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# Family and higher education: developing a comprehensive framework of parents' support and expectations of first-generation students

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Postsecondary institutions must help all students develop knowledge and skills to persist. Traditional approaches to first-generation students (FGS) have focused on describing the hindrances they experience during their undergraduate trajectories, defying their persistence. This qualitative study explores the experiences of FGS parents; specifically, the characteristics of their support and expectations toward FGS. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 25 FGS parents from diverse Chilean universities. The data collected were analyzed through an inductive process, which included describing, classifying, and interpreting data into categories and themes. The results show that the motivation of families lies in the symbolism that they ascribe to higher education, deploying various modes of family support and resources to ensure that students complete their studies and attain a degree. This process is tailored to meet the initial expectations of FGS performance at university, which typically frame the type of support the family may provide. Postsecondary institutions and policymakers can use this study to develop future policies and practices that include FGS parents' perspective, expectations and characteristics of support, articulating these with academic culture, FGS's trajectories and own expectations to reduce inequality and promote retention.

## KEYWORDS

first-generation students, family support, persistence, undergraduate trajectories, symbolism in higher education, parents' expectations

## 1 Introduction

During last decades, diverse countries around the world, and particularly Chilean, universities have experience higher education growth (henceforth, HE), integrating students of diverse profiles, characteristics, and trajectories (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2018; Segovia and Flanagan-Bórquez, 2019; O'Shea et al., 2024).

In the case of Chile, the increase in diversification of enrollment rates has progressively expanded the participation of social segments that have been historically excluded from HE (Castillo and Cabezas, 2010; Santelices et al., 2018). Such is the case of first-generation students (FGS), who are usually defined as the first ones in their families to enter HE or who have no parents or legal caregivers with professional degrees (Ishitani, 2003; Beattie, 2018). Multiple studies have indicated that these students oftentimes experience more significant

challenges than their non-FGS peers (usually considered traditional students). Typically, these peers belong to social groups with greater economic and sociocultural capital, and possess broader material resources and skills to navigate the world of university expectations (Soto, 2016; Linne, 2018; López-Cárdenas et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). Although, internationally and in the Chilean case, some educational strategies and various affirmative action programs (e.g., TRIO programs in the U.S.; *PACE, Propedeútico in Chile*), laws (free tuition) and support from the State (scholarships for food, transportation, etc.) have been implemented to equip students better for higher education aiming to enhance their academic preparation and facilitate access and retention of FGS, the empirical evidence shows that there are still challenges that impact their trajectories and make them more likely to drop out of the system (Santelices et al., 2018; García and Cuellar, 2023).

Globally, other studies have detailed family relationships and the support that families provide during the FGS university trajectories. These types of support have been shown to interfere significantly both in the decisions (strategic or not) that these students make before entering HE and in their first years of university, impacting their aspirations and their attempts to complete the degree (Harper et al., 2019; Smith, 2023). The educational trajectory is defined as the transition process among positions that people occupy in the social sphere, where family plays a significant role, influencing the inherited cultural capital, living conditions, and shared goals they want to achieve. In this sense, the family can transform the habitual practices of social reproduction (*habitus*) when the opportunity of access to education is granted, representing a significant change within the family context (Castillo and Cabezas, 2010).

Furthermore, studies on FGS families have stressed some of the relevant factors associated with the possibility of accessing HE or not. Some of these factors include the presence of (a) more siblings and/or both parents in the family, (b) the number of economic resources available, (c) the number of chores that the children must replace due to the absence of one of their caregivers, (d) the number of years of schooling of the children, the characteristics of their cultural capital and (e) the number of books at home (Castillo and Cabezas, 2010). While FGS oftentimes navigate material challenges, their families become a key resource rather than a constraint. Such family repertoires are usually based on the expectations and vast material and non-material investment of parents (family capital) during the formative years to ensure a better future for their children (supports), whose values and attitudes are fundamental to the academic success of FGS (Gofen, 2009; O'Shea et al., 2024).

Internationally, most of the current research about FGS is still concerned about FGS's experiences in higher education and how these experiences influence their outcomes, permanence and retention (Gable, 2021; Hagler, 2023; Terrón-López et al., 2023). On the other hand, empirical research from recent years on families and FGSs has mainly addressed the overall experience of having a child for the first time pursuing HE (Chlup et al., 2018), considering factors such as parents' motivations, the support given to their FGS, the change of their roles and dynamics (Harper et al., 2019), and the family achievement guilt (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015). Some studies conducted on family support for FGS has been focused mainly on describing and understanding this support and students' experiences through their perspectives (Soto, 2016; Mkonto, 2021; Suwinyattichaiorn and Johnson, 2022), whereas there is little research

analyzing the characteristics of the support received from and the challenges faced by caregivers and families when their first family member attends university. In this context, this qualitative study aimed to learn in-depth about the characteristics of parents' support and expectations toward their FGS children during their academic trajectory. Within this context, the research was guided by the following questions: (1) What are the main characteristics of the support and expectations of FGS' parents? (2) What specific factors mediated the FGS parents' support and expectations? (3) How do these support and expectations change throughout time?

