Facilitating the university transition and Australian First-in-Family students' sense of community: Environmental understanding and the mediating role of place familiarity

Laurie A Chapin [1,2], Xin Yang[1], and Humberto Oraison[1,2,3]

[1]College of Sport, Health & Engineering, Victoria University, Melbourne Australia
[2]Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne Australia
[3]First Year College, Victoria University, Melbourne Australia

Kick Start is a program to facilitate the transition to university for students who are the first in their family to attend university. Previous research has identified the achievement gap between first-in-family (FiF) and non-FiF students and the unique challenges FiF students encounter. This research focuses on the social dimension of learning using the community psychology framework of sense of community (SoC) and the individual-place relationship, and explores how familiarising FiF students with the university settings can improve their social integration into the university community. Social constructionism was used to frame the research. Seven Kick Start participants were interviewed, and thematic analysis was utilised to explore how the program facilitated the process of building environmental understanding upon their transition to university. Six themes were identified that were relevant to SoC, namely, confidence, competence, feeling settled, connectedness, relaxed, and relatedness. The findings have suggested that place familiarity can strengthen the link between individuals and the community, where an increased SoC leads to motivation to utilise resources to achieve positive university outcomes. One implication of the current research is to support the efficacy of contextualised learning opportunities like Kick Start to provide FiF students with hands-on experience of university when assisting with their transition.

Key words: first-in-family students; first-generation students; sense of community; transition to university

First-in-family (FiF) students are broadly defined as university students whose parents did not attend university, also known as first-generation in the literature. FiF status intersects with other categories of equity tertiary students including Indigenous Australians, low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and non-English-speaking backgrounds, however there is also immense diversity as FiF is not synonymous with these statuses (Patfield et al., 2021). In Australia, the Department of Education's student equity data has not included family background, so there are no current national estimates of the number of first-in-family tertiary students (Patfield et al., 2022). Self-report estimates suggest that the Australian universities with the most domestic undergraduate first-in-family students range from 45-54%, while the universities with the least have 12-21% (Good Universities, 2024). The literature has suggested an achievement gap between FiF and non-FiF students in terms of their university outcomes (Southgate et al., 2014). FiF students demonstrated poorer academic performance and higher attrition rates (Kim et al., 2020; O'Shea, 2015; Tate et al., 2015; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016), as well as social disengagement, which often leads to anxiety and lacking a sense of belonging (Orbe, 2004).

However, positioning FiF as a category of non-traditional students has created challenges which result in the inability to reach a consensus regarding any approach to specifically address FiF students' needs. O'Shea et al. (2017) explain that the first few months of university is a transition period, when FiF students are figuring things out at the same time they are taking their

first classes, and they must rapidly acquire information and behaviours required for success. The current study focuses on FiF students' challenges in adjusting to the university environment and developing a sense of community in the new setting. Kick Start is a program for FiF students designed to support this period of transition to university. Interviews with participants explore the concept of environmental understanding and how the individuals make sense of a new place, which is a natural step and prominent exercise in the process of transitioning into university and assuming the identity of university student.

Sense of Community

Sense of community (SoC) is the overarching concept in community psychology and involves several relevant ideas for FiF and the university transition. First, individual differences are acknowledged in the context that a successful community should provide necessary resources for individuals to achieve their goals (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). Second, community psychology has taken the political stance to advocate for social justice (Jason, 2016). Therefore, in terms of the enfranchisement of the underrepresented groups in the current Australian tertiary education systems, institutions should take responsibility to implement structural change and create an inclusive culture (Perkins et al., 2002). Third, SoC is experienced at an individual level as the result of an adaptive environment, which is often linked to motivation to participate in the community, and pro-community behaviours such as help seeking (Perkins et al., 2002). Taken together, SoC provides a framework to explore strategies to examine the challenges of the transition to university for FiF and non-FiF students. It implies an ultimate person-environment fit which often leads to social and academic integration at the institutional level. At the individual level, SoC is often a precursor to empowerment, a term that suggests intrinsic motivation and personal growth in a community, and in the current study has implications for academic success.

