

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Revealing the Divide: A Post-COVID-19 Comparative Analysis of Resource Utilization Among First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Applicants

By *Mark Butt*

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the college search process by accelerating digital resource adoption. This case study, framed by a Social Worlds theoretical lens, analyzes data from 28,468 respondents to a Fall 2024 Common Application question at a highly selective university, with 22 percent identifying as first-generation applicants, to understand resource use. Findings reveal that first-generation students use fewer resources overall and rely more on unpaid services, while continuing-generation peers benefit from family support and paid services. Significant disparities in resource access highlight the impact of socioeconomic and familial factors. The study recommends expanding free resources and institutional support to improve equity in college admissions.

First-generation college applicants (FGCA) face unique challenges in navigating the complex and multifaceted process of college admissions (Holland 2019). Unlike their continuing-generation peers, these applicants often lack access to critical cultural and social capital, leaving them to rely on alternative or limited resources to guide their decisions (Holland 2019). The process of searching for and selecting higher education institu-

tions is shaped by a wide range of actors, including economic, cultural, and social resources (Perna 2006; Wolniak and Engberg 2007). Yet, for first-generation college applicants, this journey is particularly fraught with uncertainty, as they navigate an ecosystem of information and support systems that are not always tailored to their needs. The availability of school-based counselors, virtual tools, and other guidance mecha-

nisms reflects the breadth of resources in higher education today (Guri-Rosenblit 2014), but the extent to which first-generation applicants effectively access these in today's virtual resource ecosystem remains underexplored, especially post-COVID-19.

The differential access to resources by FGCA highlights nagging inequities in the college admissions process. While much research has focused on the admissions criteria and decision-making practices of selective institutions, less attention has been given to how applicants—especially first-generation applicants—select and utilize resources during their search (Hossler and Bontrager 2008). Chetty, *et al.*'s (2017) research on socioeconomic barriers to selective college access underscores the urgency of understanding resource inequality, as it has profound implications for equity in higher education. First-generation college status is but one of the ways admissions officers understand context and scope of opportunities, an essential value of individualized holistic review (Coleman and Keith 2018).

The COVID-19 crisis triggered a rapid technological transformation, and in a matter of months, institutions adopted technological integration that would have otherwise taken years to integrate (McKinsey & Company 2020). By analyzing resource utilization patterns since COVID-19, in both number and types, this investigation aims to reveal any similarities and differences between FGCA and continuing-generation college applicants (CGCA) today. Unlike their continuing-generation counterparts, who often benefit from baked-in robust support networks, FGCA must patch together a diverse array of resources, including school counselors, financial aid resources, and virtual platforms, to overcome knowledge gaps within their immediate family network. Building on Butt's (2025) exploration of resource engagement, this research examines to what extent first-generation applicants engage with family, school, and virtual resources in comparison to their continuing generation peers. The findings provide critical insights for educators, school-based counselors, policymakers, and university administrators seeking to improve resource accessibility and equity in the college admissions process, ultimately contributing to a more

inclusive higher education system in America (Riggert, *et al.* 2006).

Research Questions

- To what extent do first-generation college applicants (FGCA) and continuing-generation college applicants (CGCA) differ in the number of resources they utilize to navigate the selective admissions process?
- Are there significant differences in the types of resources accessed by first-generation college applicants (FGCA) compared to continuing-generation college applicants (CGCA)?

Literature Review

The process of choosing a college is multifaceted, influenced by a range of individual, financial, geographic, social, and contextual factors (Chapman 1981; Ding, Li, and Xue 2024; Han 2014; Paulsen 1990; Perna 2006; Wilson and Adelson 2012). While applicants historically have relied on traditional and proximal sources of information, such as school counselors and family members, technological advancements, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, have introduced new channels that reshape how applicants acquire information about higher education (Holland 2019; Savitz-Romer, *et al.* 2021). The college search is the second phase in Hossler and Gallagher's three-step college-choice model (1987), typically beginning at the end of sophomore year or in junior year, though it can start as late as senior year or after high school graduation. During this phase, applicants develop a choice set—a list of colleges they are considering applying to. This model, however, has been critiqued for presenting a narrow, linear process that is more applicable to white, middle-class applicants and less reflective of the experiences of traditionally underrepresented applicants or those taking non-traditional paths (Cox 2016; Freeman 2005). Updated models account for financial, socioeconomic, racial differences, family background, and broader policy and community contexts (Perna 2006; Tierney and Venegas 2009).

FGCA face additional complexities in the college choice process due to intergenerational educational mobility. Cultural knowledge about college is largely influ-

enced by parental education levels, so applicants whose parents have limited or no experience with higher education encounter unique challenges during the search process (Cresswell-Yeager 2020; Holland 2019). Parents of FGCA can motivate applicants to attend college (Capannola, and Johnson 2022), but they can also limit students' choices by restricting options geographically or prioritizing family responsibilities (Bastedo and Flaster 2014; Mitchell and Jaeger 2018; Ovink *et al.* 2018). Research indicates that FGCA often experience lower academic success, retention, and graduation rates, coupled with increased stress and diminished self-efficacy (Aspelmeier, *et al.* 2012; Cahalan, *et al.* 2022). Scholars such as London (1989) have highlighted the strain FGCA feel in navigating between their working-class home environments and middle-class academic institutions. This duality often results in strained family relationships and a sense of disconnection, with some students limiting contact with their families to ease the transition (Stephens, *et al.* 2012; Lehmann 2007). However, recent studies suggest that familial relationships can serve as protective factors, providing emotional resilience and motivation for educational attainment (Capannola, and Johnson 2022; Gofen 2009).

