Opportunities, Obstacles, and Options: First-Generation College Graduates and Social Cognitive Career Theory

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What is This?
Opportunities, Obstacles,
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Joann S. Olson¹

Abstract
First-generation college (FGC) students often encounter a campus environment and set of norms that are substantially different from those they previously experienced. Although the literature exploring the challenges facing these students is growing, less attention has been given to their experiences as they graduate and transition from college to work. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has been suggested as a useful framework for helping individuals during the early stages of their careers by exploring the individual’s self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. In addition, SCCT considers the influence of contextual supports and barriers, which may be influencing the ongoing career development of FGC students after they graduate. This article explores the ways SCCT may prove particularly helpful when working with FGC graduates. Several case studies highlighting key challenges facing FGC graduates are also presented.

Keywords
first-generation college student, college to work transition, social cognitive career theory, college graduate

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The challenges facing those who are the first in their families to attend college are significant. These young men and women navigate the unfamiliar—and often obscure—road to and through higher education somewhat alone. While parents may be determined to see the student succeed (Delong, 2003; Mahan, 2010), they often have neither the knowledge nor the experience to help the student adequately (Miller, 2008). **First-generation college (FGC) students**, defined here as students whose parents have not completed bachelor’s degrees, have been found to be less likely to attend college within 8 years after high school (Chen & Carroll, 2005) or attain a degree (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012), more likely to have lower undergraduate grade point averages (Chen & Carroll, 2005), and less likely to complete their degrees than non-FGC students (Ishitani, 2006). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) even suggested that in their research “differences [between FGC students and peers with more highly educated parents] were of sufficient clarity that one might hypothesize the possibility of different models of success in college for first-generation students” (p. 278).

Evaluating that claim is beyond the scope of this article, but it does suggest that FGC students experience college in a way that is different from students whose parents have more education. The literature related to FGC students is broad and growing, but there seems to be a focus on how students navigate higher education. Some attention is now being given to the late-college (Overton-Healy, 2010) and post-college (Huber, 2010; Mahan, 2010; Olson, 2010) experiences of FGC students. However, even though Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) described social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as “[dealing] primarily with developmental tasks that occur prior to, during, and just after career entry” (p. 117), the literature applying SCCT to the career development of FGC students seems to focus on issues related to early adolescence and college entry (e.g., Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007), rather than college graduation and early career experiences. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to highlight the career development needs of FGC students as they transition from college to work and suggest that SCCT may prove to be a helpful framework for working with FGC graduates.

**First-Generation College Graduates**

In addition to understanding the many cognitive and developmental outcomes related to the college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), studies of recent graduates have often sought to understand the experiences of individuals in particular occupations (e.g., Etheridge, 2007). Other studies have investigated the types of jobs these graduates found (Borden & Rajecki, 2000) and the stages that new graduates may experience in transition from college to work (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Arnett (2000) explored the ongoing psychological development of recent graduates under the umbrella of “emerging adulthood,” debating the extent to which the post-college years constitute a distinct developmental stage.
However, little has been written about FGC students, specifically, after they leave formal higher education, regardless of whether or not they complete a degree. Given the relatively low graduation rates of FGC students (24% attaining a baccalaureate degree, compared to 68% of non-FGC students according to Chen & Carroll, 2005, p. iii), this is perhaps not surprising—the priority has been placed on understanding the factors that impact retention and persistence of these students (Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011; Lippincott & German, 2007; Majer, 2009; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010; Walpole, 2008). In addition, as Goodwin (2006) pointed out, keeping track of graduates is challenging, because “as they move on with their lives, they move away from their college experiences” (p. 6, emphasis in the original).

It seems naïve, however, to assume that the career-related challenges facing the FGC student do not also impact that student as he or she graduates. In one of the few discussions related to postgraduation FGC students, Pascarella et al. (2004) found little difference in the early career earnings between FGC students and their non-FGC peers, when controlling for degree attainment. However, the undergraduate experience exposes the FGC student to opportunities and choices that may be unfamiliar to his or her family or support network. According to Chen and Carroll (2005), FGC students may struggle to choose a major—perhaps because their parents are unable to offer knowledgeable guidance about the process and the ramifications of this decision. In the same way, the FGC graduate transitioning into a new job most likely faces options (e.g., training programs, benefits, etc.) unfamiliar to his or her parents—much like the expansive and unfamiliar choices he or she faced when selecting a major.

