention aimed at increasing perceived self-authorship. At the institutional level, FGEM learning communities that promote consciousness raising could facilitate social-emotional well-being among FGEM students as well as harness FGEM cultural wealth that directly and indirectly promotes their academic and career development (Jehangir, 2010b; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Finally, at the public policy level, career counselors could advocate for equitable economic policy such as the preservation of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

Although the CCWM offers a compelling framework for understanding FGEM students' academic and career development, several limitations should be noted. First, the CCWM is tailored toward FGEM students within postsecondary education and may not capture the experiences of FGEM students at earlier stages of academic and career development. Factors not reflected in the model may be more relevant to the process of choosing whether are not to pursue higher education and what type of

institution one chooses. Additionally, the CCWM does not seek to explain domain-specific career choices that may be of interest to employers or industry stakeholders. Other models, such as SCCT, may be more appropriate for this aim.

Current threats to FGEM students' well-being call for theories that incorporate their sociopolitical realities. The CCWM is meant to serve as a catalyst to more work that attends to the systemic disadvantages, social–emotional experiences, and strengths of these students. Future research and practice devoted to FGEM students may use the CCWM to promote their self-authorship, success, and broader systemic change.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank Amber N. Olson as well as students in the Education and Career Equity lab for feedback on an earlier version of this article.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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