



**ACADEMIC SUCCESS THROUGH HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS AMONG
FIRST-GENERATION RURAL COLLEGE STUDENTS IN ZHEJIANG
PROVINCE, CHINA**

By

LI RUIHUA

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

June 2024

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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June 2024

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First-generation college students (FGCS) represent a unique subset within the university environment, facing distinct challenges in their educational journey, particularly in seeking academic help and achieving success. While research has explored the academic experiences of FGCS, there remains a limited understanding of their help-seeking behaviors and pathways to success. This study aims to explore how first-generation rural college students seek help to learn and achieve personal academic success, grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Academic Help-Seeking Theory. A case study approach was utilized, involving in-depth interviews with 20 first-generation rural college students at a Chinese university. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on those from rural backgrounds who are the first in their families to attend college. Data were analyzed using qualitative case study methods, ensuring validity and reliability through triangulation and member checking. Findings indicate that first-generation rural college students view academic help-seeking as crucial for success

but face challenges shaped by personal and cultural attitudes. Motivations for seeking help range from aspirations for academic excellence to overcoming obstacles. Significant inhibitors include stigma and lack of resource awareness, which can deter help-seeking attempts. Initial experiences with seeking help critically impact future willingness to seek assistance. Despite difficulties, these students exhibit resilience, developing adaptive coping strategies when help-seeking does not yield the expected results. The study highlights the need for universities to provide targeted resources and support, such as academic advising, tutoring, and mentoring programs tailored to the unique needs of FGCS. Enhancing help-seeking behaviors can lead to improved academic success. Future research should explore the role of technology in facilitating these behaviors and investigate the long-term outcomes of successful help-seeking, such as academic achievement, career success, and social mobility. This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive understanding of FGCS' help-seeking behaviors and practical implications for educational institutions.

Keyword: First Generation College Students, Academic Success, Academic Help Seeking, Case Study

SDG: Goal 4: Quality Education

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KEJAYAAN AKADEMIK MELALUI TINGKAH LAKU MENCARI
BANTUAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR KOLEJ GENERASI PERTAMA
LUAR BANDAR DI DAERAH ZHEJIANG, CHINA**

Oleh

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Pelajar Kolej Generasi Pertama (FGCS) mewakili subset unik dalam persekitaran universiti. Pengalaman mereka dalam mencari/mendapatkan bantuan akademik dan kejayaan akademik sering berbeza daripada pengalaman rakan sebaya mereka. Mereka menghadapi cabaran yang berbeza dalam perjalanan pendidikan mereka, dan cara mereka mendapatkan bantuan akademik adalah penting untuk kejayaan mereka. Walaupun telah banyak penyelidikan dijalankan untuk meneroka perjalanan akademik FGCS, namun masih terdapat pemahaman yang terhad tentang kesukaran dinamik tingkah laku mencari bantuan akademik dan laluan kejayaan mereka di kolej. Kajian semasa bertujuan untuk meneroka bagaimana pelajar kolej luar bandar generasi pertama memanfaatkan tingkah laku mendapatkan bantuan untuk belajar dan mencapai kejayaan akademik peribadi. Kajian ini berasaskan Teori Tingkah Laku Terancang (TPB) dan Teori Mencari Bantuan Akademik, memberikan kerangka teori untuk memahami tingkah laku ini. Pendekatan kajian kes digunakan, melibatkan temu bual mendalam dengan 20 pelajar kolej luar bandar generasi pertama di sebuah

universiti di China. Setiap temu bual berlangsung selama 60 hingga 90 minit, dan peserta dipilih melalui pensampelan bertujuan, dengan fokus kepada mereka yang berasal dari latar belakang luar bandar dan merupakan yang pertama dalam keluarga mereka menghadiri kolej. Data dianalisis menggunakan kaedah kajian kes kualitatif, memastikan kesahihan dan kebolehpercayaan melalui triangulasi dan semakan ahli. Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa pelajar kolej luar bandar generasi pertama melihat pencarian bantuan akademik sebagai alat penting untuk berjaya, namun mereka menghadapi cabaran yang berbeza. Tingkah laku mencari bantuan mereka dibentuk oleh sikap peribadi dan budaya, dengan motivasi yang berbeza-beza daripada aspirasi untuk kecemerlangan akademik kepada mengatasi halangan tertentu. Terutamanya, pelajar ini menghadapi beberapa kerencatan, termasuk stigma dan kekurangan kesedaran mendapatkan sumber, yang boleh merencat percubaan mereka mendapatkan bantuan. Pengalaman awal mencari bantuan memberi kesan kritikal kepada pendekatan masa depan dan kesediaan mereka untuk mendapatkan bantuan semula. Walaupun menghadapi kesukaran untuk mendapatkan sokongan, pelajar-pelajar ini menunjukkan daya tahan yang luar biasa, membangunkan strategi menangani penyesuaian demi menghadapi masa-masa apabila mencari bantuan tidak membuahkan hasil yang diharapkan. Penerokaan ini menyerlahkan amalan mencari bantuan pelajar. Universiti boleh menyediakan sumber dan sokongan yang disasarkan untuk membantu FGCS mengemudikan sistem akademik dan mencari mentor. Ini boleh termasuk program penasihat akademik, tunjuk ajar dan bimbingan yang dibentuk khusus untuk memenuhi keperluan unik FGCS. Kajian masa depan boleh meneroka peranan teknologi dalam memudahkan tingkah laku mencari bantuan dalam kalangan FGCS dan mengkaji hasil jangka panjang tingkah laku mencari bantuan yang telah berjaya, seperti pencapaian akademik, kejayaan kerjaya dan mobiliti sosial.