In Huber’s (2010) study, recent FGC graduates working primarily in engineering and technology-related careers highlighted the challenges of transitioning from college in terms of learning life skills such as understanding 401k retirement plans, managing cash reserves, or even selecting an appropriate wardrobe. These young men and women also described a growing awareness of what Huber refers to as “social class contrast” (p. 121), as they encountered work and life experiences beyond the opportunities of those they had “left behind” (p. 112). At the same time, these new FGC graduates were hesitant to share their challenges with friends and family; rather, they highlighted the value of professional mentors as an emerging support system for navigating the norms of their new work environment.

For many, a college education brings with it the possibility of social mobility. Brooks-Terry (1988) suggested this leads to a “double assignment” for FGC students. For all college students, the first assignment of college is mastering course material to the extent required by the institution. For FGC students, the additional second assignment is uncovering and understanding a middle-class, college-educated lifestyle. Orbe (2008) referred to this challenge as “multidimensional identity negotiation” in which the FGC student “negotiates the alien culture of the academy against that of home” (p. 81) and tries to come to terms with how he or she may have been changed by the college experience, even while recognizing the
uniqueness of that experience among family and friends. Orbe and Lubrano (2004) both indicated that these changes are noticed by others, even while the student may be unaware of how his or her identity is being shaped by the exposure to people, experiences, and ideas of higher education. In other words, the student is being changed by his or her experience in college, and—regardless of his or her own awareness of this change—others are aware of the transformation. For families with college experience, these changes may be familiar or even expected. For the FGC student, these changes can lead to accusations by family and friends that the student has left his or her roots. This challenge continues after graduation, as the FGC graduate pursues employment and the opportunities afforded by his or her education but quite possibly unfamiliar to family and friends (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Leyva, 2011; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006).

To further complicate the issue, London (1989) suggested that families may assign one or more roles to the FGC student as the student engages in higher education. The parents may seek to “bind” the student, to keep the child close to home and forever dependent on the parent; the parents may send the student out as a “delegate” of the family, instructing the child to “[become] successful in the ways we approve” (p. 158) or to select a particular course of study based on what the parents believe is best for the status of the family; or the parents may “expel” the student by communicating that the child is a hindrance or nuisance.

This may be a negatively skewed perspective on the interaction between an FGC student and his or her family. Mahan (2010) interviewed FGC students who had participated in a Student Support Services program and who had successfully completed a bachelor’s degree. She found that parents—in particular, mothers—emerged as important and positive factors in the participants’ persistence in college. These successful FGC students described parents who “repeatedly demonstrated [their] support” (p. 166), who clearly communicated that “there was no other alternative” (p. 167) than attending college, and who were sources of “critical encouragement” (p. 173). Several of Mahan’s participants also highlighted the influence and assistance of siblings or extended family members.

Pursuing a college education and the change in social class or socioeconomic status that may result from that education can complicate already complex family dynamics. The FGC graduate may continue to deal with “often conflicting requirements of family membership and educational mobility” (London, 1989, p. 144) long after he or she leaves college. Delong (2003) interviewed parents of FGC students finding these parents to be “very committed” (p. 116) to their child’s pursuit of college, yet at the same time they were struggling to understand “what is enough assistance and what is too much” (p. 117). Could it be that a parent’s noninvolvement, often labeled “unsupportive” by researchers or administrators, is actually intended (by the parents) to support the student’s independence? As Delong concluded, “Treating parents of first-generation college students as deficient... positions them as obstacles for their students to overcome” (p. 141). Without a doubt, some of the parents of FGC students may be resistant to the FGC student’s education (e.g.,
Olson, 2010), but the FGC student may also draw great strength from the involvement and support of his or her family (Delong, 2003; Mahan, 2010).