Furthermore, McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined four dimensions of SoC, namely, membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections. *Membership* refers to the belief and feeling of being part of a group, sharing a common symbol system as other members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Previous research has reached the consensus that FiF students reported a weaker sense of belonging, feeling like they are an outsider or an imposter, which often results in alienation (O'Shea et al., 2015, 2017). First generation students report lower sense of belonging to their university community, which is negatively associated with persisting in studies, using campus services, and mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). *Influence* refers to being open to the influence of the community, and also to feeling consensual validation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Differences in the language of higher education, terminology, and communication modes at university is particularly challenging for FiF students (O'Shea et al., 2017), and can interfere with the development of influence and consensual validation. *Integration and fulfilment of needs* refers to the need for the individual-community relationship to be rewarding (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). While being the first in the family to go to university is often associated with pride and sense of achievement, adapting to university studies tends to be more difficult for FiF students compared to non-FiF (O'Shea et al., 2015). FiF and other equity groups frequently lack the information, experience, and mentoring in high school that contributes to a smooth transition to university (Patfield et al., 2021). Lastly, *shared emotional connections* can be broadly defined as the feeling of alignment and closeness to the community to which individuals feel they belong (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the university context, where students enter the new community as first year students, this connection must be built over time, and hinges on the first three elements, which the research indicates is more challenging for FiF students.

Place, Identity and Transition

In essence, SoC implies an ideal person-environment fit which often leads to pro-community behaviours, and individuals access community for personal betterment, while

community becomes a part of individual identity and the collective identity is enhanced when the community members collaboratively contribute to it (Cicognani et al., 2008; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Perkins et al., 2002). However, in conceptualising FiF students' experience using the person-environment lens, the mediating role of place has been largely underexplored. Place is an integral part of environment which forms the backdrop of the social and cultural development of individuals (Proshansky, 1983). Place refers to space, including layout, structure, settings, and people in the space; and place also encompasses a conceptual dimension, for example, the location of a place is underpinned by the mental representation of a series of spatial relationships (Proshansky, 1983). The individual-place relationship is best explained by the concept of place identity, which is a multi-faceted construct that consists of cognition, feelings, and attitudes towards places, which is parallel to the process of identity formation.

First year students, and FiF students in particular, are confronted by a foreign place upon their transition to university. Forming a new place identity is an intertwined process of making sense of the unfamiliar culture of the academic system and social norms (Orbe, 2004). Specifically, the lack of connection to university as a place can also negatively impact on an individual's social engagement. This is evident in a reported loss of identity which characterises the common experience of all first-year students (Scanlon et al., 2007).

Therefore, the current research explores support strategy through the lens of place identity, where the individual-place relationship influences one's social experience at university. Practically, the tangibility of a place enables the process of delineating specific aspects that play a significant role in an individual's experience (Sampson & Goodrich, 2009). Furthermore, rather than grappling with the changing group membership, such bottom-up approaches can pinpoint specific context and reveal the complexity of how different social and cultural influences intersect when shaping individual identities.

Kick Start: Environmental Understanding and Spatial Familiarity

Kick Start is a program developed to assist FiF students settling into the university environment. The unique orientation program is for students commencing their first year of university and consists of two workshops in the week before semester 1 classes begin. A previous study of Kick Start found that students who participated reported better academic engagement and better grades compared to a control group (Chapin et al., 2023). The support strategies aimed to increase FiF students' sense of belonging and familiarity with their new environment through enhancing their environmental understanding, which includes the individual process of making sense of their surroundings. Spending more time at a place can increase the opportunity to engage with this process and maximise the chance of spatial familiarity, which suggests a close tie to the place as familiar places are likely to be those best remembered. This establishes a foundation for academic work to commence when students start classes. Kick Start addresses FiF students' potential barriers of conceptualising university as a foreign place to their future engagement when their courses commence in a week. The program instructors aim to foster the participants' belonging through empathy and responsiveness.

Kick Start was designed to simulate the classes students would encounter. The university is located in Melbourne, Australia, and the vast majority of students live at home and commute to campus, sometimes travelling for as long as 2 hours each way. Workshops were held at three campuses, and each group was limited to 20 students. The workshops were taught by the first and third authors and conducted in a typical tutorial room where first-year classes run. Most sessions also had the support of a 3rd year student who was also first-in-family, who could answer questions and work with small groups of students. The workshop format was based on the format of classes the students would encounter. The university has a unique learning model, with students taking one 4-week class ("block") at a time and class sizes are typically about 30 students, and there is an emphasis on interactive learning, group activities, and technology (Victoria University, 2024).