Kata Kunci: Pelajar Kolej Generasi Pertama, Kejayaan Akademik, Mencari Bantuan Akademik, Kajian Kes

SDG: MATLAMAT 4: Pendidikan Berkualiti



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	x
LIST OF TABLES	xvi
LIST OF FIGURES	xvii
LIST OF APPENDICES	xviii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xix
 CHAPTER	
 1 INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research Background	4
1.2.1 International First-generation College Students	4
1.2.2 Academic Help-Seeking and Academic Success of First-Generation Rural College Students in China	6
1.3 Problem Statement	10
1.4 Research Objectives	14
1.5 Research Questions	15
1.6 Research Significant	16
1.6.1 Theory	16
1.6.2 Practice	18
1.7 Research scope	20
1.8 Definition of Terms	20
1.8.1 First-generation college students	21
1.8.2 China's first-generation rural college students	21
1.8.3 Continuing-generation student	21
1.8.4 Academic Success	22
1.8.5 Help-seeking behavior	22
1.8.6 Academic Help-Seeking	23
1.8.7 Formal Help	23
1.8.8 Informal Help	24
1.8.9 Academic Help-Seeking Avoidance	24
1.8.10 Coping strategies	24
1.9 Chapter Summary	25
 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	 26
2.1 Introduction	26
2.2 The Phenomenon of Academic Help-Seeking	27
2.2.1 Elements Facilitated the Academic Help Seeking	27
2.2.2 Interaction of Element Academic Help-Seeking	29
2.3 Definition and Factors Influencing Academic Success	37

2.3.1	Definition of academic success	37
2.3.2	Factors Impacting First-generation College Student's academic success	39
2.4	First Generation College Student	42
2.4.1	Perspectives and Theories of First-generation College Students	44
2.4.2	Experience of First-generation College Students	47
2.5	Understanding the Role of Academic Help-Seeking in Academic Success	51
2.6	Academic Help-seeking Among First-generation Undergraduate Students	53
2.7	Fundamental theory in this study	57
2.7.1	Theory of Planned Behavior Ajzen (1991)	57
2.7.2	Theory of academic help-seeking	60
2.7.3	Theoretical Framework	67
2.8	Chapter Summary	68
3	METHODOLOGY	71
3.1	Overview	71
3.2	Research Philosophy	71
3.3	Research Design	74
3.4	Research Population	79
3.5	Sampling Technique and Sample Size	80
3.6	Data Collection Techniques	83
3.6.1	Data Collection	83
3.6.2	Interview	84
3.6.3	Document Analysis	86
3.6.4	Field notes	88
3.7	Instrument	90
3.7.1	Protocol of Semi-Structure Interview	90
3.7.2	Documents Analyses Check List	96
3.7.3	Research Journals	98
3.8	Rigour, Trustworthiness, and Reliability/Validity and Reliability	99
3.8.1	Triangulation	99
3.8.2	Member Checking	101
3.8.3	Prolong Engagement	102
3.8.4	Audit Trial	102
3.8.5	Expert Checking	103
3.9	Location of Study	106
3.10	Duration of Study	108
3.11	Pilot Study	110
3.12	Procedure Data Collection	111
3.12.1	Institutional Review Board Approval	111
3.12.2	Data collection	112
3.12.3	Evidence of Data Saturation	114
3.13	Data Analysis	115
3.14	Researcher as Instrument	118
3.15	Ethical Consideration	121
3.16	Summary	125

4	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	126
4.1	Introduction	126
4.2	Demographic Information of Respondents/ Study Participants	127
4.3	Summary of Data Collected	132
4.4	Findings and Discussion of RQ 1: What is the perception of help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?	135
4.4.1	Understanding Academic Help-Seeking Behavior	136
4.4.2	Conceptualization of Academic Success	144
4.4.3	RQ1 Discussion: Perceptions of Academic Help-seeking Academic Success	151
4.5	Findings and Discussion of RQ2: What elements facilitated the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?	153
4.5.1	Academic Help-Seeking Source	155
4.5.2	Motivators for Academic Help-Seeking	170
4.5.3	Inhibitors for Academic Help-Seeking	179
4.5.4	Pre-Academic -Help-Seeking Assessment	185
4.5.5	RQ2 Discussion: Elements facilitated the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	187
4.6	Findings and Discussion of RQ3: How did the elements facilitate the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?	195
4.6.1	Approaches of Academic Help-Seeking	196
4.6.2	Academic Help-Seeking Acquisition	198
4.6.3	Post-Academic -Help-Seeking Assessment	200
4.6.4	RQ3 Discussion: How did the elements facilitate the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	204
4.7	Findings and Discussion of RQ4: What are the challenges of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?	208
4.7.1	Challenges Encountered in Academic Help-Seeking	209
4.7.2	RQ4 Discussion: Challenges of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	213
4.8	Findings and Discussion of RQ5: What are the coping strategies of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?	214
4.8.1	Coping Strategies Following Unsuccessful Academic Help-Seeking Attempts	215
4.8.2	RQ5 Discussion: Barriers to Academic Help-Seeking for First-Generation Rural College Students	218
4.9	Conceptual Framework based on the findings	218
4.10	Chapter Summary	221