The extant, and most recent research, challenges deficit-focused narratives historically associated with FGCA by emphasizing their strengths and varied experiences. Scholars like Jack (2016) have demonstrated that FGCA experiences are not monolithic; rather, there is broad and considerable heterogeneity within this population, particularly regarding socioeconomic status, geography, and racial identities. Jack's concept of the privileged poor underscores how pre-college educational experiences shape students' engagement with higher education institutions. Similarly, scholars have argued that cultural values such as interdependence, family loyalty, and resilience are critical for understanding how marginalized FGCA define success beyond traditional academic metrics (Capannola, and Johnson 2022; Guiffrida 2006; Kao 2004; Yosso 2005).

High school organization and culture also shape how students engage in the college search process. For instance, McDonough (1997), Savitz-Romer (2020), and

Radford (2019) argue that the structure of high schools, along with school-based counselors' knowledge and practices, influences the range of colleges students consider for a range of students. Shi and Brown (2020) found that the way school counselors allocated their time was a strong predictor of ninth-grade retention rates, as well as the percentage of students enrolling in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and attending four-year universities. By offering personalized guidance, academic support (Hurwitz and Howell 2014), and expertise tailored to each student's unique needs, school-based counselors play a crucial role in shaping students' academic trajectories and postsecondary outcomes.

Social Worlds Theory Theoretical Framework

The Social Worlds framework, which emerged from the Chicago School of Sociology in the early 20th century, offers an effective lens for examining the complex experiences of FGCA. Initially developed to understand the structure of urban social relations in Chicago and the like, the framework identifies social worlds as groups of actors who share similar identities, interests, norms, or ideologies and engage in collective meaning-making (Strauss 1978). For FGCA, the transition from high school to higher education involves navigating multiple social worlds, each with distinct values and expectations. These social worlds often intersect within various arenas—spaces where competing interests are debated, negotiated, and sometimes contested (Strauss 1978). The tensions that arise from these interactions shape the ways FGCA interpret their educational journeys and access critical resources of information. For the purposes of this analysis, three social worlds are identified: family, high school, and virtual (Figure 1, on page 44).

The first prominent social world influencing college applicants is the *family social world*. The family social world encompasses financial considerations, familial responsibilities, and proximity to home when considering educational options. FGCA and CGCA may have family social worlds that differ in values, resources, and influence. Families play a critical role in guiding students, providing essential insights, resources, and support as

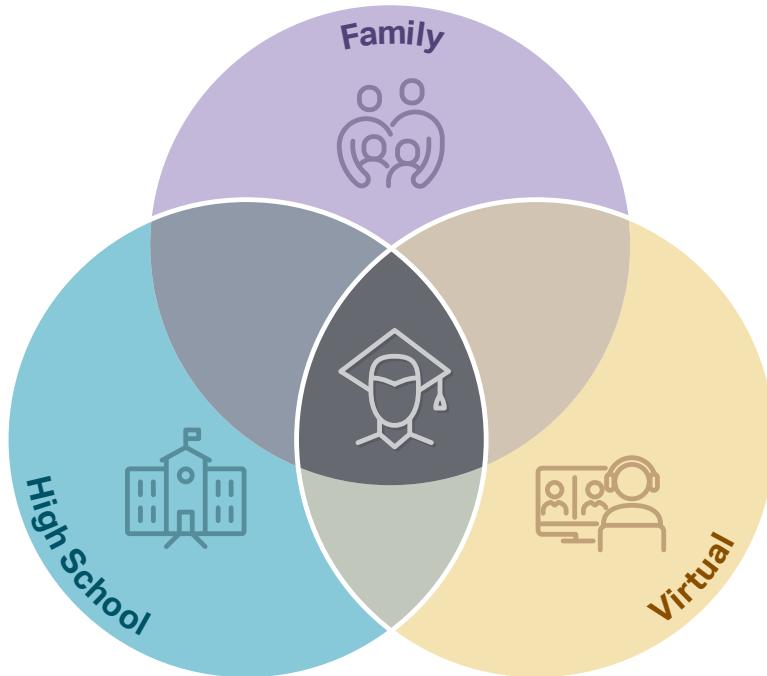


FIGURE 1 ► Social Worlds Theory and College Applicants

they navigate their options and make informed decisions about their academic futures, regardless of social class differences (Bastedo and Flaster 2014; Freeman 2005; Gofen 2009, Holland 2019; Mitchell and Jaeger 2018; Ovink *et al.* 2018).

Second, the *high school social world* offers a different set of norms, knowledge capital, and values. High schools vary widely in type, size, locality, and resources. While teachers and peers within this social world promote unique cultural capital generation and acquisition, school-based counselors are understood as vital (Hurwitz and Howell 2014, McDonough 1997, Radford 2019, Savitz-Romer 2020). They can both provide, and/or inadvertently constrain, students' access to information on higher education application processes, financial aid, and the benefits of a variety of institutions. However, the interaction between these two social worlds, family and high school, can create friction and disequilibrium, leaving some college applicants to reconcile divergent messages about their impending educational steps (Stephens, *et al.* 2012).