Extending the lens of investigation to include those in proximity to FGS enhances understanding the impacts of parents' considerations of their children's educational futures. Equally, it is important to understand how parents may facilitate or challenge FGS access and persistence to HE, through their support and expectations. This paper begins with an overview of the characteristics of FGS and an exploration of the main theoretical approaches that have sought to pinpoint family and their influence on educational trajectories and academic performance. Following this framing, the methodology for the study designed to understand the nature of having FGS in the family and the support and expectations toward that experience are detailed. In the following section, the findings of the framework of parent's support and expectations of FGS are detailed and their implications are considered in light of the literature used to frame the study.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 First generation students

In the last decade, the study of first-generation students (FGS) has globally attracted much attention, both in the interest of higher education institution enrollments and from researchers trying to understand their unique characteristics (King, 2021; Fei et al., 2023; Gardner and Leary, 2023; O'Shea et al., 2024). While there is still no consensus on the FGS definition (Felicetti et al., 2019), they are usually defined as those students who do not have mothers, fathers, or professional legal caregivers (Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Concept of FGS provides several dimensions that involve characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, minorities, gender, among others (Wright et al., 2021), and its research has focused on describing experiences, a part of their culture, identity, expectations, and values, as on state policies, access to services, education, specific accompaniments, labor income and social security (Van Noy and Ruder, 2017; Almeida et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Then, it could be inferred that the notion of FGS is an attribute in itself as it crosses several years of a person's life and history and traverses several significant dimensions of the life cycle.

First-generation students as a group possess some cross-cutting characteristics that differentiate them from their non-FGS peers or so-called traditional or continuing students. Regarding the former, research has shown that FGS usually come from lower socioeconomic strata, must play multiple roles while studying, have higher rates of failing subjects, and graduate from primary and secondary schools with lower educational quality (Morosini and Felicetti, 2019; Pataro, 2019; Webb, 2019; O'Shea et al., 2024). These same characteristics of FGSs have been reflected in the research carried out by other authors,

which reveals the barriers and university difficulties experienced by FGSs in various countries around the world (Pascarella et al., 2004). In the academic environment, FGSs, according to Canning et al. (2019), present some characteristics, such as lower commitment to their classes, low attendance, and lower academic integration (Adams et al., 2016), in addition to presenting inconveniences to integrating into their curricular process (Afeli et al., 2018). On the other hand, they are perceived as people with more significant problems to finance their careers and expenses associated with their studies (Adams et al., 2016).

## 2.2 The family and their influence on higher education lived-experiences

A defining element of students' university experience that is related to family is the quality of family relationships and the emotional ties parents or caregivers generate with their children (Padua, 2019; López-Angulo et al., 2020; O'Shea et al., 2024). On one hand, social support received from parents constitutes a factor of academic achievement, where students who maintain better communication with their caregivers and, oftentimes, a good relationship with them, show a higher self-perception of academic performance (López-Angulo et al., 2020). Moreover, perceptions of the different types of social support may affect their trajectory, especially in the first years of their programs (López-Angulo et al., 2020). On the other hand, Padua (2019) states that negative paternal relationships and maternal psychological control can affect academic performance alongside factors such as study habits, organization, planning, and the leverage of affordances. Thus, when students receive the necessary support from their families, they are able to express the desire to outperform and excel in their studies, continue their studies, and generate sound expectations about his or her professional future (Padua, 2019; López-Angulo et al., 2020).

Regarding FGS, some studies show that the family is one of the factors that most affect the transition process from FGS to HE, their expectations, academic achievement, and permanence (Soto, 2016; LeBouef and Dworkin, 2021; Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). Research has highlighted that the social capital of parents and the support provided by relatives and community affect FGS (Zhao et al., 2023). In addition, family dynamics and the type of support they provide during the university trajectory are crucial factors in motivation and desire to continue studying, and that their absence may cause anxiety, sadness, and low cognitive and academic performance (Gofen, 2009). A low level of family support can be caused by multiple factors, such as difficulties in navigating university academic culture and expectations for university students, lack of interest, low levels of information about their programs, perception of low academic competencies to accompany/assist the student trajectory of their children and economic demands that increase the job expectations of their children once they graduate from high school (Soto, 2016; Flanagan-Bórquez et al., 2023a).

A study conducted by Bueno (2007) discusses various research accounts on the success and failure of FGS students and their family relationships. Family expectations often depend on the intensity of economic and emotional dependence between students and their families, the flexibility and adaptability of parents, the distance between home and HE institutions, and the emotional ties between

them. Moreover, families often have unrealistic expectations. Most of them had no opportunity to acquire experiential knowledge about the challenges presented in an academic environment (O'Shea et al., 2024). Consequently, FGS often experience an emotional duality between maintaining family ties and pursuing their own goals, the latter of which jeopardizes the perception of family loyalty based on parents' efforts to provide better education to their children with the expectation of receiving support or benefit in return in the future (Bueno, 2007). If the wishes or projections of the FGSs differ from those of their families, they can generate inner tensions that affect both their performance and the quality of the support perceived by the family. Research findings have shown that if parents of FGS are committed to their children's education, they seek strategies for them to access HE even in precarious socioeconomic conditions and influence the decisions that they make regarding the university (e.g., type of university and program of study they choose), valuing and recognizing FGS's efforts (Soto, 2016; Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2022).