FGC graduates who pursue graduate-level credentials may find that their life experience and educational aspirations remove them even further from family and cultural norms (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Leyva, 2011). In addition, successfully navigating the undergraduate environment does not necessarily translate into success in graduate school (Lunceford, 2011), and some FGC graduate students have described tensions between existing ethnic or cultural identities and emerging professional identities that may not be relevant for their non-FGC counterparts (Leyva, 2011; Nelson et al., 2006). It appears that FGC status continues to be “an invisible, often unrecognized external component of a student’s life” (Nelson et al., 2006, p. 119), even beyond the confines of the undergraduate experience.

Once in a job, the FGC graduate often continues to navigate new territory. One FGC graduate who had grown up in a working-class family found that her post-college work experiences (as a student services professional) forced her to change her thinking about jobs, careers, relationships with supervisors, and the nature of work. Her work environment was very different from that of her parents, and she said that at times she felt like she was “becoming a tool of the enemy” (C. D. Rill, personal communication, November 17, 2008). The differences in setting and expectations between the white-collar work and the often more physical work done by his or her parents can lead the FGC graduate to question whether his or her employment is “real work” (Olson, 2010, p. 170; also Holley & Gardner, 2012; Overton-Healy, 2010). Huber (2010) found that FGC graduates described feelings of jealousy at the financial support that other (non-FGC) graduates continued to receive from their parents—even after college. She also indicated that FGC graduates avoided telling family members about concerns that felt “small in comparison” (p. 110) to the challenges being faced by the family. Once again, the FGC graduate’s “changing subculture of reference” (Brooks-Terry, 1988, p. 131) further differentiates the career experience of the FGC graduate from the work–life of his or her parents.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory and the First-Generation College Graduate**

Lent et al. (1994) present SCCT as a framework that is particularly appropriate for those who are in the early stages of exploring and preparing for careers. The theory describes career decision making as a function of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. In addition, based on Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, SCCT acknowledges the ways that personal characteristics, environmental factors, and behaviors influence each other and also allows for the consideration and influence of contextual (interpersonal) factors in an individual’s career development (Cunningham, Bruening, Sartore, Sagas, & Fink, 2005).

SCCT has been described as “particularly useful” (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009, p. 92) for addressing career concerns related to persistence when facing
obstacles. As such, SCCT has been used as a theoretical framework for empirical research related to FGC students, specifically the career decision-making self-efficacy of Upward Bound students (O’Brien et al., 2000); the college-going expectations of prospective FGC middle school students (Gibbons & Borders, 2010); the academic performance and college adjustment of FGC freshmen (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007); and academic success of FGC sophomore students (Vuong et al., 2010).

Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) suggested that SCCT would be helpful when exploring career development and college options with prospective FGC students, proposing that prospective FGC students may eliminate viable career and education options based on inaccurate assessments of their ability to succeed in college. Given the high college attrition rate of FGC students (Chen & Carroll, 2005), it is possible that a prospective FGC student may be aware of others who have gone to college and not succeeded. Bandura (1986) proposed that self-efficacy can be based on vicarious learning. Therefore, a prospective FGC student may have “learned” that he or she cannot succeed in postsecondary education after watching peers fail in college. Gibbons and Shoffner indicated that “these foreclosed occupational options may be reintroduced and reexamined so that self-efficacy or outcome expectations may be judged for accuracy” (Perceived Barriers to Success section, ¶ 4). Prospective FGC students may not be basing their career choices and college aspirations on accurate information, and their parents may not have the firsthand experience or knowledge to correct these inaccuracies. Gibbons and Shoffner suggested that SCCT highlights the key factors that influence the career decisions of prospective FGC students. This idea was explored empirically by Gibbons and Borders (2010) who surveyed seventh-grade students, viewing them as prospective college students, and found that FGC students scored lower in terms of self-efficacy, scored higher in terms of outcome expectations, and identified more perceived barriers.