The third relevant social world shaping experiences is the newest: the *virtual social world*. This rapidly evolving arena, especially post-COVID-19, now provides most students, if accessible, with a new, massive ecosystem of valuable information beyond their immediate and often localized social environments of family and high school (Butt 2025). This social world encompasses online platforms such as college forums (Reddit, etc.), social media (Instagram, YouTube, etc.), financial aid calculators (MyIntuition.org, etc.), and virtual information sessions. Recent investigations show the time investment online for younger generations is significant (Stolzenberg, *et al.* 2019). For many applicants, these virtual spaces become essential hubs for knowledge capital transfer, allowing them to access information traditionally reserved for more privileged social worlds. Within this ecosystem, students engage in meaning-making by interpreting advice, sharing experiences, and building networks with others navigating similar processes. The virtual social world functions as an arena where different social worlds intersect, enabling college applicants

to develop strategies for managing the competing demands of family and school expectations. By leveraging these virtual resources, applicants enhance their ability to navigate the complexities of the college admissions process in a way not experienced by prior cohorts of aspiring college students.

Methodology

This study examined the resource utilization behaviors of college applicants, utilizing data collected through the Common Application platform for one highly selective university. The Common Application is a centralized system that enables students to apply to multiple colleges and universities using a single application form. Designed to streamline the admissions process, the platform minimizes redundancy by allowing applicants to input their information once and submit it to various institutions simultaneously. With more than 900 member institutions worldwide, the Common Application is a widely recognized tool in higher education, facilitating access to postsecondary opportunities for a diverse range of students.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data collection for this study was conducted through a single multiple-choice question embedded within the Member Page of the Common Application for a highly selective, anonymous research university. Applicants for Fall 2024 admission were presented with this optional question as part of their application process. The Member Page is a customized section of the Common Application, specific to each institution, that allows for institution-specific questions. The phrasing of the question was designed to capture self-reported resource use during the college search and application process, ensuring the data collected directly aligned with the study's research objectives.

The university is conducting research on a study of how students learn about college admissions and financial aid. Please identify the resources you used in the university search and selection process. Check all that apply. (This question is optional)

This optional question provided respondents with seventeen choices in the sets, encompassing a diverse array of resources, as delineated below. Applicants were able to select an unlimited number of resources (including all, or none) that applied to their search and selection process. The choices given to the applicants were:

- College Admissions office (in-person)
- College Admissions office (virtual)
- College fairs
- College guidance organization
- College planning websites and books (e.g., College Board, Common Application, Fiske Guide to Colleges, Princeton Review, etc.)
- College websites
- Essay writing coach or editor (paid)
- Essay writing coach or editor (unpaid)
- Extended family (e.g., aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc.)
- Financial Aid offices and resources (including FAFSA and scholarship search, MyIntuition.org)
- Immediate family (parent or sibling)
- Independent counselor (paid)
- Independent counselor (unpaid)
- Social media channels and online forums (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, etc.)
- Test preparation courses or resources
- Virtual campus tours
- Your high school counselor

Respondents were prompted to select all applicable resources they utilized during their university search and selection. At the conclusion of the admissions cycle, data analysis ensued, involving an examination of the frequency and distribution of resource selections among respondents.

Identifying First-Generation College Applicants

The term first-generation college student was first codified in the 1980 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) within the TRIO programs, which aim to support historically marginalized students in accessing higher education (Council of Opportunity in Higher

Education 2025). According to the statute, a first-generation college student is “an individual...whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree,” or, in the case of a single-parent household, “whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (Council of Opportunity in Higher Education 2025). This definition highlights parental educational attainment as a key factor in identifying first-generation applicants, who often face unique challenges in the college process. Many institutions use this criterion to guide admissions and support programs aimed at promoting educational equity and social mobility. With respect to this sample, students have the opportunity to self-identify as first-generation on a member page through a required yes/no question on the Common Application. To ensure accuracy, admissions officers reviewing applications can update or correct this information. This process helps institutions maintain accurate records and provide appropriate support to first-generation applicants.

Participants

The initial participant dataset was comprised of 34,617 applicants, including 20,831 females and 13,806 males, with eight individuals identifying as neither male nor female. Due to a recent Supreme Court ruling (SFFA v. Harvard 2023), race and ethnicity data were not available, as the consideration of these factors in college admissions is now prohibited. Regarding citizenship status, the dataset included 8,231 non-U.S. citizens, 1,376 U.S. Permanent Residents (Green Card holders), 24,904 U.S. citizens, and 134 entries with unspecified citizenship status. In terms of high school location, 77.55 percent of applicants attended high school in the United States, while 22.45 percent were educated abroad. The academic strength of the participants was notable, with a mean SAT score of 1,476 out of 1,600 ($n=17,590$). Additionally, 60.4 percent of students expressed interest in financial aid. Out of the total applicants, 28,467 students submitted at least one resource they engaged in during the process, resulting in a response rate of 82.23 percent. Among these respondents, 6,305 identified as first-generation college applicants (FGCA), representing 22.15 percent of the respondents. The data was deidentified

in the analysis, and the robust sample size enhanced the reliability of the study’s findings.

Analysis

To examine resource utilization during the college search and application process among FGCA and CGCA, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. The independent variable for this study is applicant cohort status, categorized as either FGCA or CGCA, which is binary and mutually exclusive. The dependent variables included the total number of resources utilized (continuous) and the seventeen specific types of resources accessed (categorical). Descriptive statistics were used to address the number of resources used by the respective cohorts of FGCA and CGCA, in addition to a Chi-Square Test of Independence. With respect to the resource types, descriptive statistics followed by an ANOVA for each resource type and FGCA membership were performed.

Findings

This study examined the (1) number of resources and (2) the types of resources utilized by two distinct cohorts of applicants: FGCA and CGCA. The data reflected resource usage patterns during the college search and application process. Percentages shown in Table 1 (on page 47) are based on respondents by each respective cohort to account for the disparity in the applicant pool, as 6,305 of the 28,467 (22.15%) of the total respondents identified as FGCA.