## 2.3 Family capital as cultural wealth

Bourdieu (1990) defines "capital" as those resources that people possess, placing them in a specific social position, which is in constant power dispute between individuals and groups. Among these capitals are economic (monetary and financial resources), social (social and organizational networks that can be mobilized by the individual), and cultural (dispositions and habits acquired through socialization, including educational capital and symbolic capital) (Bourdieu, 1990). Alternatively, Coleman (1994) develops the concept of social capital as a socio-structural asset that incorporates a myriad of entities that are characterized by not only having a social structure but also by facilitating certain actions of individuals within this structure. Within his theory, Coleman also refers to physical capital and human capital. The former is tangible capital such as tools, machines and other equipment that facilitate production, while human capital is intangible and "is created by changing persons to so as to give them skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways" (Coleman, 1994, p. 304).

Although Bourdieu and Coleman overlook the existence of family capital, Gofen (2009, p. 115) comments that family capital is "the ensemble of means, strategies, and resources embodied in the family's way of life that influences the future of their children," which usually combines the social, human, and cultural capital of families. Especially in an FGS context, this investment is an essential support for achieving social mobility, as it is reflected both implicitly and explicitly through behavior, emotional development, fundamental values and influence of the family on the priorities, habits and values of their children (Gofen, 2009). A recent study highlighted that family cultural capital significantly predicted ability development, academic performance and self-concept in FGS (Zhao et al., 2023). In addition, parent's attitude toward education is strongly linked to the desire for a better future and professional success, where expectations constitute a motivating aspect of such investment, and when the perspectives of the children are also aligned with those of their caregivers (Gofen, 2009; O'Shea et al., 2024).

Research has shown that one of the initial actions—and intentions—of some FGS families is to enroll their children from a very early age in educational institutions with better educational

quality indices, indicating a “bridge” to a better academic and social capital that would help them to enter HE (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2022). In this perspective, Gofen (2009) refers to the fact that all families from different socioeconomic backgrounds expect their children to enter university, but that the main difference between FGS and second-generation families (with professional parents) is that the former expect a significant change in their lives when they have a professional child, while the latter, usually with greater economic capital, expect changes that have a greater impact on their daily lives (Gofen, 2009).

Yosso (2005) describes family capital as an element that is part of a set of capitals that are embedded into cultural capital or wealth, and that is composed of the cultural knowledge transmitted by the family, including its history, values, and connection with the community, in addition to emotional, moral, and educational skills. For FGS, familial capital is a strong framework to recognize the different ways that their parents contribute to FGS’s career development (Smith, 2023).

Other forms of capital described by the Yosso (2005) are also part of cultural capital and correspond to aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, and resilient capital to name but a few. Accordingly, they comprehend a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks of contacts that favor the richness of cultural capital.

Among other relevant forms of capital, aspirational capital can be defined as the capacity of families to maintain future hopes and dreams despite obstacles and/or lack of available means, which encourages themselves and their children to aspire to greater possibilities (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital refers to the skills and set of social networks that people have and that facilitate their ability to move within social institutions, such as schools, work, and the health and justice systems (Yosso, 2005). This navigational capital particularly refers to how less advantaged students (such as FGS) move within HE, which could be considered a “hostile” environment for the author (Yosso, 2005). Social capital concerns all the networks, community resources and social connections that provide both instrumental and emotional support for people to move through different social institutions, such as access to education, legal justice, employment, and health care. Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills obtained through communicative experiences, which can be through different languages, narrative styles and/or artistic forms, which refers to the capacity to adapt different communication styles to the different contexts in which one participates (Yosso, 2005). Finally, resilient capital is the knowledge and skills cultivated through behaviors of opposition to social inequality, which have been historically manifested in different communities (Yosso, 2005).

These capitals continue to have a significant family intervention, which FGS could articulate differently to enable them to remain in HE beyond solely academic purposes.

### 3 Methods

The present qualitative study (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Creswell and Guetterman, 2019) sought to understand the support and expectations of mothers and fathers regarding having a first-generation student in HE.

### 3.1 Participants

To meet this objective, semi-structured interviews (Creswell and Creswell, 2022) were conducted with 25 parents of FGSs, belonging to universities in central Chile (Metropolitana and Valparaíso zones). These regions concentrate around 55.3% of total undergraduate enrollment in 2023 (Servicio de Información de Educación Superior [SIES], 2023), which is relevant from the point of view of the student population they serve. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the study participants. The names of all participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

To recruit participants, a non-probabilistic convenience sample was conducted using the snowball recruitment method (Stratton, 2021; Creswell and Creswell, 2022). The sample size was defined according to Creswell and Creswell’s (2022) approaches, who recommend a number of participants for qualitative studies between 10 and 50. A total of 25 participants were defined referring to a particular context and phenomenon (parents and/or guardians of FGS), whose experiences could be transferable to other similar contexts (Maher et al., 2018). The inclusion criteria were: (1) being parents or guardians whose children are studying a university degree at a public or private university in the Metropolitan or Valparaíso

TABLE 1 Participants’ sociodemographics.