5	SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	223
5.1	Introduction	223
5.2	Research Summary	223
5.3	Research Contribution	227
5.4	Implications of Findings	228
	5.4.1 Theoretical Implications	228
	5.4.2 Practical Implications	234
5.5	Research Limitations	237
5.6	Recommendations for Practice and Future Research	239
	5.6.1 Recommendations for Practice	239
	5.6.2 Recommendations for Future Research	242
5.7	Chapter Summary	245
	REFERENCES	246
	APPENDICES	267
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	312
	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	313

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
3.1 Inclusion criteria of the qualified participants	81
3.2 Data collection and analysis according to the Case study	90
3.3 Interview Topics of the research	94
3.4 Document check list	97
3.5 Field notes check list	98
3.6 Confusion Matrix	105
3.7 Overview of Data Sources	113
3.8 Ethical questions and how they were addressed in the study	124
4.1 Demographic Profile of Study Participants	129
4.2 Descriptive Data for Semi-Structured Interviews	133
4.3 Numbers of themes, categories, and code of the study	134
4.4 Themes of how first-generation rural college students seek help to learn and achieve personal academic success	134
4.5 Themes and categories of first-generation rural college students' perceptions of help-seeking behavior	135
4.6 Themes and categories for elements facilitated the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	154
4.7 Themes and categories for how the elements facilitate the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	196
4.8 Themes and categories for How did the elements facilitate the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	209
4.9 Themes and categories for coping strategies of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success	215

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	Theory of Planned Behavior	59
2.2	Theoretical framework of the study	68
4.1	Model of Conceptual Framework of the Study	220
5.1	Academic Help-seeking Model	234



LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
A	Consent Form 267
B	Approval Letter for Data Collection 271
C	Sample of Interview Protocol (English version) 272
D	Data collection: documents example 277
E	Data collection: fieldnotes example 281
F	Audit Trail 283
G	Sample Transcripts 288
H	Informants Profile 291
I	Examples of the Codes, Description, and Example Quotes for Data Analysis 295
J	Example of How Codes Were Categorize 299
K	Cohen's Kappa Interrater Agreement Form 308

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHS	Academic help-seeking
FGCCS	First-generation Chinese college students
FGCS	First-generation college student
TPB	Theory of Planned Behavior



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Today's society highly values higher education as an important means of improving personal quality of life and social status. With the rapid development of the economy and technology, the demand for high-skilled labor is increasing, making higher education an important threshold for entering the high-quality job market. Against this background, obtaining a university degree is not only related to personal career development but also a key factor in achieving social mobility (Ogden et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2023). First-generation college students, defined as students whose parents did not obtain a university degree, face unique challenges and difficulties. Although they bravely cross the boundaries of their family's educational background and enter the halls of higher education, they often encounter more obstacles in academic preparation, financial support, and social and emotional support. This not only affects their college experience but also their ability to complete their studies and achieve career goals. Seeking academic help can not only improve their academic performance and help them adapt to the requirements of university learning but also enhance their self-efficacy and sense of belonging (House et al., 2020).

The study of first-generation college students (FGCS) presents a historical picture of the initial "one and only" in the United States to the later "blossoming" in various countries, reflecting the academy's pursuit of educational equity and quality and its concern for the disadvantaged. The term "first-generation college students" was

introduced in 1978 by the National Coordinating Council of Educational Opportunity Organizations in Iowa as a potential non-economic obstacle to higher education. In 1978, the National Coordinating Council of Educational Opportunity Organizations (NCOEOA) proposed the concept of "FGCS" as a potential non-economic obstacle to post-secondary education (Auclair et al., 2008). Janet Billson and Margaret Terry were the first to argue that parental education is the most influential factor in student attrition, that FGCS have lower levels of structural and subordination integration, obtain less instrumental support from their parents, and are susceptible to dropping out of school (Billson & Terry, 1982). By offering a conceptual framework for evaluating the influence of parental educational attainment on student achievement, this study demonstrates that FGCS are disadvantaged and at risk.

Although there have always been college students whose parents did not attend college, it was not until the early 21st century that FGCS were constructed with special social significance as representatives of a college-disadvantaged population that attracted significant attention from scholars in a higher education context, most directly driven by the significant decline of FGCS in the US (Wildhagen, 2015). This is also closely related to the massification of higher education in the US, multiracial backgrounds, immigrant integration, and the pursuit of educational equity. During this period, an extensive amount of literature has emerged exploring dropout and adjustment of FGCS. American researchers have tended to study FGCS in a limited way, usually considering only FGCS who are already in university and primarily using a deficit analysis framework to paint a narrow picture of them, highlighting their lack of resources and aspirations (Bruce, (2009).