First, FGCA reported using fewer resources on average (3.67 resources per respondent) compared to CGCA (4.41 resources per respondent). The standard deviation of resource utilization for CGCA was approximately 4,743.35, while for FGCA, it was approximately 1,194.98, indicating greater variability in resource usage among CGCA compared to FGCA. Among both cohorts, college websites were the most frequently utilized resource, with 19.29 percent of FGCA and 17.97 percent of CGCA reporting their use. This resource also accounted for 18.22 percent of total reported resource use across all respondents. Second, high school-based counselors ranked as a highly utilized resource for both groups,

TABLE 1 ► Resources Used, by Generational Cohort

Resource	FGCA ¹		CGCA ²		% of Total
	n	% Within	n	% Within	
College Websites	4,463	19.29	17,579	17.97	18.22
Your High School Counselor	3,147	13.60	12,488	12.76	12.92
College Planning Websites and Books	2,650	11.46	11,349	11.60	11.57
Social Media Channels and Online Forums	2,823	12.20	9,846	10.06	10.47
Immediate Family (Parent or Sibling)	1,161	5.02	8,635	8.83	8.10
College Fairs	1,957	8.46	6,863	7.01	7.29
Virtual Campus Tours	1,112	4.81	5,849	5.98	5.75
College Admissions Office (In-Person Program)	998	4.31	5,689	5.81	5.53
College Admissions Office (Virtual Program)	1,075	4.65	5,422	5.54	5.37
Extended Family (e.g., Aunt, Uncle, Grandparent, etc.)	783	3.38	4,672	4.78	4.51
College Guidance Organization	822	3.55	2,190	2.24	2.49
Financial Aid Offices and Resources	754	3.26	1,621	1.66	1.96
Independent Counselor (Paid)	169	0.73	1,975	2.02	1.77
Test Preparation Courses or Resources	411	1.78	1,515	1.55	1.59
Independent Counselor (Unpaid)	521	2.25	1,130	1.15	1.36
Essay Writing Coach or Editor (Paid)	75	0.32	597	0.61	0.56
Essay Writing Coach or Editor (Unpaid)	213	0.92	422	0.43	0.52
Category Summary		n	% of Total	n	% of Total
Total Resources Used	23,134	19.12	97,842	80.87	120,976
Respondents	6,305	22.14	22,162	77.86	28,467
Mean Resource Use Per Respondent	3.67		4.41		4.25

¹ First generation college applicants² Continuing generation college applicants

with 13.60 percent of FGCA and 12.76 percent of CGCA engaging with this resource. Both groups reported these two resources as their most used resources.

College planning websites and books were used at nearly identical rates by both cohorts (11.46 percent for FGCA and 11.60 percent for CGCA). Social media channels and online forums were more popular among FGCA (12.20 percent) compared to CGCA (10.06 percent). CGCA showed a greater reliance, relatively, on immediate family (parent or sibling) as a resource (8.83 percent) compared to first-generation applicants (5.02 percent). Essay writing coaches were the least used resource, regardless of paid or unpaid. Figure 2 (on page 48) illustrates the percentage of resources used between FGCA and CGCA.

Chi-Square Test of Independence

To assess whether FGCA and CGCAs utilized resource numbers independently, a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted. The results reveal a statistically significant association between FGCA status and the numbers of resources used during the college search process. The Pearson Chi-Square value (Table 2, on page 49) is 1,561.657 with sixteen degrees of freedom, and the asymptotic significance level is less than 0.001 ($\chi^2(16)=1561.657$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, the Likelihood Ratio test yields a value of 1,579.756 with sixteen degrees of freedom, also significant at $p<0.001$. The analysis included 120,976 valid cases, with no cells (0.0 percent) having an expected count less than five, and the minimum expected count being 121.43.