Region	Type of university	Pseudonym (age/relation to FGS) M: Mother; F: Father	FGS’s study area
Valparaíso	Selective/research university	Javiera (56/M); José (53/F); Josefa (47/M); Alejandra (53/M); Nancy (53/M); Javiera (56/M); Elena (57/M); Débora (43/M); Joel (44/F)	Social Sciences (6); Engineering (1); Public health (2)
	Selective/teaching with participation in research	Gloria (51/M); Daniela (55/M); Julia (50/M)	Social Sciences (1); Engineering (1); Public health (1)
	Selective/teaching	Marta (48/M); Panchita (52/M)	Public health (2)
Santiago	Selective/research	Veri (57/M); Pepa (51/M); Juan (50/F); Pamela (54/M); Sonia (55/M); María (55/M)	Social sciences (1); Public health (5)
	Selective/teaching with participation in research	Ana (49/M)	Arts and architecture (1)
	Selective/teaching	Monse (44/M)	Social sciences (1)
	Non-selective	Emilia (56/M); Alejandra (48/M); Amalia (49/M)	Education (3)

Source: Own elaboration.

regions, and who are the first educational generation to access this educational level; (2) not having completed higher education or not having attended university; and (3) being available to be interviewed in person.

The post-secondary institutions attended by FGSs were classified according to the taxonomy proposed by [Torres and Zenteno \(2011\)](#) and [Muñoz and Blanco \(2013\)](#), classifying Chilean universities into selective research universities, selective teaching universities with participation in research, selective teaching universities and non-selective universities. The concept of selective university refers to those post-secondary institutions that are selective in their admissions in terms of the test scores that students need to be accepted in one of their degree programs ([Espinoza et al., 2022](#)). Selective universities, whatever their orientation (research, teaching or mixed), correspond to those universities with an average national entrance score of the University Selection Test (currently the *Prueba de Acceso a la Educación Superior – PAES* – Higher Education Access Test) over 500 points (out of a maximum of 850), and which also have a high level of university quality accreditation granted by the *Comisión Nacional de Acreditación de Chile* (the Chilean National Accreditation Commission) ([Torres and Zenteno, 2011](#); [Muñoz and Blanco, 2013](#)). On the other hand, the distribution of programs by disciplines was carried out according to the Chilean Government's *Corporación de Fomento de la Producción* (CORFO–Production Development Corporation) website, which clusters the different programs offered by Chilean universities according to their academic field and professional area.

In general, 88% of the people interviewed were mothers of FGS, and 12% were fathers. Likewise, 44% of the total are mothers and fathers of FGSs who are studying in the capital and 56% in the Valparaíso region, giving homogeneity to the group of interviewees. On the other hand, 88% of the people interviewed have a child studying a program in selective universities in the capital and Valparaíso region, while the remaining 12% are studying (education) in non-selective universities in the capital. Of the selective universities, 60% of the participants are fathers or mothers of FGSs who are studying at research-tier universities; 16% are mothers of FGSs who are studying at selective teaching-tier with participation in research, and 12% of the persons surveyed are mothers of FGSs studying at selective universities that are purely teaching-tier universities.

### 3.2 Data collection

The information production was carried out through semi-structured interviews ([Creswell and Creswell, 2022](#)). Semi-structured interviews were adopted to generate data, given they offered a potent means of developing an understanding of the complex elements that shaped parents' experiences of having a first-generation student in the family. As [Denzin and Lincoln \(2018\)](#) pointed out, this type of interview allows rich insight and offers meaningful data on how a particular phenomenon was experienced.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and last between 50 and 60 min. Following the objectives of this study, the interview protocol included questions about the experiences of having a FGS in the family, the choices made by their children about higher education study, the types and mechanisms of family support provision, parents' expectations regarding their children's studies, the main challenges

faced by their children at university, and suggestions to support FGS retention and persistence (see the [Supplementary material](#) section for more detail).

The interview guidelines were carefully developed through a critical analysis of the literature and following the recommendations of [Creswell and Creswell \(2022\)](#) and [Dunwoodie et al. \(2023\)](#) for the construction of semi-structured interviews under a qualitative approach that allow understanding the phenomenon through the experiences of the participants themselves.

### 3.3 Data analysis

For the analysis of data, we have followed thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)) and the procedures advanced by [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#). We first conducted a first cycle of familiarization with the data and its content with the assistance of NVivo software. Then, we identified the critical emergent themes based on the research questions that guided the design of the study (and associated interview protocol). After that, we continue in a second cycle to conduct the coding rounds of narratives. Central or general themes were generated by clustering codes based on similar and broader categories together with their verification, to ultimately define these categories for the analysis. Initial codes identified from the transcripts included “Economic Support,” “Emotional Support,” “Technological Support,” “Health and Mental Health Support,” “Academic Support,” “Expectations,” “Economic Resources,” “Additional Efforts,” “Family Role,” “Adapting to HE,” “Motivation,” “Coexistence,” among others. These codes were grouped into broader categories to organize the data coherently, such as “Types of Support,” “EPG Trajectory in HE,” “Family Dynamics,” “Family Resources,” “Expectations and Motivation.” From these categories, the main themes of “Socioemotional, Economic, and Technological Supports,” “Family Adaptation and Flexibility,” “Additional Efforts (Sacrifices)” and “Motivations and Expectations.” These themes are developed in the following section.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

The present study complied with the ethical protocols established for research involving human subjects (e.g., signing of informed consent and use of pseudonyms to preserve anonymity) and was approved by the corresponding Ethics Committee (Approval Record 2/2022).