In recent years, this research paradigm has been challenged by scholars. With the impetus of American scholars, scholars in various countries have begun to accelerate the study of FGCS in their own countries and use this group to promote the process of educational equity in their own countries. Besides comparing first-generation college students in their own countries, some scholars have also conducted cross-sectional comparative studies of FGCS internationally. For instance, Maureen Reed and others found that FGCS's personality traits are culturally specific and that a deficit analysis framework is possibly more appropriate for describing Canadian FGCS by comparing the performance of 844 college students in South Africa and Canada on resilience, inventiveness, adjusting to college, self-efficacy, and self-report (Reed et al., 2018). This study challenges the U.S.-dominated Western deficit research paradigm and reflects the need for localized research on FGCS in national contexts. As higher education continues to expand in all countries, the issue of FGCS is becoming an important topic in international education studies.

Compared with Western countries, the study of FGCS in China started later. Still, scholars have paid increasing academic attention to this topic and often compared them with urban first-generation college students, highlighting their disadvantaged status and paying more attention to the issues of FGCS school selection, further study and employment, teacher-student interaction, learning experience, participation in activities, and learning benefits. The project "Tracking Study on Learning and Development of Chinese College Students" led by Shi has opened a new chapter in the study of FGCS. The team has drawn a learning portrait of FGCS, comprehensively analyzing their individual and family characteristics, pre-college learning characteristics, as well as the characteristics and problems of their learning behaviors

during college (Huafeng et al., 2016). Guo Jiao used the 2019 China Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Survey database to examine the academic performance of first-generation college students and found the opposite: FGCS performed no less well academically, and their number of failed courses, major rankings, and scholarship awards during their undergraduate years were not significantly different from those of non-first-generation students after controlling for background variables such as gender and scores on college entrance exams (Jiao, 2020a).

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the entire research work. It first sets the background of the research, clearly defines the core questions guiding the study, and elaborates on the main purposes and key issues the research aims to address. At the same time, this chapter also specifies the specific objectives of the research, as well as the potential contributions and significance of the research results to the relevant field. In addition, detailed definitions and explanations of the key concepts and terms used in the research are provided to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the study. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the limitations and scope of the research, clearly defining the boundaries of the study for the readers.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 International First-generation College Students

Universities worldwide have recently welcomed students whose parents and grandparents were historically barred from involvement in society and higher education due to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity (Bell & Santamaría, 2018). Many students who benefit from these efforts are from low

socioeconomic origins, are the first in their families to attend college, or both. These students are referred to as FGCS (Bassett, 2021; Bumby & Litwack, 2021; Ma & Shea, 2021; Marbouti et al., 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2019, degree-granting institutions in the United States enrolled 16.8 million students in 2017, a 27% increase from 2000. Although the number of undergraduate enrollments decreased slightly from 2010 to 2017, it was expected to increase by approximately 3% from 2017 to 2018.

Additionally, a study by Taylor Payne et al. in 2021 indicated that about one-third of high school graduates are first-generation college students, meaning they are the first members of their families to attend higher education institutions (Taylor Payne et al., 2021). FGCS have a complex profile due to national circumstances. British first-generation university students are often equated with those whose families are economically poor or from lower social classes (Clive Hunt et al., 2018). First-generation South African university students have lower family socioeconomic status, live in poor social environments, and often complete their education in a second or third language, which largely affects their educational participation and structural location (Najwa Norodien-Fataar, 2018). Lacking sociocultural capital, the first generation of Indian university students face the dilemma of caste inequality and unfair and discriminatory treatment and are the main victims of inequality under extremely unfair regulations (Wadhwa, 2018).

1.2.2 Academic Help-Seeking and Academic Success of First-Generation Rural College Students in China

In 1999, China implemented a massive expansion of higher education, and 20 years later, in 2019, China officially moved from the stage of popularization of higher education to the stage of universalization, with a gross university enrolment rate of 54.4%. By 2020, 9.67 million undergraduates will be enrolled in colleges, and the number of students will reach 41.83 million, 19 times more than in 1998 (Education, 2021). Higher education in China has progressed to the popularization stage. A college education is an important channel for promoting social mobility and interrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Aydemir & Yazici, 2019; Guo et al., 2019; Yang et al.). In China, "education changing destiny" usually begins with families raising their first college students. As a relatively disadvantaged group that accounts for 70% of Chinese college students (Huafeng et al., 2016), Making sure China's first generation of college students succeed academically has become an important tool for achieving high-quality undergraduate education and cultivating high-level top-notch talents.

Since the implementation of the policy of expanding college enrollment in the late 1990s, China's higher education has achieved leapfrog development (Wei et al. (2019). In this process, along with the trend of popularization of higher education, many problems have emerged: doubts about the decline in the quality of higher education are constantly being heard, life safety incidents of college students occur from time to time, college students are unemployed after graduation, and so on (Wang, 2021). It is impossible not to pay attention to the students and to reflect on education and management in the field of higher education. More and more scholars are paying

attention to the study experience and learning effects of students in higher education, and they have found that there are obvious differences between FGCS and non-FGCS (Chen, 2015).

According to Tsinghua University's "Chinese Undergraduate Study and Development Tracking Study," from 2011 to 2018, the proportion of FGCS in national undergraduate colleges has remained at more than 70%, and the FGCS have become undergraduates (Buckner & Khoramshahi, 2021). The characteristics of the first generation of college students, campus adaptation, interpersonal relationship, and teacher-student interaction, social in terms of sense of responsibility, the FGCS are compared with non-FGCS, focusing on the overall differences between the two groups, and less research on gender or other differences between the first-generation college students (Lu & Zhang, 2019).