Furthermore, Lent, Hackett, and Brown (1999) highlighted three developmental tasks that are particularly salient during the school-to-work transition: translating goals into action; developing both specific task-related and broader work-readiness skills; and navigating goal-related contextual supports and barriers. They further suggest that SCCT offers theoretical support for designing (or redesigning) workforce readiness programs—alerting those who are supervising apprentices to the importance of career-related self-efficacy, for example. SCCT also encourages “fostering students’ work-based learning experiences” (p. 308) in ways that help young workers recognize the impact of distal and proximal contextual barriers, while promoting strategies for understanding and building upon contextual supports. These school-to-work issues—developing appropriate career and work-related goals, adjusting to the norms and expectations of a workplace, and making the most of work-based learning—are often mirrored in the experiences of many who are transitioning from college to work (Olson 2010, 2012), which suggests that SCCT is also an appropriate theory for addressing the career development needs of FGC graduates throughout the college-to-work transition.
Self-Efficacy and the First-Generation College Graduate

Lent et al. (1994) described self-efficacy as a “dynamic set of self-beliefs” (p. 83) that leads an individual to make a judgment as to whether he or she will be able to successfully complete a specific task. Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that FGC students tend to have lower grade point averages, take fewer courses, and complete fewer credits than their non-FGC peers. Majer (2009) described self-efficacy as related to education as “an important cognitive resource among ethnically diverse [first-generation students] at community colleges” (p. 243), and Gibbons and Borders (2010) found that prospective FGC students demonstrated lower self-efficacy than non-FGC peers. In other words, although these students often overcome significant barriers as they enroll in and persist through college, they may not see themselves as successful students or as successful as they should have been.

This may impact the student’s sense of self-efficacy toward career entry and success. This trend was noted by Goodwin (2006) who spoke with FGC students who had been admitted to an Ivy League school under an academic opportunity program (designed to provide access to an elite education for those who were not otherwise academically qualified) as those students neared graduation. Many of these students expressed frustration at their inability to perform academically, even as they completed college with grade point averages above 3.0 on a 4.0 scale.

In addition, given that self-efficacy is defined as “specific to particular performance domains” (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, p. 83), the individual who expresses a high level of self-efficacy in one area (e.g., academic achievement) may not feel confident that this success will transfer to another domain (e.g., success on the job). Brown and Lent (1996) suggested that a counselor may be able to identify inaccurate or diminished self-efficacy beliefs by exploring not only the career options that are interesting to the individual but also by paying attention to areas where the individual expresses less interest. In the case of an FGC graduate, it may be important to understand the graduate’s feelings about the jobs he or she is not applying for, as these decisions may be based on faulty information or an inaccurate interpretation of past events.

For example, Darnell, an FGC student from an academically weak high school, struggled in a computer programming class during college. While he eventually earned an engineering degree and graduated with honors, the grade in that one particular computer class was the lowest on his transcript. When looking for work after graduation, he avoided all jobs in the technology sector, because he was “no good at computers.” He had unnecessarily eliminated a vast and growing sector of the economy based on his negative experience within a very narrow discipline (a specific and obscure programming language) and an inaccurate belief that all jobs in the technology sector would require skills in programming. Furthermore, given Darnell’s FGC status, there may be no one in his family or relational support network with insider or accurate knowledge of the field to help correct his perceptions. Using an SCCT framework alerts the counselor to how that one difficult computer class may be
coloring Darnell’s sense of career self-efficacy and causing him to foreclose on technology jobs.

**Outcome Expectations**

Described as “the imagined consequences of performing particular behaviors” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83), outcome expectations also shape an individual’s career choices. Whereas self-efficacy causes an individual to evaluate whether or not he or she will be successful in a given endeavor, outcome expectations are the individual’s projections as to what might happen if he or she pursues a particular opportunity. The FGC student may have chosen to pursue college, in general, and a specific major, in particular, with the expectation that this course of action would lead automatically to a high-paying or prestigious job (Dillon, 2010; Longwell-Grice, 2003)—outcomes that may be out of the FGC graduate’s control, but that will likely impact his or her career-related decisions. In addition, given that the work environment he or she will encounter may be vastly different from the job settings of his or her parents, the FGC graduate may be basing his or her career decisions on faulty expectations regarding work environment, ongoing training, or relationships with supervisors.