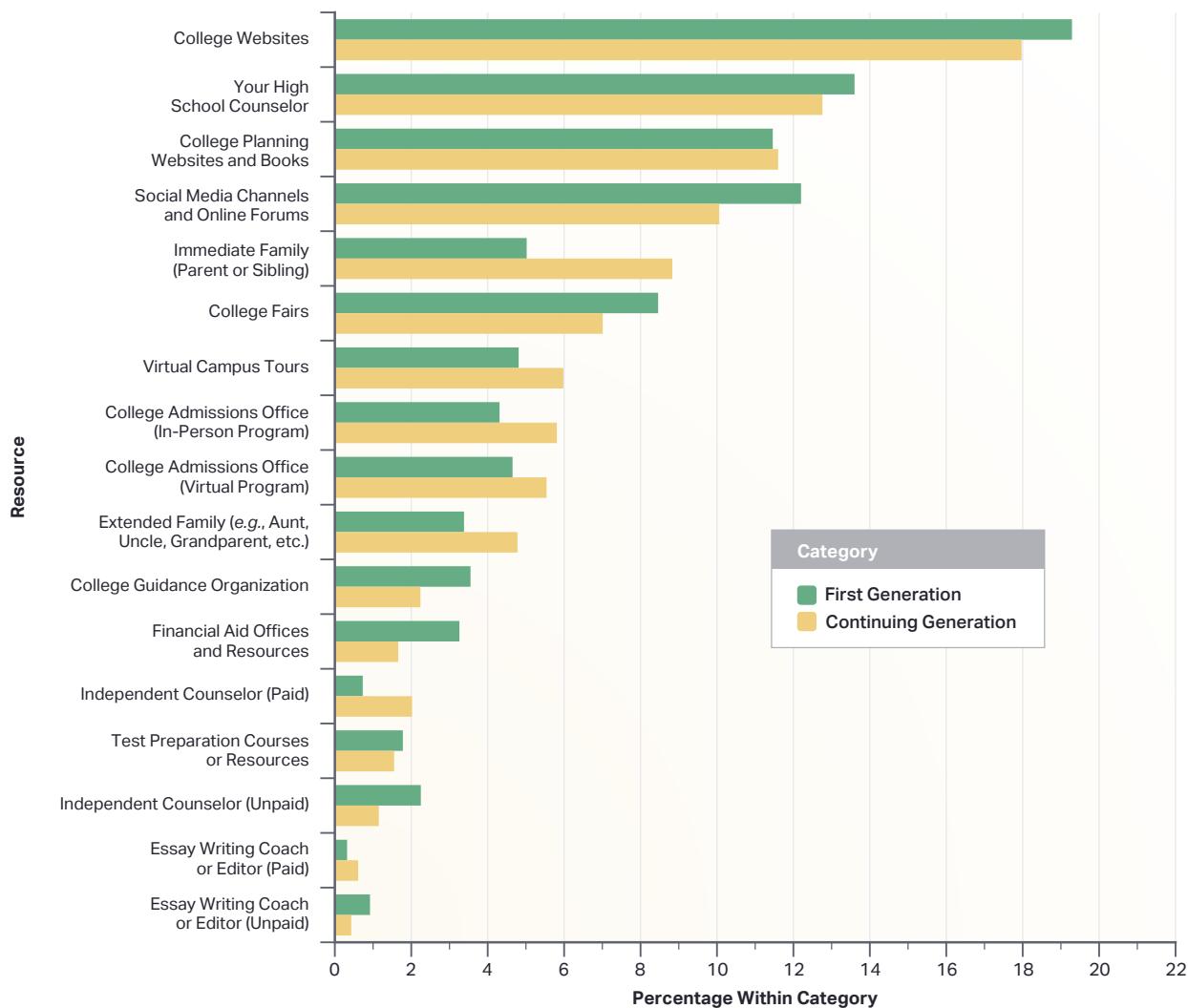


FIGURE 2 ► Resources Used, Percentage of Total by Generational Cohort

These findings show there is a meaningful relationship between FGCA status, and the types of resources utilized during the college search process, indicating that the variation in resource use is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Next, to best understand where significant differences in resource use occurred, a unique ANOVA was calculated for each resource with the FGCA/CGCA distinction, and the results are summarized and presented in Table 3 (on page 49) ordered by their respective F-statistic. Findings show that fourteen of the seventeen resources were statistically significant.

The ANOVA results indicated that several resource types are statistically significant in predicting differences between FGCA and CGCA groups. Notably, but perhaps unsurprisingly, immediate family (parent or sibling) resulted in the highest F-statistic ($F = 950.741$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong and significant difference in reliance on immediate family members between the groups. Similarly, independent counselors, both paid ($F = 276.354$, $p < 0.001$) and unpaid ($F = 90.214$, $p < 0.001$), showed significant differences, with paid counselors having a notably stronger effect. Other highly significant variables included extended family support

($F = 239.631, p < 0.001$), virtual campus tours ($F = 205.035, p < 0.001$), and college websites ($F = 206.978, p < 0.001$), suggesting these resources play a prominent role in the college search process for these populations.

Three resource types did not show statistically significant differences between FGCA and CGCA groups. These included college fairs ($F = 0.011, p = 0.917$), social media channels and online forums ($F = 0.224, p = 0.636$), and test preparation courses or resources ($F = 0.787, p = 0.375$). The lack of significance in these areas suggests that both groups may engage with these resources at similar levels or that these factors are less influential in differentiating between FGCA and CGCA students' resource usage. This finding is explored further in the discussion.

In the final stage of this investigation, the analysis treated each resource type as a dependent variable, categorizing usage by both first-generation college applicants (FGCA) and continuing-generation college applicants (CGCA). Resources were ranked from least to most used by FGCA respondents as a percentage of each resource (Figure 3, on page 50), which included baselines for all resources used and the share of applicants utilizing each. The most disproportionately used resources by FGCA were unpaid essay writing coaches or editors at 33.5 percent, financial aid offices and resources (including FAFSA and MyIntuition.org) at 31.7 percent, and unpaid independent counselors at 31.6 percent. The most disproportionately used resources by CGCA included paid independent counselors (92.1 percent), paid essay writing coaches or editors (88.8 percent), and immediate family members (parents or siblings) (88.1 percent).

TABLE 2 ► Chi-Square Test of Independence¹

	Value	df	p-Value ²
Pearson Chi-Square	1,561.657 ³	16	< 0.001
Likelihood Ratio	1,579.756	16	< 0.001

¹ Based on 120,976 valid cases

² Asymptotic significance (2-sided) at < 0.001

³ 0 cells (0.0 percent) have expected count less than 5; minimum expected count is 121.43

Summary of Findings

This study examined the quantity and types of resources used by first-generation college applicants (FGCA) and continuing-generation college applicants (CGCA) during the college search process, revealing notable differences between the two cohorts. Overall, FGCA respondents utilized fewer resources (3.67 per applicant) than CGCA respondents (4.41 per applicant), though both groups

TABLE 3 ► ANOVA Summary of First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Applicants' Resource Use