The experiences of first-generation rural college students in seeking academic help and achieving academic success have become a critical area of study in recent years. This demographic, representing a substantial portion of the college student population in China, faces unique challenges that can impact their educational outcomes. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing effective support mechanisms that can enhance their academic success and, consequently, their social mobility. Recent literature, particularly from the past five years, has shed light on various facets of the academic journey of first-generation rural college students. For instance, Benavides et al. (2024) emphasized that these students often enter higher education with fewer preparatory resources compared to their peers, leading to a reliance on informal networks for academic support. Similarly, Benavides et al. (2024) highlighted that institutional support and faculty mentoring play significant roles in

fostering academic resilience among these students. These findings underscore the importance of tailored support systems that address the specific needs of first-generation rural college students.

The academic experiences of first-generation rural college students markedly differ from those of their non-rural or non-first-generation peers. Research by Tian and Zhang (2024) indicates that these students are more likely to face geographical and socio-economic barriers that limit their access to academic resources. Unlike their urban counterparts, first-generation rural students often rely heavily on peer support due to the unavailability of formal academic assistance in their communities. Ko et al. (2023) further note that financial constraints and the need to juggle multiple responsibilities exacerbate these challenges, making it more difficult for these students to engage fully in their academic pursuits. This comparative perspective highlights the additional hurdles that first-generation rural college students must overcome to achieve academic success. First-generation rural college students encounter specific challenges that significantly impact their educational journey. Financial constraints are a primary concern, often requiring these students to balance part-time jobs with their studies, which can detract from their academic focus (Qu et al., 2023). Additionally, a lack of academic preparedness, stemming from inadequate high school education and limited access to advanced coursework, further complicates their transition to college-level studies (X. J. Li et al., 2023). These challenges are compounded by the limited availability of academic resources and support services in rural areas, as highlighted by (Fan & Nkansah, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). Current data supports these observations, indicating that first-generation rural students are more likely to experience higher levels of stress and lower academic self-efficacy compared to their peers.

In response to these challenges, first-generation rural college students employ various methods to seek academic help. Many turn to digital platforms and social media to form virtual study groups and access online resources, compensating for the lack of physical academic support in their environments (Fan & Nkansah, 2024). These innovative strategies not only provide academic assistance but also foster a sense of community among students who share similar backgrounds and challenges. The effectiveness of these methods varies, with some students reporting significant benefits from peer-led study groups and online tutorials, while others struggle with the lack of direct access to experienced mentors and tutors. Despite these mixed results, the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these students highlight their determination to succeed academically.

The strategies and help-seeking behaviors of first-generation rural college students have a profound impact on their academic success. Effective use of digital resources and peer support can enhance their understanding of course material, improve their grades, and increase their overall confidence in their academic abilities. However, the limitations of these methods, such as the lack of personalized feedback and guidance, can hinder their long-term academic growth. Understanding these factors is crucial for educators and policymakers who aim to develop more comprehensive support systems that address the unique needs of first-generation rural college students. By focusing on these students' specific challenges and coping strategies, this study aims to provide insights that can inform the design of targeted interventions to enhance their academic experiences and outcomes.

1.3 Problem Statement

Since the late 20th century, China's higher education has experienced significant expansion, transitioning from a mass higher education system by 2019. By 2020, the number of college students enrolled reached 9.67 million, with a total student population of 41.83 million, a 19-fold increase from 1998 (Education, 2021). This expansion not only allows more students to access higher education but also significantly improves the educational level of the Chinese population. Higher education has become an important channel for promoting social mobility and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Bai et al., 2021). For many students from poor families, attending university is a crucial step in changing their family's economic status and social position. First-generation college students (FGCS), particularly those from rural areas, make up a significant portion of the student population. They typically exhibit high levels of academic commitment and determination but also face unique challenges and obstacles, which require them to exert more effort in pursuing academic success (Jiao, 2020a).

Academic Achievement Issues

Despite overall high academic commitment from FGCS, those from rural backgrounds still face significant academic achievement gaps. Recent statistical data show that although FGCS generally exhibit high academic dedication, their GPA tends to be lower and dropout rates higher compared to non-first-generation peers (Wang et al., 2024). A survey of Chinese university graduates from 1978 to 2008 found that FGCS performed significantly better than non-first-generation students and exhibited higher academic commitment levels (Jin et al., 2016a). However, due to various social,

economic, and educational disparities, FGCS from rural backgrounds still face academic challenges that may hinder their success (Li et al., 2021). Specifically, these students have significant disadvantages in accessing academic resources, academic preparation, and academic support systems. Additionally, due to the uneven distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas, rural students often lack sufficient academic preparation, leading to feelings of pressure and disorientation when facing university coursework.

Unique Challenges

FGCS in China face some unique difficulties that impede their academic success. Economic hardship is a major issue, as many of these students come from low-income families and must take up part-time jobs to support themselves, reducing their study time (Hou, 2024; Tian & Zhang, 2024). These economic pressures not only affect their academic performance but also can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Furthermore, due to the differences in urban and rural educational resources, many FGCSs lack adequate academic preparation (Cao, 2021). In high school, they may not have had access to advanced courses or high-quality teaching resources, leading to academic disorientation and pressure when entering university. This lack of preparation often exacerbates anxiety and reduces self-efficacy, further complicating their academic journey. Additionally, FGCS often encounter difficulties in accessing academic resources, such as tutoring services and academic counseling, which are more easily available to non-first-generation peers (Xing et al., 2021). This unequal access to resources further exacerbates their academic challenges, making their academic path more difficult.