Leila, an FGC student and single mother, had returned to college as an adult learner after working for 20 years as a hairdresser. Based on television advertising and an expectation that “everyone in healthcare makes good money,” she enrolled in a 2-year medical technology training program at a local for-profit college, anticipating that this course of action would enable her to provide for her family. As she completed her program, however, it became clear that because of the popularity of this program in her city, Leila, location-bound due to her family situation, would be competing with many others who had similar credentials for any open positions. Furthermore, because this particular market was saturated, the income prospects were significantly lower than she had assumed they would be—insufficient to meet the needs of her family. SCCT gives the career counselor a framework for identifying the outcomes that Leila expected from her pursuit of higher education and for helping her chart the next step.

**Personal Goals**

Goals allow individuals to organize and guide behavior across time (Lent et al., 1994) and play an important role in the development of career plans and direction. Brooks-Terry (1988) suggested that an FGC student, and by extension the FGC graduate, who does not identify clear goals will be “vulnerable to the pulls of his [or her] other role sets” (p. 132). For the FGC graduate, these goals may include more individualistic aspirations such as repaying student loans or pursuing a well-defined career path. These personal goals may also find expression in the context of the FGC graduate’s family or relational network—being able to provide financial support for
parents or returning to his or her home community to be a role model for younger students, for example. The FGC graduate may also find that his or her goals compete (e.g., choosing to live at home to save money, while at the same time feeling the need to live in a major metropolitan area to pursue a particular line of work, or valuing time with friends while also needing to work long hours to be positioned for career advancement) or that these goals conflict with the aspirations and plans his or her family may have for the FGC graduate (Overton-Healy, 2010).

Consider the case of Tong, a Hmong FGC graduate, the eldest of four boys and the first in his family to attend college. Although many in the Hmong community have traditionally married at a relatively young age, Tong’s parents highly value education and have devised a plan to provide for their sons’ education—even in light of their own limited financial means. Tong’s parents paid for his education with the expectation that when Tong graduated, he would support his next younger brother through college. That brother would, in turn, pay the way for the third brother to go to college, and so on, with the fourth brother repaying the parents. Tong expressed gratitude for his parents’ sacrifice and a sincere desire to assist his younger brother, but he also indicated that this goal could potentially limit his desire to pursue nonprofit work, since his salary might be insufficient to fulfill his goal of both pursuing financial independence and supporting his brother’s education. SCCT acknowledges the power of these goals to influence career-related decisions and provides a framework for the career counselor to explore the influence and outcomes of conflicting goals and cultural expectations.

**Contextual Supports and Barriers**

SCCT acknowledges the influence of background and context on an individual’s career development. Within this framework, these potential supports and barriers can be identified as either “distal, background influences that precede and help shape interests and self cognitions” or “proximal influences that come into play at critical choice junctures” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 107). The impact of interpersonal variables and the influence of an individual’s context upon his or her career choice has been described as a “second level of analysis” (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000, p. 36) within SCCT.

Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000) proposed that distal background factors play a part in how self-efficacy and outcome expectations develop related to one’s career. In support of this, Gushue and Whitson (2006) explored the extent to which parental and teacher support related to career self-efficacy and outcome expectations among African American high school students, finding that both parental support and teacher support were positively related to this self-efficacy. In addition, teacher support was positively related to outcome expectations. For the FGC graduate, these distal factors may include precollege educational background, the choice to attend a particular college or university, or even the extent to which family validated or opposed the idea of pursuing a college degree. The SCCT theoretical framework predicts that an FGC
student with strong family support for his or her pursuit of a nontraditional degree choice is likely to develop a strong sense of career self-efficacy regarding that degree. Although the relationship between distal variables and career self-efficacy was not supported empirically in a sample of adolescent Mexican American women (Flores & O’Brien, 2002), the relationship has not been explored with FGC graduates. These distal influences may continue to shape the career-related learning for the FGC graduate by fostering a sense of self-efficacy related to post-college work and learning experiences, such as internships or early career employment.