## 4 Results

The findings in this study correspond to the analysis of parents' stories about their experiences having an FGS in the family and how they either contribute or hinder their child's permanence and retention in HE. From the initial analysis of the narratives, it is clear that the role of the family primarily consists of providing support to the FGSs. The main types of support are the following: socioemotional, economic, technological, family adaptability and flexibility as a relevant quality, and additional efforts made to contribute to the

academic achievement of their children, all of them under a motivational framework and expectations of the families.

#### 4.1 Socioemotional, economic, and technological supports

The overall parents interviewed indicated that they provide different types of support to their children, contributing to the permanence and retention of FGSs in HE. One of the supports provided is socioemotional, which is often given in response to the difficulties faced by FGSs and provided despite the adults' perception that they do not have all the necessary skills to cope with it. This is how one mother described it: "(...) well, sometimes you yourself may not deal with the emotional aspects of the children, of the youth... because their academic load, the stress, also adds up, and well, you also have to be aware of it" (Josefa).

Similarly, one of the greatest supports provided in this area consists of the family member's distribution of chores. It is one of the aspects that best characterizes the FGS trajectory. Within this framework, mothers and fathers adjust the family dynamics that seek to favor exclusive dedication to studies through the reduction and reorganization of responsibilities and roles at home. Although these responsibilities do not disappear completely, caregivers are responsible for reducing the burden that FGSs oftentimes have in their daily lives, so that they have fewer stressors in addition to those already existing in HE. Their objective is to ensure that their children maintain a steadfast commitment to their university responsibilities. One mother reported "he began to fulfill only his role, not sure [before], he did one thing, then a brother role, of father, of son, of student, but I stayed working from home, then he started to focus on his own work (...)" (Ana).

Empathy is one of the individual characteristics that is relevant to the emotional support provided. Although caregivers do not have prior college experience, they usually exercise high levels of empathy toward the characteristics and demands of being an undergrad student, as one mother noted:

*Sometimes, she's mad at me because I feel sorry for her doing her coursework alone, like I say: 'I'm gonna be sleeping while she keeps studying;' and I say like, 'ok, I'll make you company for a little while.' Or sometimes I am myself too tired, yet I am still there with her. (Pamela).*

Concerning economic support, families usually state that scholarships and government aids are the main facilitators of their children's entry to HE, since the family's economic capital is not considered sufficient to afford a program. One participant pointed out:

*(...) my son accessed free education, so thanks to he can study, because when I went to enroll him in the law school(...), it costs \$600,000 at least plus the monthly fee, which is about 500 [thousand]<sup>1</sup> or so, if not a little more (...). And thanks God, he got it... free education and that's why he can study, because I think*

1 Enrolment fee: Around 700 USD. Monthly fee: approximately 580 USD.

*we would not have been able to afford his university studies (...)* (Nancy).

Although economic resources are limited, caregivers always try to pay for everything not covered by the scholarships or other benefits granted (e.g., housing in another city, materials, photocopies, books, etc.), limiting their own needs or those of the rest of their family. "Monse" explains it like this: "[If] I have a certain amount of money to pay for something else, and [if] she is having a hard time, I do not spend it on this thing and I give it to her...".

Another relevant support mentioned by the participants is technological support, understood as the provision of material and non-material digital resources. Although this relates to economic support, we have decided to separate it in order to underscore its relevance.

According to the participants, families usually need help making adequate technological devices available to meet the requirements of the course subjects and the organization of university life (e.g., group coordination, internet browsing, e-mails, etc.). This challenge is mainly due to family factors, such as the socioeconomic condition and territorial location of the home, which could experience constrained Internet service quality if the family resides in rural areas. Faced with this scenario, caregivers make additional efforts to obtain computers, tablets, and better Internet service so that their children can meet their academic demands. "Veri" explained this with respect to the use of the Internet connection and other technological devices: "We had to buy him a computer, pay for extra Internet line because we had an internet that did not work much; then, all the other things were canceled: the telephone was taken out, everything else was taken out and we left pure internet." And "José" pointed out about his experience during the Covid-19 pandemic:

*[The pandemic] was hard, very hard...we did several changes at our place, we had to get Internet service, and since there were too many students studying under the same circumstances, it became increasingly challenging because right at the same time they all had their exams, and several of them lost their connection, and that made it all more challenging... we had to go downstairs to safer places to be able to send the information [of my son].*

#### 4.2 Family adaptation and flexibility

Another theme arising from the participants is that families tend to adapt to their children's routines and agree to reorganize their physical spaces to facilitate the comfort of FGSs while they are doing chores and working from home. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when many families had to set up new study spaces or modify existing ones, as "Elena" pointed out:

*For instance, the living room made things easier for her to study. Similarly, part of the dining room, because she studied in two areas when there was more activity during the day. She studied in the living room and since at night things were quieter, she opted to study in the dining room. We had to adapt to the new circumstances. There was no other option.*

And “Pepa” added: *“The only thing was to adjust to her timings, because she was studying, and we had to keep it quiet (...) So while she was here, we were all adjusting ourselves to her routing... and a bit more silently (...).”*

The homes where many FGS live are described as small in space and/or the surrounding area lacks appropriate environmental conditions to mitigate distractions; however, the family tries their best to respect their children’s time and space while they are studying, reducing noise as much as possible, adapting meal times to the student’s routine and avoiding interruptions while FGS are studying, as “Veri” said: *“We know she is studying and nobody will disturb her.”* Moreover, “Pamela” pointed out, *“...we had to allocate a space where she could study, because you would never think about having a space to read or for them to do coursework. So, we had to adapt a place where she could study in peace.”* Such flexibility enables FGS to focus on their role as university students and fulfill their academic tasks. Moreover, it is important to point out that it is the family who adapts to the needs of FGS and not the other way around.