Significance

Seeking help is a key factor influencing academic success. Effective help-seeking can alleviate the academic challenges faced by FGCS, improving their academic performance and overall success. Understanding these behaviors is crucial for developing better support systems for this group. Although people recognize the importance of help-seeking behavior, there is still a gap in understanding how these behaviors specifically affect Chinese FGCS, who make up over 70% of undergraduate students (Qu et al., 2023). Recent research shows that students who actively seek academic help are more likely to succeed, indicating the need for focused research in this area (Bimerew & Arendse, 2024; R. H. Li et al., 2023a; Schwartz et al., 2023). However, FGCS often face obstacles when seeking help, such as feelings of discomfort in expressing help-seeking needs, fear of communicating with professors, and shame related to their first-generation identity (Hagler et al., 2023; Malott et al., 2022; White & Canning, 2023). These obstacles make it more difficult for them to seek academic support, which in turn affects their academic performance. Therefore, a deeper understanding of FGCS's help-seeking behaviors and their impact on academic success is crucial for developing effective support strategies and improving their academic outcomes.

A more thorough investigation is required to address the issue of first-generation rural college students (FGCS) conduct when seeking academic help. The research gaps are evident in several areas: theoretical, research, and practical aspects of help-seeking behavior and its influence on academic success, and knowledge. Firstly, Theoretical Gap. While the academic help-seeking behavior of college students has been examined through various theoretical lenses, most of the existing literature focuses on

developed countries. There is a notable lack of theoretical exploration of FGCS in developing countries like China. The experiences of FGCS, particularly from rural areas, remain under-theorized, especially from a reflective perspective. Scholars rarely explore FGCS experiences through retrospective narratives from students who have completed post-secondary education, limiting our understanding of their long-term academic journeys and the evolution of their help-seeking behaviors. The second is the research gap. Although numerous studies have been conducted on students' help-seeking behaviors (AHS), these often focus on psychological or mental health help-seeking rather than academic help-seeking. Moreover, most research on AHS has been concentrated on the K-12 education level, with limited studies addressing college students' AHS behaviors. The specific help-seeking behaviors of FGCS in higher education remain underexplored. Furthermore, many studies do not include the voices of FGCS, instead presenting perspectives from educational workers and professors who interact with these students. This oversight creates a gap in understanding the authentic experiences and needs of FGCS from their viewpoints. Third is the methodology gap. It is rare to study the help-seeking behavior of FGCS from their perspectives. Many studies on academic institutions do not include FGCS's voices; instead, the research perspective often comes from educational workers and professors who interact with these students. This lack of direct insight from FGCS themselves results in an incomplete understanding of their experiences and challenges. Finally is the practical gap. In practice, there is a significant gap in understanding how FGCSs navigate academic challenges and utilize help-seeking behaviors to promote their academic success. FGCS face unique difficulties, such as financial constraints, lack of academic preparedness, and limited access to resources, which are not adequately addressed in current support systems. Despite their higher levels of academic

commitment and performance, especially among those from rural areas, FGCS often struggle with accessing and benefiting from available academic resources. Practical strategies and interventions tailored to their specific needs are insufficiently developed, hindering their potential for academic success.

This research thus contributes to a deeper comprehension of FGCS college experiences and how they overcome challenges to succeed academically. This study will analyze the learning experiences of FGCS at a micro level to learn more about their lesser-known stories in their pursuit of college success, concentrating on the results of AHS behaviors on academic success and better understanding how rural FGCS use the resources around them to AHS. Who did they seek help? What were the outcomes of the requests? Did FGCS build its learning help networks to facilitate their academic development better?

1.4 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences of FGCS in rural China and to understand their academic strategies for seeking help. Because some FGCS come from families with low socioeconomic status, they are less likely to seek help when they need it.

Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the perception of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China.

2. To explore the elements that facilitated the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China.
3. To identify the challenges of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students In Zhejiang Province, China.
4. To identify the coping strategies of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China.

1.5 Research Questions

With the above literature in mind, the main research questions to be investigated are as follows: The focus of this research is to explore how first-generation rural college students seek help to learn and achieve personal academic success. This central question was delineated into three research sub-questions:

1. What is the perception of help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?
2. What elements facilitated the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?
3. How did the elements facilitate the experience of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?
4. What are the challenges of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?
5. What are the coping strategies of academic help-seeking behaviors for academic success among first-generation rural college students in Zhejiang Province, China?

1.6 Research Significant

Investigating the experiences of successful first-generation college students (FGCS) at a university as they seek academic help and navigate challenges enhances existing research, builds upon previous theories, and offers practical insights into the field.