SCCT also suggests that contextual supports and barriers include proximal factors such as parental support, the presence or expectation of racial/ethnic discrimination, or an individual’s professional and career network. These proximal factors are “particularly important during active phases” (Lent et al., 2000, p. 38) of career decisions, shaping how career interests are transformed into goals and how those goals may be translated into action. For example, an individual with a well-developed network of personal and business contacts may learn about career-related opportunities that are not yet known to the general public. That same network may provide a way to translate a career interest (e.g., work in banking) into a concrete goal (e.g., work as a loan officer at First National Bank) with a clear plan of action (e.g., ask a business contact who is an executive at First National for an introduction to the bank’s hiring manager).

As with distal factors, proximal influences may facilitate career-related goals and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2002). They may also serve as barriers. Lent et al. (1994, 2000) suggested that an individual’s informal career network may be a proximal contextual support. However, Lubrano (2004) indicated that many from blue-collar backgrounds view networking as a “dirty word” (p. 144), finding it to be a practice of selfishly manipulating relationships for one’s own gain. The SCCT-informed counselor should be aware that the FGC graduate, therefore, may face a double bind created by his or her contextual influences: Engage in the culturally uncomfortable practice of networking in the hopes of career advancement or remain true to the relational norms of his or her background at the risk of missing opportunities that might help the FGC graduate move along the interest–goals–action path.

Without question, cultural supports and barriers influence career-related decisions and actions. However, maintaining a clear distinction between distal and proximal influences may not reflect the lived experience of FGC graduates. Lent et al. (1994) suggested certain aspects of context are “ever-present” (p. 107)—social inputs such as family, for example—influencing career-related behavior over time. In other words, as Gushue and Whitson (2006) suggested, a particular factor may exert either distal or proximal influence, depending on the situation.

By definition and by virtue of completing college, the FGC graduate is charting new territory within his or her family. For some FGC graduates, being the first to finish college is a point of pride and accomplishment that at the same time produces internal (and external) pressures to succeed (Orbe, 2008; Overton-Healy, 2010). This may also create tension for parents, as they struggle to determine “what is enough
assistance and what is too much” (Delong, 2003, p. 117) as the FGC student experiences and completes college. Within the framework of SCCT, consider an FGC graduate from a collectivist culture of origin who is considering a job out of state. If those in her relational network highly value shared decision making or prioritize group goals over individual aspirations, she may find herself experiencing conflict between the desires or norms of her extended relational network and her own career goals, while at the same time struggling to explain that conflict in a way that “makes sense” to those around her. In this case, the culture of origin, which may have acted as a distal contextual affordance by supporting her educational goals and fostering her career-related self-efficacy, may now be experienced as a proximal cultural barrier, exerting a direct effect on the FGC graduate’s goals and actions.

In addition to their academic pursuits, FGC students may be learning the social norms and lifestyle “rules” of the middle class (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Tokarczyk, 2004). The FGC graduate leaves the college environment and campus culture behind; moves into a new work setting, which requires learning another set of norms and expectations; and continues to rework a relationship with culture and social class—both his or her social class of origin and his or her adopted (or aspired to) class standing. Leong, Hardin, and Gupta (2011) suggested that multiple selves, which may be formed by environment or culture, can compete in ways that strongly influence career identity or conflict. Therefore, in addition to managing the new and additional responsibilities of adult life (job search or employment, income and expenses, etc.), the psychological “work” of social mobility may leave the FGC graduate struggling to establish himself or herself and understand the meaning of his or her chosen career.

The result is often a tension between old and new that the FGC graduate may not be able to identify or adequately label (Huber, 2010). While this phenomenon has been described and explored as class jumping (Nelson et al., 2006) or framed in terms of differential status identity (Fouad & Brown, 2000) or the social class worldview model (Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004), the FGC graduate may only know that he or she is now “interested in stuff other than being a redneck” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 114). An SCCT framework creates space for the FGC graduate to explore career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals as a way to navigate the challenges created and opportunities provided by his or her educational attainment and early career development. SCCT provides a lens for understanding how context can shape career, acting as support or barrier, and exerting direct or indirect influence on goals and interests. It can provide a vocabulary and framework for helping the FGC graduate, finding value in multiple approaches, and developing strategies for melding them.