Kick Start is designed to specifically mirror how their classes are taught to make them more comfortable in the university environment. Table 1 summarises the Kick Start curriculum. The content is relevant for successful transition, but it is also the way it is conducted (through presentations, discussions, and activities) that is very important.

Table 1

A summary of the 2020 Kick Start program.

Workshop 1	**Workshop 2**
Introduction Introduce themselves. Ice breaking activities for students first in small group and then to the whole group.	Time management Explain the benefits of time management and what is recommended for academic success, emphasising they are capable and can be successful.
Connecting to university system Help students get connected to campus wifi.	Assist students to schedule their week and discuss balancing study, travel, family, work, and time for fun.
Students to navigate their personal university login (web-based class management program) to locate key information, opportunities for individual assistance.	Top study hints from FIF Small group discussion about top study tips compiled from a study of FIF students.
Navigating campus Students locate their classrooms and find their way around, locating key support services and other places of their interest.	This activity simulates group discussions students will encounter in their classes.
Students received discount coffee vouchers that were only valid during the program.	Ready for Week 1 Complete check list for Ready for Week 1.
Teaching staff demystified Reviewing different staff roles, explaining who they are, what the job titles are, and how to contact them.	Answer any last-minute questions students may have.
Student mentors panel 3-4 FIF students who had been at the university for at least one year shared their experiences, open to questions from Kick Start students.	

Note. Each workshop lasted about 2 hours. The academic year began in late February and Kick Start was the week prior.

Aim and Research Questions

The current research explores the mediating role of place familiarity in the development of SoC. In the context of institutional support, intervention strategies which enhance individual's environmental understanding are evaluated in terms of the positive changes in individual-place relationship. The efficacy of the Kick Start program is explored under these frameworks. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How do changes in individual-relationship foster SoC in the university transition?
2. In evaluating Kick Start strategies to enhance environmental understating, how can universities maximise the opportunity for individual-environment fit?
3. What are the changes in individual identity?

Methodology

Social constructionism provided a foundation epistemology for the current study. Social constructionism is based on the idea that knowledge and interpretation are grounded in our experiences and social interactions (Crotty, 1998; Harper, 2012). Because this study was not focused on a particular phenomenon, but on how individuals understand their experience, social constructionism was the guiding epistemology. As first-year FiF students negotiate the transition to university through participating in Kick Start, begin their studies, and become familiar with the physical and virtual academic environments, they construct a new understanding of themselves and their new student identity, which might be a constructed differently than students who are not FiF. Interactions with other students, teaching staff, other university staff, and family and friends is also a key process in exploring the new environment and experiencing the university transition. Social constructionism allows for a focus on the social process of producing knowledge and relevant cultural contexts (Harper, 2012). This is ideal for understanding the role of Kick Start in facilitating the transition, but also accounts for cultural and personal contexts that also impact the experience. This provided the basis for a general qualitative methodology and for thematic analysis.

Participants

Kick Start participants were recruited through an email inviting first-year students who identified as FIF students on their enrolment. Eighty-five students signed up to participate in the program, and 50 attended one or both sessions. All were enrolled in a bachelor's degree and started university in semester 1, February 2020.

Table 2

Demographics of the participants and course participants enrolled in.

Participants	Age	Course enrolled	Other reported cultural/social status
Michael (M)	19	Construction	Regional Victoria; working class
Taylah (F)	18	Social Work	Second-generation Australian; working class
Kaylen (F)	18	Nursing	Working class
Shawn (M)	18	Business	Working class
James (M)	18	Business	Second-generation Australian; working class
Jennifer (F)	18	Business and Psychology	Working class
Coby (M)	37	Psychology	Migrant; working class

Note. Names are pseudonyms.

Procedure

The University Human Research Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this study. A participant information statement was provided to all the prospective participants and participants signed a participant consent form. Participants were informed they could stop participating at any time. Participants received a movie ticket voucher as thanks for their time.