Variable ¹	F-Statistic	p-Value ²
Immediate Family (Parent or Sibling)	950.741	< 0.001
Independent Counselor (Paid)	276.354	< 0.001
College Admissions Office (In-person Program)	266.870	< 0.001
Extended Family (e.g., Aunt, Uncle, Grandparent)	239.631	< 0.001
College Websites	206.978	< 0.001
Virtual Campus Tours	205.035	< 0.001
College Planning Websites and Books	167.012	< 0.001
College Admissions Office (Virtual Program)	153.962	< 0.001
Financial Aid Offices and Resources	138.178	< 0.001
Independent Counselor (Unpaid)	90.214	< 0.001
Your High School Counselor	82.892	< 0.001
College Guidance Organization	51.879	< 0.001
Essay Writing Coach or Editor (Paid)	48.279	< 0.001
Essay Writing Coach or Editor (Unpaid)	47.997	< 0.001
Test Preparation Courses or Resources	0.787	0.375
Social Media Channels and Online Forums	0.224	0.636
College Fairs	0.011	0.917

¹ All variables: df = 1, 28463

² Significance at $p < 0.001$

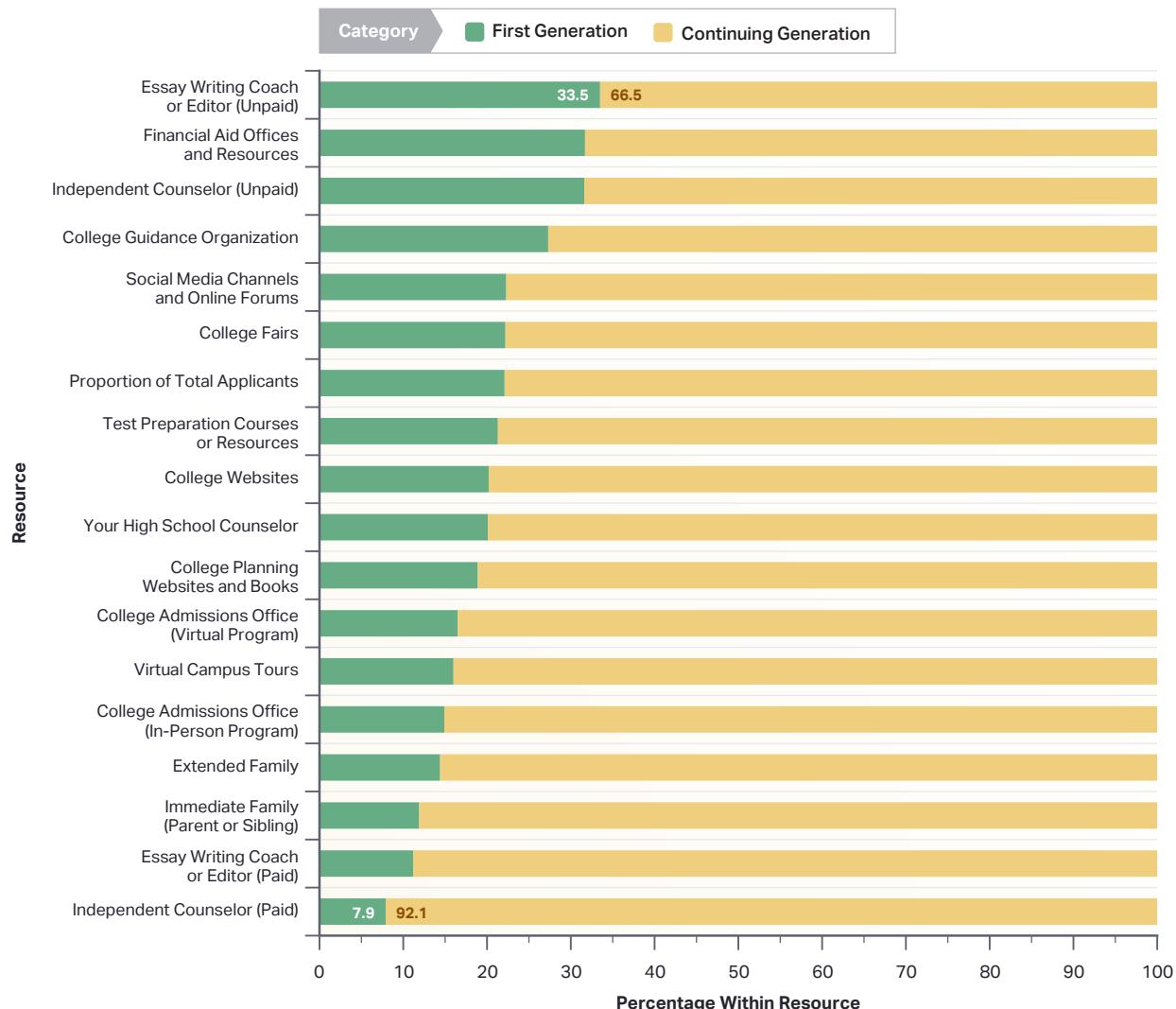


FIGURE 3 ► Resource Usage, by Resource Type and Generational Cohort

consistently relied on college websites and high school counselors as their two top primary resources. Statistical analyses, including a Chi-Square test of independence and ANOVA, confirmed significant differences between the groups in their resource usage patterns, and fourteen of the seventeen resources were shown to have a statistically significant relationship with FGCA status. Interestingly, resources like college fairs, social media channels, and test preparation materials showed no significant differences between the two groups. The analysis further identified distinct patterns of disproportionately used resources, with FGCA favoring unpaid services (such as essay coaches and financial aid offices) and CGCA show-

ing a disproportionate reliance on paid counselors and immediate family support. These findings underscore the influence of socioeconomic and familial factors in shaping the resource utilization strategies of FGCA and CGCA during their college search process.