### 4.3 Additional efforts (sacrifices)

In addition to the support that FGS families oftentimes deploy to support the educational process of their children, sometimes they make what are called “sacrifices” (Amalia), e.g., additional efforts. All this is so that students can achieve their goals of obtaining a professional degree. These sacrifices may appear when the student must migrate from one region or city to another in order to attend classes at the chosen university and must cover extra housing expenses, when the cost of materials, tools or technological equipment is very high or when scholarships are not enough to cover the totality of the program fees. In these situations, oftentimes the family assumes a debt burden, gets a second job or works overtime to cover such expenses, as reported by two caregivers: *“Well, sacrifices... To purchase his stuff, whatever she needs; having a computer that works, because her previous one did not, and for one that means to incur in more debts to get her whatever she might need”* (Veri), and:

*When I had to rent a dormitory for him (...), I realized my salary was not enough, and so I had to begin working over the weekends, and so full time in golf and doing extra hours at my own job too in order to save more money because it was not enough. (Gloria).*

Sometimes, families even move to other places in order to get materials or pay extra rent to accompany their children during their university life, as “Javiera” points out:

*(...) We used to live back then in Rancagua, he came over to Valparaíso [four-hour distance city] (...) until we all as a family decided that, to be closer to him, –because he felt lonely–we had better move all together here to Quilpué, like, the closest point for us to Valparaíso.*

Despite the costs involved in these efforts, the family is able to demonstrate a high capacity for adaptation and commitment to their children’s education, putting their children’s needs before their own. This is what “Elena” says in her story:

*As we were finding solutions to have her submit her coursework, we even lived in Chilepín (...), and we would come to Salamanca so that she could take her tests or give an interview. We would come from one town to another to solve the problem... always supporting her.*

## 4.4 Motivations and expectations

Our findings are framed within the motivations and expectations that both FGS and families considered about accessing, staying in, and graduating from HE under the symbolic projection of the benefits associated with being a professional and the consequent improvement of the family’s socioeconomic condition. “Ana” commented: *“(...) Our wishes were always that he would study (...) the only way to get ahead and have a better remuneration or that he could have a different life, was that he had to study.”*

The above expectation is framed by the perception that having a professional university degree will not only allow social-economic mobility but a higher valuation of their capitals. “Sonia” pointed out:

*Obtaining a degree is very important, because having that degree will open many doors for her; she now has her technical certification and... she has been working and I tell her: “if you have that degree, you are going to earn much more.” Because now she is studying, working as a technician, she gets paid peanuts. They do all the work and the professional who has a “bigger” degree earns much more.*

Oftentimes, it is during elementary education when families begin to generate expectations regarding the entrance to HE, the type of university and/or the programs they can choose. “Panchita” commented: *“Together with Francisca, we went through several stages... Nobody ever thought that Francisca was going to go to university because she was first misdiagnosed with attention deficit disorder.”* More often than not, these expectations are higher than those expected by the school, as “Ana” pointed out: *“You say ‘what kind of education they give him in the public school like?...none, but he always grew up with the idea of studying at university.”*

These expectations usually depend on the strengths and abilities that caregivers perceive their children to have, their children’s interests and the external support received, as “Monse” referred: *“(...) because we told her ‘go study statistics if you are so good at mathematics,’ because she was always very good at mathematics.”*

After admission, parents contrast their initial expectations with the way in which their children perform in the university environment. This new expectation sometimes begins with the fear of starting a new stage in an unknown place. These expectations are contrasted with those of students from other socioeconomic strata and, usually, not FGS, but culminate in being defined by the students’ performance in higher level studies. This can be seen in the stories of “Ana” and “Gloria” respectively:

*We were afraid because we believed that he had all the desires, but if he had not been able to it was because maybe he could not study, he did not have the capacity. We were really afraid, but later, over time, we calmed down because we began to see that he managed, (...), he began to get good grades, he liked the program, he worked on his models, happy with life. (Ana).*

(...) I was a little bit afraid that Matías would go there, because there are boys who have a much higher economic level than we do... And then, when Matías took a test, he said to me: 'Mom, I got a one' [an F in the American academic grading]. And I told him: 'Matías, I told you that the level of demand is not the same as a public school and they come from private schools, it's not the same'. [And he told me] 'but mom, do not worry...' And then, in the second semester, he told me: 'look, mom, my classmates are asking me for help'... Then, after that, my classmates asked Mati for help. (Gloria)

In summary, families' motivation lies in the symbolism that they attribute to HE, and it pivots around obtaining a better professional and labor future. When students show academic strengths and aptitudes during the different moments of their school careers, caregiving adults begin to develop the idea of going to university and place their expectations on both the students and their careers. Once the student enters university, the joy that surrounds this achievement leads the family to deploy different types of support and resources so that the student can remain in HE and graduate. This is accompanied by an adjustment of the initial expectations based on the performance that the students show in the university context, and that in some way can combine the type of support manifested by the family. Finally, and transversally, the pride that it means for families to have a child at university justifies and promotes the different efforts made and sets a precedent in the lives of the families. Figure 1 summarizes the motivations, expectations, and support of the families in the FGS's trajectory at the university.