All 50 program participants were invited to complete an interview and to contact the research team. Participants who indicated interest in completing an interview were contacted within the two weeks after the Kick Start program via email and phone calls. The interviews were completed by the second author, who was not involved in teaching the program, so that participants would feel freer to discuss their experiences with the program. Initially eight students agreed to participate, and a mutually convenient time and place were scheduled for the interviews to take place. Six interviews were conducted prior to the local COVID-19 lockdown that commenced in late March, 2020. One interview was completed remotely during lockdown and one interview was cancelled and failed to reschedule. The demographics for the seven interviewees are summarised in Table 2. Potentially the uncertainty at this time in 2020 impacted the number of volunteers for the research. At the time of the interviews, the participants had been studying for 3-5 weeks, meaning students had completed or almost completed their first 4-week block class, all completed on campus. The interviews lasted 40-50 minutes and then the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a process to identify, analyse and report themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method offers flexibility in interpreting data whereby researchers can make a number of choices to define what accounts for a theme guided by their epistemological stance

and specific research question. Guided by Braun and Clarke (2006)'s summary of the important choices inherent in conducting qualitative analysis, a number of decisions were made to define the scope of this study. We adopted a theoretical thematic analysis, whereby a detailed account of aspects that are related to sense of community and place identity were the focus in order to explore the research questions. Furthermore, the themes were identified within the explicit meaning of the data, which can shed light on the specific aspects of the individual-environment related to change.

The themes and on-going data analysis were discussed by the first two authors of the research team. The researchers acknowledge that their own cultural, personal and historical background inevitably impact the research process (Creswell, 2007). This included our own educational background and professional training. The data analysis involved careful examination of how the researchers' contexts affect the interpretation of the data and findings, and the authors discussed how to separate their experience from the participants throughout analysis. When adopting thematic analysis, community psychology has also acknowledged the ingrained limitation of this approach due to the intersubjectivity of the researcher and the researched at the operational level. The plurality of 'truth' means that when exploring an issue, individual researchers bring their unique lens as the result of their own beliefs, values and experiences, which can manifest in the choices they make in analysing data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, data analysis is a subjective process of selection, editing and deploying to support an argument. Although it is impossible to eliminate biases, reflexivity however provides the 'best practice' for researchers to reflect on their positionality on the matter in order to avoid potential biases (Darawsheh, 2014).

Researcher Positioning

Reflexivity also opens up the dialogue between the researcher and the readers by providing the additional information regarding the analytical process involved (Darawsheh, 2014). Therefore, the readers are also positioned to acknowledge the intersubjectivity of the research, and hopefully adopt the same approach of self-interrogation when conceptualising the issue for themselves. The three researchers were not the first in their families to attend university and all completed at least part of their education outside of Australia. They recognised the advantage they had that came with family familiarity with university, and used this reflection throughout the research. Authors 1 and 3 have years of experience as university lecturers working with students from diverse backgrounds, which they have brought to developing Kick Start. The researchers believe that the disadvantages are a result of systems that perpetuate inequality, and not that FiF students are deficient in any way. Throughout the interview and data analysis process, the authors used memos and meetings to explore the emerging themes in relation to biases, experience, and scholarship.

<div align="center">

Findings

</div>

Overall, on completion of Kick Start, students reported feeling settled with lower stress and uncertainty about engaging in their studies. Figure 1 outlines four broad Kick Start strategies that the students experienced in the workshops, and the six themes identified through data analysis have been aligned with the relevant parts of the program.