**The Case of Mary**

Mary is a 23-year-old, White, FGC graduate with a bachelor’s degree in political science. She graduated with a 3.0 grade point average, but was not very involved
in extracurricular activities as a student. Her elder brother did not attend college and now runs the family farm; her younger sister is a junior in high school and just beginning to make college plans. Mary’s parents are still married and living on the family farm. Both parents graduated from high school, and although neither of them pursued any postsecondary education, Mary’s mother has hinted at plans to go to college after Mary’s younger sister finishes high school. Mary graduated 6 months ago and has been unable to find work. She has been living in the apartment she rented while she was a student, but the lease is about to expire, and she needs to find both a job and a place to live within the next month. Mary is frustrated with her unsuccessful job search and meets with a counselor at her college’s career center.

During the first session with the counselor, Mary expressed annoyance that “there just aren’t any good jobs out there” and “I can’t do anything with my degree.” Using SCCT, the counselor began to explore Mary’s sense of self-efficacy, specifically as related to job search skills. Mary told the counselor that she had been checking the college’s placement board, Monster.com, and “a few newspapers” each week and sending resumes and targeted cover letters to jobs that “might work.” Brown and Lent (1996) suggest that understanding “foreclosed occupational options” (p. 357) can give the counselor insight into areas where the client may be making decisions based on faulty self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, the counselor asked Mary to look again at last week’s newspaper and identify one or two jobs that she “would never apply for” and one or two others that “looked kind of interesting” that she had not pursued.

When Mary returned, the counselor asked her to describe the “kind of interesting” jobs she had noticed. These jobs seemed to be entry-level positions for which Mary was qualified, but Mary indicated she did not have the experience required by these jobs—even though she had performed very similar tasks in a volunteer position the previous summer. As they talked, the counselor highlighted how Mary’s volunteer work had provided skills and experience related to the job in question. In this way, the counselor helped Mary increase her self-efficacy to pursue a broader array of employment opportunities than she might have based on her “paid work” alone.

The counselor also noticed that two of the jobs Mary had marked as “would never apply for” seemed to be closely related to Mary’s expressed interest in political science and government work. As Mary talked about the rejected jobs, she said “I wouldn’t fit in there” and “I would just mess up in a stressful setting like that.” SCCT alerts the counselor to the influence of an individual’s outcome expectations related to specific career-related actions (Lent et al., 1994), so the counselor probed these responses. As they talked, Mary began describing a difficult internship in a local politician’s office that ended badly after 2 weeks. Based on this experience, Mary developed an (unconscious) expectation that any public sector job would “turn out badly.” The counselor helped clarify the ways Mary could have responded more effectively, but also helped her recognize the many ways that the situation was not representative of all government or civil service jobs. They also discussed the
aspects of this particular situation that seemed to be related to the actions of one individual in the office and due to forces beyond Mary’s control. In addition to helping Mary rationally evaluate the previous situation, the counselor helped her identify the ways she may have translated her past negative experience into an expectation of future failure that served to limit her career and job choices.

The counselor also noticed that the newspaper Mary used for this exercise was from a small city very near Mary’s hometown. Mary had described a long-term goal of working for a state or federal government agency, and no such agencies were located in this city. The counselor, further informed by SCCT to investigate the influence of personal goals on shaping career decisions, mentioned the apparent disconnect between the geography of Mary’s job search and her goal of government service. Mary indicated that her brother’s family was growing, and she wanted to live close to her nieces. She also talked about several college friends who would be living in that city and thought “it might be fun” to live together. Even as she described these various desires to the counselor, Mary recognized that it may not be possible to pursue these goals simultaneously. Brown and Lent (1996) indicated that “it is important to empower clients to choose from the broadest possible array of realistic occupational alternatives” (p. 361) and to help them make career-related decisions based on the most complete and accurate data possible. The counselor encouraged Mary to spend some time thinking about her career goals and the ways these goals may confound each other; the counselor also challenged Mary to explore alternate paths that might eventually lead to the types of jobs she is interested in, such as working within city or county government or finding a job with local law enforcement.