### 5 Discussion and conclusion

Findings in this study reveal the main characteristics of the support and expectations associated with the experience of having a child studying at university for the first time. Although the families of FGS have fewer material resources and a cultural capital that is oftentimes distant from HE institutional expectations, this research

shows that the support provided by caregivers and their characteristics constitute an important type of family capital for FGS. This family capital facilitates their entry, permanence, and retention in HE (Yosso, 2005; Gofen, 2009; LeBouef and Dworkin, 2021; Csók and Pusztai, 2023). One of the main supports provided is socio-emotional, translated into a high level of commitment and dedication on the part of the families regarding their children's HE. This commitment is significantly framed by the expectations that families usually have about the benefits of pursuing HE, so that from childhood, and based on the perception of their academic abilities, they begin to build the idea of attending HE. This support is not only limited to purely academic matters during the educational process. There is a genuine commitment to the socio-emotional wellbeing of FGS, although this is usually mediated by the tools that the family possesses to deal with their various emotions. Oftentimes, families are interested in their children's academic life and, even if they might not understand university dynamics, they recognize the value of learning and strive to involve themselves and accompany their children during the educational process (Csók and Pusztai, 2023). Thus, the results of this study show both the importance of the presence of meaningful relationships between FGSs and their caregivers (Padua, 2019; López-Angulo et al., 2020) and how these relationships can compensate for the human capital (Coleman and Hoffer, 2011) of the latter, measured, for example, in the years of schooling achieved by them during their children's student trajectory.

Concerning economic and technological support, families tend to permanently look for alternatives to meet the material needs of their children's student life. This is the case even when they do not have the necessary means to do so, the place where they live does not provide sufficient inputs to study or other needs within the family must be covered. Within this point, the support provided by the Chilean Government for HE, such as the Gratuity Scholarships and the food Scholarships (*Becas de Gratuidad y las Becas de Alimentación*) are recognized as a facilitator for FGSs to access and remain in university, but they are not enough. More often than not, limited

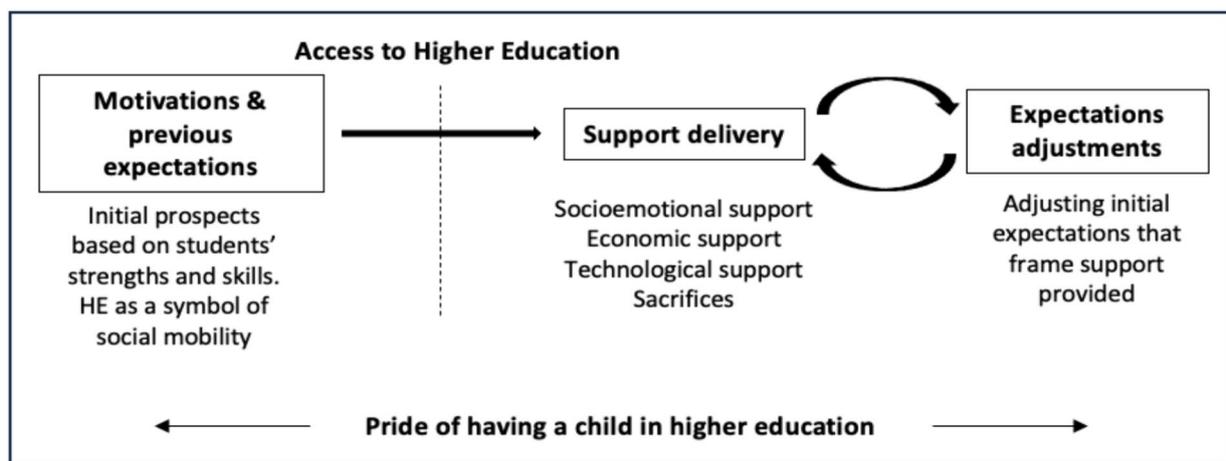


FIGURE 1 Motivation, expectations, and support given to FGS in HE. This figure shows how motivation and expectations promote the delivery of FGS support. First, the families' intention and motivation to have a child in HE is described, along with the expectations that are generated prior to entry. Then, the figure shows the types of support that the family provides to FGS and the adjustment of their initial expectations based on the university trajectory of their sons and daughters. The family's pride in having a child in HE is highlighted as a transversal axis of the university. Source: Own elaboration.

economic capital is associated with higher levels of stress and the possibilities of abandoning a career (Flanagan-Bórquez, 2017; Guerrero et al., 2022). Among the primary expenses incurred that could be verified in this study are the extra payments for accommodation, materials, printing, computers, tablets, and better Internet service to be connected during asynchronous teaching, as during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors should be considered for future scenarios of a digital university. The previously described supports (emotional, economic, and technological) are framed within what English-speaking authors have defined as components of a complex family capital (Yosso, 2005; Gofen, 2009) and which is intertwined with other capital factors, such as economic, social (in its variants of both physical and human capital) and cultural capital that incorporates educational and symbolic capital (Coleman, 1994; Bourdieu, 1990). In this sense, the family tries to combine diverse resources and capitals that allow FGS to enter and remain in the university, by adapting them to an unfamiliar and complex context such as HE.