Discussion

The findings reveal five central themes that emerged from the analysis of how first-generation and continuing-generation college applicants access and utilize resources during the college search process: (1) the number of resources used per applicant, (2) the disparity between paid and free resources, (3) similarities

in most frequent resource use, (4) neutral resources, and (5) how first-generation college applicants fill the family knowledge gap through alternative means. These themes highlight important differences in access, equity, and the evolving role of digital and school-based resources in college planning.

Number of Resources

The findings indicate a significant disparity in the mean number of resources utilized by FGCA compared to CGCA. CGCA, on average, used more resources per applicant (4.41 resources) than their first-generation counterparts (3.67 resources). Further, while FGCA made up 22 percent of the applicant pool, they accounted for only 19 percent of the total resources used. This discrepancy underscores the challenges FGCA face in accessing the necessary tools and support to navigate the college application process effectively. The lower resource usage may reflect barriers such as limited awareness of available resources, fewer social networks to tap into, or constraints (financial, time, accessibility, etc.) that prevent FGCA from engaging with additional resources.

The underutilization of resources by FGCA highlights a critical gap in equity. Although the percentage difference may seem small, it represents a substantial disadvantage for a population that is already navigating higher education pathways without the benefit of parental experience in the college search and application process. This finding calls for a closer examination of the types of resources available and how they are distributed across applicant groups. Resource awareness is the precursor to resource engagement.

Paid vs Free Resources

The research further reveals an increasingly problematic divide in the types of resources accessed by FGCA and CGCA, particularly in the distinction between paid and free resources. These findings show CGCA are using paid resources at higher rates than FGCA, such as independent college counselors or paid writing coaches. These two resources showed the greatest disparity between the two cohorts of students. However, it is important to acknowledge that CGCA are not a monolithic group (Jack

2016); not all continuing-generation applicants have the financial means to afford such resources. This variability within the CGCA population should be considered when crafting policy solutions. That said, this finding also emphasizes the significant and growing need for pro bono independent college counseling. While not all independent college counseling offer such services, this research highlights the importance in addressing inequities inherent within the college admissions ecosystem.

In contrast, FGCA disproportionately rely on free or low-cost resources. These include unpaid writing coaches, financial aid calculators and cost aggregators, pro bono assistance from independent counselors, and support from community-based organizations (CBOS). The role of CBOS is particularly significant, as they often provide tailored college guidance to students who might otherwise lack access to such support. These organizations help bridge the resource gap for FGCA by offering mentorship, workshops, and the possibility of one-on-one college advising. Given the drastic importance of these resources, it is imperative to ensure that CBOS receive adequate funding and institutional support to sustain their services. Without access to free or low-cost resources, FGCA students would be increasingly disadvantaged.

Similarities Between Cohorts

Despite the differences in the number and type of resources used, there are notable similarities between FGCA and CGCA in their reliance on certain resources, especially the most frequently used resources. First, both FGCA and CGCA frequently use college websites to gather information. These websites play a central role in the college search process, providing students with details about admissions requirements, tuition costs, campus life, and academic programs. Maintaining accurate and up-to-date information on both institutional websites and proprietary college planning platforms is essential, as students across applicant groups rely on these tools to make informed decisions. This finding reinforces the need for excellent user interfaces (UI) in addition to clear and accurate information on respective institutional websites.

Next, both groups heavily utilize school-based counselors as a primary source of college information. The role of school-based counselors should not be understated, especially for FGCA, who may lack familial knowledge about the college process. School counselors are the first line of equity of information in the college admissions process. School-based counselors serve as critical connectors to resources, offering advice on application strategies, financial aid, and college selection (Savitz-Romer 2020). As such, school districts and senior-level district administrators are to continue to invest in school-based counselors and the in-house college guidance apparatus. Notably, these resources benefit students regardless of first-generation status.

Finally, both cohorts garnered more than 50 percent of their resource use from the same four resources: websites, school-based counselors, college planning websites/books, and social media/online forums. This reaffirms that while a large ecosystem of resources is available for students, there is a core set of resources on which institutions, and broader organizations centered on college enrollment, can focus their time and investment. Institutions, especially those under various constraints, can use these findings to optimize efficiency and maximize their reach to both populations.

Neutral Resources

The analysis revealed that three resource types did not have a statistically significant relationship with FGCA status: test preparation courses/resources, social media channels/online forums, and college fairs. These findings suggest that both FGCA and CGCA engage with these resources at comparable rates. Ideally, resources would be equitably accessible and distributed to students regardless of FGCA status. These resources rise to that level based on this analysis. Test preparation courses or resources, often associated with standardized testing preparation, may be equally prioritized across applicant cohorts, perhaps reflecting a shared perception of their importance in college readiness. This may be a function of online accessibility of resources or the rapid proliferation of test preparation resources. Regardless, this finding offers a layer of optimism as this

resource was uniformly used by both cohorts with no significant disparity.

Similarly, social media channels and online forums, which can provide informal guidance and peer support, appear to be utilized by both groups without significant disparity. This suggests that, since COVID-19, the third social world is commonly accessed, regardless of an applicant's generational status, and reflects a broader trend in how the modern-day college applicant seeks information online. Further, as the most used resource with no significant disparity, the use of social media/online forums suggests COVID-19 has perhaps democratized information accessibility. Institutions and society leaned in to creating new virtual channels of information, creating new lines of knowledge exchange for all students. Information previously only accessible in person could now be accessed virtually.

Lastly, college fairs, which offer direct engagement opportunities with college representatives, show no significant difference in attendance between FGCA and CGCA students. This implies that access to such events is largely determined by other variables, such as school resources or geographic location, rather than FGCA.