1.6.1 Theory

Addressing Gaps in Existing Literature: This study addresses a critical gap in the literature concerning first-generation college students (FGCS) and their help-seeking behaviors in postsecondary education. While significant research has been conducted on help-seeking behaviors in K-12 settings, FGCS have not been adequately studied within the higher education context. This gap is particularly important because the transition to higher education presents unique challenges for FGCS that are not present in K-12 education. By focusing on this group, the research provides new insights into their specific needs and experiences. It highlights the unique factors influencing FGCS help-seeking behaviors, such as cultural capital, social support networks, and personal perseverance, thereby filling a crucial gap in the existing understanding of academic help-seeking among this population.

Building Upon Previous Studies: This research builds on previous studies that have predominantly used a deficit model to examine FGCS, focusing on their limitations and struggles (Martin et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019). By incorporating the Strengths Perspective, this study challenges the traditional view and offers a more comprehensive understanding of FGCS. The Strengths Perspective acknowledges the social, institutional, and cultural factors that influence FGCS and

emphasizes their resilience, adaptability, and cultural capital. Previous studies have often overlooked these positive attributes. By highlighting these strengths, this research provides a more balanced and holistic view of FGCS, recognizing not only their challenges but also their capabilities and resources. This approach helps to reframe the narrative around FGCS from one of deficit to one of strength and potential.

Expanding Theoretical Understanding: The study expands the theoretical understanding of academic help-seeking behaviors by providing detailed narratives of FGCS who have successfully navigated their academic journeys. These narratives offer rich, qualitative data that illustrate how FGCS utilizes both formal and informal academic resources to overcome challenges. This qualitative approach provides a deeper understanding of the help-seeking process, capturing the complexities and nuances that quantitative studies may miss. For instance, the narratives may reveal how FGCS develops relationships with faculty and peers, leverage family and community support, and employ personal strategies to persist in their studies. By presenting these detailed accounts, the study enriches existing theories on help-seeking behaviors, offering a more nuanced view that goes beyond mere frequency counts and explores the qualitative aspects of how and why students seek help.

Contributing to Theory Development: The findings of this study contribute to the development of new theories or the refinement of existing ones related to self-regulated learning and help-seeking behaviors. By illustrating the specific ways in which FGCS overcome challenges and succeed academically, the research provides a foundation for future studies and theoretical models that can better explain the dynamics of help-seeking in higher education. For example, the study might reveal

new factors that influence help-seeking behaviors, such as the role of cultural capital, the impact of social and institutional support, and the importance of personal resilience. These insights can inform the development of more comprehensive theoretical models that account for the diverse experiences and strategies of FGCS. Additionally, the findings can guide future research by identifying new areas of inquiry and suggesting new hypotheses to test. In this way, the study not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge but also lays the groundwork for future theoretical advancements in the field of educational psychology and student success.

1.6.2 Practice

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals: This research provides valuable insights for student affairs professionals, emphasizing the importance of understanding FGCS help-seeking behaviors to develop more effective support services. By recognizing the unique challenges and strengths of FGCS, student affairs professionals can customize their support strategies to better meet the needs of these students. For example, professionals can create targeted workshops that address common adjustment issues faced by FGCS, such as time management, study skills, and campus resource navigation. These workshops can include interactive lessons, hands-on exercises, and peer discussions to make them more engaging and effective. Additionally, training staff to recognize and address the specific needs of FGCS can lead to more personalized and effective support. This training can cover topics such as cultural competency, empathetic communication, and the unique financial, social, and academic challenges that FGCS may face. By implementing these customized strategies, student affairs professionals can ultimately enhance the overall student

experience, fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment that promotes the success of FGCS.

Practical Recommendations: Specific recommendations from this study include strategies to encourage FGCS to seek academic help, as well as ways to enhance support services that can be implemented in college and university settings. These strategies may involve establishing peer mentoring programs where successful FGCS can guide incoming students, providing guidance and support based on shared experiences. These programs can include regular check-ins, group activities, and social events to build a sense of community and belonging among FGCS. Additionally, increasing the accessibility of support services such as counseling and advising is crucial. Ensuring these services are easily accessible and widely known, especially to FGCS who may be unaware of these resources, can significantly impact their utilization rates. This can be achieved through various channels, such as orientation programs, email newsletters, social media, and campus bulletin boards.

Further support for FGCS' academic journey can be provided by organizing skill-focused workshops and seminars tailored specifically for FGCS, such as time management, effective study techniques, and stress management. These workshops can include guest speakers, interactive activities, and practical skills that students can apply in their daily lives. Moreover, promoting a campus culture that encourages help-seeking and reduces the stigma associated with seeking academic assistance is essential. This may involve events, endorsements from successful FGCS, and faculty recognition, creating an environment where seeking help is viewed as a positive, proactive step toward success. Such initiatives can utilize posters, social media, and

student ambassadors to spread the message and build a supportive community. By implementing these detailed and practical recommendations, colleges and universities can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that encourages FGCS to seek the help they need and succeed academically.

1.7 Research scope

In this study, the boundaries of the research scope are set by the researchers to clarify the scope of the research. Specifically, the researchers have intentionally chosen to focus on the successful first-generation college students (FGCS) at a small public university. This deliberate choice excludes continuing-generation students and those not classified as successful students, thereby limiting the research population. Additionally, selecting a small public university as the research background means that the results of this study do not represent the experiences of FGCS at large, private, or differently composed public universities. Recognizing that FGCS experiences may vary by university type and size, the findings of this study provide a local understanding of FGCS experiences in a specific educational environment and cannot be generalized to the universal experiences of all undergraduate students, regardless of their generational identity.