Another important support identified in this study is the modification of family dynamics in favor of reducing the roles and/or responsibilities that FGSs have at home during their HE studies. This change driven by the FGS's family seeks to favor the FGS's exclusive dedication to their academic work by reducing household chores and, consequently, minimizing additional stress factors that could potentially impact their academic performance. Families are also able to reorganize their physical spaces to facilitate the FGS's wellbeing so that they can study and have their classes properly. These modes of support result in important changes in routines that families have to adapt to respect their children's time and space while they are studying, including meal times or noise reduction, among others.

Other findings in this study concern the sacrifices or additional efforts that the family is able to commit in favor of their children's studies. In this context, families report that they have had to resort to loans and debts, secure additional employment, or work overtime, sell various items in the market, go from one place to another looking for materials and even rent properties in different cities to be closer to their children during the process, when students must migrate to other regions or cities to pursue their studies, when the costs of tools or supplies are high, or when scholarships are not enough to cover all the student's expenses or fees. Amidst this reality, it is worth noting the attribution that families make regarding access to resources. In this sense, the responsibility for accessing resources is seen as exclusively personal or familial, rather than institutional.

In light of these sacrifices, families demonstrate a high capacity for adaptation, flexibility, and commitment, which add to the motivational factors and emotions of the families in the face of the symbolic value of having a child studying at university for the first time. These emotions are directly related to the FGS's decision to enter HE. They are linked to the high expectations that the family creates about the abilities and strengths of the students, which begin in primary or secondary education and are maintained until they achieve their university studies. In this sense, the family's projection of success in entering university hinges on overcoming the reported hindrances that obstructed access to HE, thereby potentially facilitating social and economic mobility. To this end, families may even suggest programs and/or universities in order to ensure a successful future for their children, where communication between family and students becomes an important predictor of academic success (Csók and Pusztai, 2023).

In understanding, and based on the families' expectations, if the student manages to enter university, it generates great pride for the families and means that their children's strengths and abilities have surpassed those of their parents and that, with their support, they will be able to obtain a university degree. In this sense, families find ways to develop diverse resources, both economic and emotional, to support their children through their academic trajectories, which are adjusted as events unfold for in their university experiences.

It is important to underscore the relevance of the family expectations, rooted in the symbolism that the family attributes to the university. This symbolism encompasses the likelihood of economic success through the attainment, which Yosso (2005) defines as aspirational capital. This emphasis aligns with the overarching goal of social mobility that Gofen (2009) places within the expression of the transformation of social capital. These findings raise the need to study the symbol that the university projects in FGS families as a socioeconomic lifeline versus the reality of FGS students who have already graduated.

It is interesting to note that the experiences of the parents in this study were similar regardless of the type of university in which their children are studying, which suggests that the experience of being an FGS transcends different family backgrounds.

This study challenges the traditional notion that parents do not have any influence on FGS's expectations and academic achievement. These parents usually have a cultural capital that is different from expected in academic contexts. However, this study shows that this capital is highly valuable. The number of FGS likely will continue to increase. In that framework, these findings could be used in a practical way for postsecondary institutions and policymakers. They can use this study to develop future policies and practices that include FGS parents' perspective to reduce inequality and promote retention. Faculty and non-faculty members may help develop success strategies that include parents' perspectives to address their needs and challenges.

## 5.1 Limitations and suggestions for future work

Although the rationality of the results of qualitative research is not used to generalize the data, this study has some limitations. First, the participants of FGC parents came from two Chilean regions. More research is needed on the characteristics of support and expectations with parents from other cities and countries around the world. Some of our results may be influenced by cultural differences. Second, it was very difficult to access FGS's parents. Parents from K-12 contexts attend school events or conferences with their children's teachers and provide researchers with a captive population, which is not the case of FGS's parents. As O'Shea et al. (2024, p. 176) highlighted "it became difficult to encourage family members to come to campus or commit to an interview; this is perhaps not surprising when the majority of students interviewed indicated that their family members had rarely, or never, been on-campus." Within this framework, there is a methodological challenge to both, qualitative and quantitative studies, that should be addressed in the future. Finally, we recommended further work that examines differences by parents' gender, ethnic background, age, and number of children to explore how these factors influence their support and expectations for FGS.

Regarding the practical applications of the results of our study, it is crucial to implement educational policies that include family-oriented programs and the expansion of government resources to support the efforts of families to meet the needs of first-generation students. Similarly, educational institutions could establish family support centers or organize family-oriented events, integrating them into university life, providing information about the university and its challenges, and offering various strategies to support their children's educational path. Finally, it is essential to offer psychological support to both families and FGS, mainly aimed at dealing with the stress and anxiety associated with their children's university experience.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Comité de Ética Científica FACSO, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

AF-B: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources,

Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GS-S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1416191/full#supplementary-material>

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