Filling the Family Knowledge Gap

A key, but expected, finding from this research is that FGCA rely less on immediate family members for college-related information relative to CGCA. This gap in familial knowledge is expected, given that FGCA are the first in their families to pursue higher education. With that understood, the next question becomes: how are FGCA filling this knowledge gap, if at all?

One significant way FGCA compensate for this lack of immediate familial guidance, based on these findings, is through the use of the third social world: virtual resources. Specifically, social media platforms and online forums, as these were the most frequently used resources, where there was no statistical difference in usage between FGCA and CGCA. Further, this may suggest that virtual resources are democratizing access to information in a manner not previously seen by generations of college applicants. These virtual spaces provide a readily accessible means for students to ask questions,

share experiences, and seek advice from peers and perhaps professionals. While these platforms can be valuable, they come with clear limitations. The lack of quality control in online forums and social media means students may encounter misinformation or incomplete information, which can complicate their decision-making process. However, the accessibility and immediacy of social media and online forums make them appealing resources for most students, including FGCA.

To maximize the benefits of virtual resources in the third social world, institutions and organizations should consider creating verified, moderated online spaces where students can access accurate information and engage with knowledgeable advisors or trained moderators. These platforms could provide a more reliable alternative to unregulated forums, ensuring that FGCA receive the guidance they need to navigate the college application process successfully.

In summary, while both FGCA and CGCA utilize a range of resources during the college application process, disparities remain in the number and type of resources accessed. Addressing these gaps will require a multifaceted approach that includes supporting free and low-cost resources, enhancing the role of school-based counselors, and improving the quality of virtual resources available to students.

In Policy and Practice

The findings of this investigation underscore the importance of expanding equitable access to college application resources. Institutions should bolster partnerships with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to ensure FGCA receive essential guidance, particularly when they cannot access paid services. Additionally, maintaining accurate, comprehensive, and accessible college information on institutional and third-party websites is vital, given the reliance of both FGCA and CGCA on digital resources. Policies that prioritize funding for school-based counselors and support for free or low-cost college advising programs can reduce disparities in access to critical information. Investing in school-based counselors is crucial, as they play a vital role for both cohorts of students. Independent counselors and similar advising

organizations should, to the extent possible, offer pro bono services to FGCA, as these resources are essential to bridging gaps in access. Keeping essential services low or no cost is critical for FGCA, and alternative funding sources, including public-private partnerships, should be explored to sustain and expand these efforts.

Limitations

This investigation faces several limitations. First, it excludes students who used alternative application platforms, such as Questbridge or the Coalition Application, potentially limiting insights into their perspectives and experiences. Secondly, due to the university's highly selective nature, findings may not fully represent the broader applicant pool, warranting cautious generalization in the marketplace. Additionally, the survey's predetermined resource choices, while comprehensive and robust, may overlook less common options. Further, the absence of an "other" option limited the scope of responses. The study also does not capture the nuanced differences within FGCA and CGCA populations, such as variations in socioeconomic status, race, or geographic location, which could influence resource utilization patterns. Finally, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, as applicants may overestimate or underestimate their resource usage. Finally, as a single-case study, generalizability to other institutions may be limited; however, it serves as a valuable model for similar investigations about FGCA.

Future Research

Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific resources on college application success rates, particularly for FGCA. Investigating the role of cultural capital and social networks through qualitative interviews could provide deeper insights into how applicants navigate the process. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking applicants through the college choice process and into their academic careers would help determine the long-term impact of various resources on admission, retention, and graduation rates. Finally, additional research is needed on the use of virtual resources by FGCA. The findings draw attention to the growing im-

portance of virtual resources, and a greater understanding is needed around their quality and effectiveness.

Connecting to Social Worlds Theory

The findings of this analysis highlight the interplay between the three social worlds—family, high school, and virtual spaces—in shaping applicants' resource use. For FGCA specifically, the absence of family-based knowledge about the college process necessitates clear reliance on alternative sources of valued information, particularly school-based counselors and virtual ecosystems. High schools play a pivotal role as centralized fountains of knowledge, connecting students to critical information and resources, while virtual spaces provide both opportunities and unique challenges in filling knowledge gaps. Social media platforms and online forums (such as Reddit) are accessible and widely used, yet they can be both helpful and problematic, offering valuable advice alongside misinformation. For CGCA, family remains a significant resource, yet they, too, benefit from school-based counselors and virtual ecosystems. The confluence between these social worlds illustrates how applicants navigate their educational journeys, often drawing upon multiple spheres to make informed decisions, with varying degrees of access and support shaping their process.

Conclusion

This investigation underscores the critical role of resources, and their disparities, in shaping the college

search and application experience for students, particularly FGCA. The variation in resource utilization, framed by students' social worlds, highlights how access to information and support systems directly influences their college decision-making process. School-based counselors remain pivotal in this dynamic, providing consistent and knowledgeable guidance. However, the disparities in resource availability across different communities and institutions reflect broader systemic inequities, requiring sustained efforts to ensure all students, regardless of their background, can effectively engage with and benefit from the college search process. While COVID-19 appears to have democratized some resource access through technological adoption and integration, disparities remain.

The findings emphasize the importance of striving for a more equitable process, one that begins and ends with equity in resource distribution and accessibility. By recognizing the unique needs of FGCA and understanding the social worlds in which they navigate their college journey, institutions can better support their transition to higher education. As society seeks to eliminate, or at least mitigate, resource inequities, it is crucial to foster environments where every student has equal access to the tools, guidance, and opportunities necessary for success. Such a commitment to equity will not only improve the college application process but also advance broader goals of educational mobility and values of a democratic society.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Data may be available at the discretion of the issuing institution. Requests can be made directly to the author.

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