SCCT also provides a framework for conversations regarding how Mary’s situation is being influenced by her current and emerging culture and context, both as a distinct topic of discussion and as a backdrop that may lend depth and insight to discussions about self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals of FGC graduates. Mary’s frustration with finding “no good jobs out there” may be grounded in a vague sense of the salary or types of jobs that “I should be able to get with a college degree.” This ambivalence could also be rooted in a working-class perception, formed from her culture of origin, that may equate “real work” with physical exertion (Olson, 2010). Furthermore, Lubrano (2004) suggested that understanding the norms of a white-collar workplace for the first time may require developing a new set of competencies. The norms of political maneuvering and the prevalence (and necessity) of self-promotion (p. 139) are new to many young adults, regardless of FGC status; for the FGC graduate, these realities may not have been part of the everyday experience of her otherwise supportive family and relational network. The counselor may want to explore Mary’s comments about “not fitting in” or her assumption that things would “turn out badly” through the framework of class jumping (Nelson et al., 2006) and help Mary navigate her potential transition from working class to middle class by equipping her with skills that will help her observe and acculturate to the new settings where she may find herself.
Implications and Limitations

Career counselors interacting with FGC graduates may find that the challenges presented by these men and women extend far beyond the “typical” early career concerns. Education is simultaneously a means of socialization and a means to social mobility (Brooks-Terry, 1988), and the FGC graduate may be seeking to understand his or her “place” in relation to both the social class of origin and the social class to which he or she may potentially gain entrance by virtue of that education. In addition, FGC graduates who have not fully engaged in the campus (middle class) environment may have “not become comfortable enough with the norms of the work world they aspire to enter” (p. 124) and may find themselves struggling in ways they do not understand, against forces they may not be able to identify, with ideas or tensions they cannot explain. SCCT may provide a concrete way to talk about these types of intangible and ill-defined challenges. With its emphasis on the influence of contextual supports and barriers, SCCT also provides a framework and a language for exploring the influence of the FGC graduate’s family and social background on the individual’s career-related actions.

Although SCCT provides a relatively comprehensive framework for working with FCG graduates, it does not address several aspects of the transition from college to work for this population. As the FCG graduate begins working, he or she may find that coworkers assign meaning to their work in a way that is different from role models or parents. In these cases, aspects of Super’s theory may be helpful—perhaps including a tool such as the Salience Inventory (Super & Nevill, 1986)—to help the FGC graduate understand and identify various life roles and the how the importance ascribed to those roles may influence career development. In addition, given that FGC students tend to focus on academics at the expense of extracurricular activities and out-of-class interactions with peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), FGC graduates may tend to discount the value of outside-of-work interactions and intentional networking (Lubrano, 2004). Therefore, introducing the idea of “planned happenstance” (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) and encouraging the FGC graduate to be alert to how unplanned events have already shaped his or her life may introduce an important aspect of constructing a career (i.e., using unexpected events to one’s career advantage) not explicitly addressed within SCCT.

It also bears mentioning that neither FCG students nor FCG graduates are monolithic; they come to college from a variety of social class, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds; academic experiences; and family dynamics, all of which may have varying degrees of salience from individual to individual. Furthermore, the FGC student may not be from a working-class background, or he or she may not identify as such; the career counselor must guard against such assumptions when working with FGC students or FGC graduates. Furthermore, this discussion does not include the growing number of nontraditional and adult learners who are also FGC students and graduates (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Olson, 2012). Although many issues (e.g., negotiating class and social mobility) may be similar to those
experienced by traditional-aged FGC students, the career development process of these graduates will also reflect the influence of varying life histories and family situations, as well as their experiences as FGC students.

Conclusion
As the FGC graduate explores the opportunities made available by education, the counselor can help the FGC graduate identify the ways that self-efficacy (or the lack of self-efficacy) may be hindering or limiting career development. When the FGC graduate perceives obstacles in his or her career path, SCCT encourages the career counselor to help the client describe “how it will all turn out” and investigate how those thoughts may be limiting his or her occupational choices. If the FGC graduate is struggling to evaluate the options he or she sees, the counselor informed by SCCT will encourage the client to articulate the goals that may be motivating his or her choices or competing for attention. Through it all, SCCT highlights the ever-present influence of background and context. SCCT provides an effective framework for the career counselor who works with FGC graduates as they embrace opportunities, face obstacles, and explore options.

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