1.8 Definition of Terms

The section that defines terms offers a clear explanation of the terminology used in the study. The study delves into how first-generation college students (FGCS) articulate the process of seeking academic help, their response to challenges in this process, and how they overcome these challenges. Each term is operationally defined to provide a

foundation for understanding the key concepts or terms within the research context. These definitions aid in establishing a common and understandable language. The key terms for the study are outlined below. Academic help-seeking (AHS) is defined as the framework for the study's phenomenon. The sample's characteristics, including first-generation status and being a successful student, are also specified. The following terms will be used operationally in this study.

1.8.1 First-generation college students

A first-generation student is operationally defined as a student who does not have at least one parent or guardian who has completed a four-year college degree (Fabiano, 2022; Mason et al., 2022; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). This study focuses on FGCS in China whose parents did not attend college or high school—their families' first college graduates.

1.8.2 China's first-generation rural college students

The FGCS in rural China refers to the FGCS who lived in rural areas before attending college and whose parents did not attend college.

1.8.3 Continuing-generation student

A continuing-generation student is operationally defined as a student who has at least one parent who has completed a four-year college degree (Jones & Schreier, 2022; Mason et al., 2022). In this study, students who are not FGCS are those whose parents either attended college or did not complete it; in other words, if their parents had college experience, they were not first-generation college students.

1.8.4 Academic Success

Examining academic accomplishments is prevalent in the educational research literature, with most of the research using grades as indicators of success. Furthermore, a student's grades are typically the most important criterion for entrance to educational programs (passing above the regular level), awarding of scholarships, etc. (Guterman, 2021). York, Gibson, Rankin, et al. (2015) suggest a theoretically grounded definition of academic success that is made up of six components: academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives, and career success. The term "academic success" in this study refers to a combination of factors. Firstly, students must have a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Secondly, they must demonstrate their perceptions of academic success, well-being, skill, and competency acquisition, learning objective achievement, and career success during their time in college. This definition of academic success is based on a multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond just academic achievement and includes other factors such as career success and personal well-being.

1.8.5 Help-seeking behavior

Seeking help behavior, as defined by Cornally and McCarthy (2011), refers to the act of actively seeking support or assistance when faced with challenges that exceed one's problem-solving abilities. This behavior extends far beyond a specific field. The act of seeking help is prevalent, whether it is seeking academic help in an educational environment, seeking professional health advice in the healthcare field, or using information retrieval systems to search for information. This indicates that seeking external help is a common natural response when faced with problems and challenges.

1.8.6 Academic Help-Seeking

Seeking academic help is one technique students may employ to overcome academic obstacles and achieve academic achievement (Won et al., 2021). A student must be cognitively aware of the need for help and then request help from a source to seek assistance. So, the process of requesting help consists of a sequence of choices. These choices include but are not limited to deciding to seek assistance, deciding from whom to seek assistance, and deciding what type of assistance to seek (Finney et al., 2018). In this study, students' academic help-seeking behavior is primarily defined as the behavior of students who ultimately achieve academic success through their outside help-seeking.

1.8.7 Formal Help

The concept of formal help refers to the official and specialized channels that students rely on when seeking academic support. This type of help originates from resources and services directly related to education within the school, such as professors, student support services, counselors, and resources provided through official online courses (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). In this study, formal help-seeking is defined as students actively utilizing official school resources to address academic problems and challenges. This includes but is not limited to seeking guidance from teachers, using research materials from the library, and utilizing formal academic counseling services provided by the school.

1.8.8 Informal Help

Informal help refers to help from a non-professional source such as peers and internet searches (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988). Informal help-seeking in this study refers primarily to academic help-seeking by students to people or resources in venues outside of school, for example, peers, parents, or online resources.

1.8.9 Academic Help-Seeking Avoidance

Help-seeking avoidance is “instances when students know that they need help but do not seek it” (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). In this study, Help-seeking avoidance refers to students' reluctance to seek academic assistance for a variety of reasons, including a reluctance to seek assistance from themselves, i.e., through their efforts to seek assistance from online resources.

1.8.10 Coping strategies

Coping strategies refer to the methods and techniques that individuals use to manage and mitigate the stress and challenges they face in various situations. These strategies can be cognitive or behavioral efforts aimed at handling internal or external demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding one's resources. Coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive and typically fall into two broad categories: Problem-focused coping: This involves taking direct actions to solve the problem causing the stress. Examples include seeking information, developing a plan of action, or altering the source of stress. Emotion-focused coping: This involves efforts to regulate the emotional response to the stressor. Examples include seeking social support, engaging

in relaxation techniques, or reframing the situation in a more positive light (Fitzgibbon & Murphy, 2023). In this study, **coping strategies** refer to the specific methods and techniques employed by individuals, particularly first-generation undergraduate students, to manage and alleviate the stress and challenges associated with their academic journey.

1.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a summary of a phenomenological study examining the AHS behaviors of FGCCS. How can FGCS from rural areas utilize seeking help to achieve academic success? The goal of the study was to comprehend the lived experiences of FGCS who seek academic support during their time on campus and how they choose to seek assistance or enhance their academic achievement. This study's objective was to address gaps in the existing knowledge while examining strategies for promoting students' academic success.

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