Figure 1

Summary of themes describing the transition to university and related Kick Start program strategies.
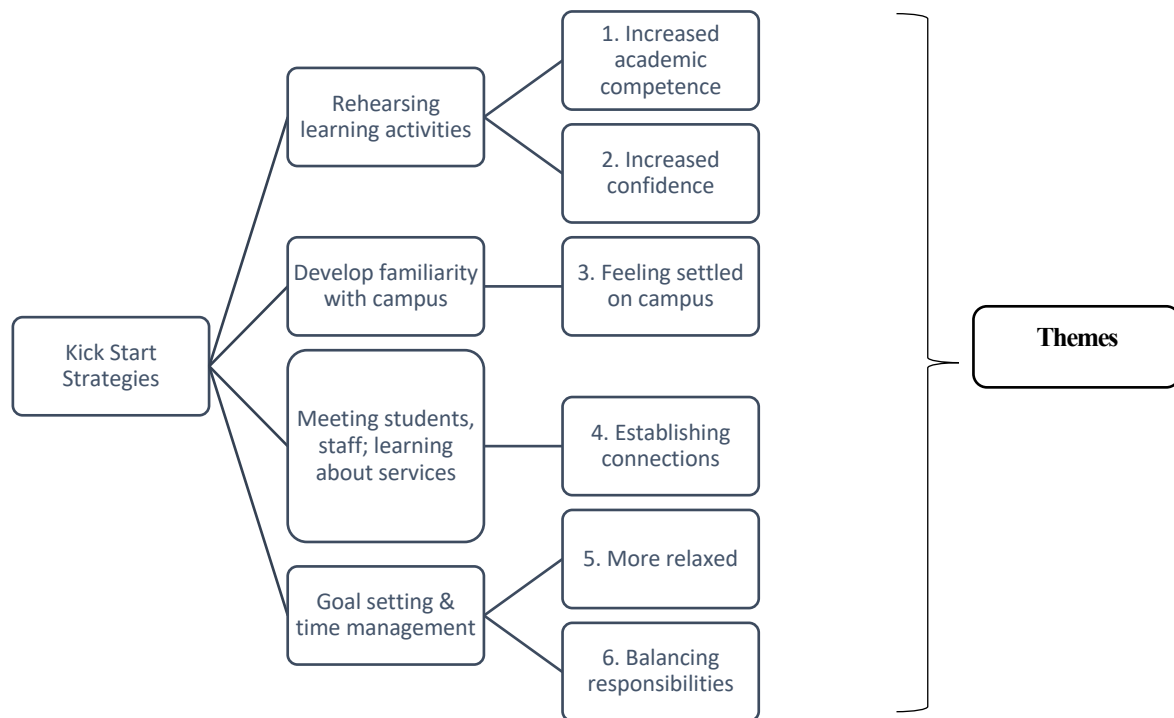
Increased Academic Competence

All participants found the Kick Start activities related to navigating the university's web-based class-management system very valuable (this is the platform for announcements, assignments, readings, and class material). The experience provided "vital" pieces of information, and the participants reflected a sense of competence in the ability to begin their classes. For example, Shawn found that Kick Start helped him to understand "what to do", as he stated: "especially in the second session, because the session seems to focus a lot more on like, actually practical work when it came to, knowing what to do, how to use Kick Start and, using the learning space, checking all sorts of information about your course, even getting into email and all that."

Another example of the increased competence was evident in how James' attitude about starting university changed after Kick Start. As he had formed his understanding of university primarily based on other people's views, such as his high school teachers and peers, and his parents who pressured him to go to university, James developed anxiety about not being able to cope with the learning. This was further perpetuated by the uncertainty of what to expect, as he described university as "so a huge class, just one lecture, all assignments and subjects all crammed up together, and I thought I won't be able to complete uni, and I might drop out in the first year uni." Therefore, being able to get a grasp the activities and steps involved assisted James to focus on the process of participation and utilise resources to reduce the perception barriers: "The first session of Kick Start, I had some idea how [Blackboard] work, and this really helped me with my first class, especially in regards to finding my classes, using my timetable."

Increased Confidence

There was also an increased confidence regarding the new identity of being a university student, and specifically in their response to the question about how much they felt like a university student after Kick Start. While all the participants rated higher for this question compared to their rating based on prior Kick Start experience, the salient information they identified which linked to a stronger university student identity was diversified. Therefore, the opportunity to experience university and to ask specific questions and express concerns seemed to act as a catalyst to increase their confidence to assert themselves in this space. As people process information differently, this helped students to seek reassurance based on individual needs to bridge the gap in the process of forming this new identity. Interacting with other nervous students and hearing from the panel of experienced FIF students who had overcome challenges, legitimised any feelings of anxiety.

Kick Start has replicated the classroom environment they experience at Kick Start with a small class size and the tutorial room setting. The close physical proximity and interactive layout allowed instant opportunity for peer interactions, one-on-one conversations, as well as whole-class discussions. The participants commented on the facilitators' "accessibility" and "friendliness", which made them comfortable to ask questions. This was reflected in Shawn's comment that he appreciated hearing other students' questions: "like, if you want to go to the toilet, do you ask? Even small things like that, I didn't even think of." Gaining knowledge and familiarity was important to start their classes the following week with a high level of confidence.

Feeling Settled on Campus

By the time of the interviews, the participants reported being settled into the physical space and more broadly into the routine. Attending Kick Start required the students to first find their way to campus, which required either navigating by car and finding parking or by planning and catching public transport (which might require two or more legs on buses, trains, and making transfers). Having a practice run for Kick Start (when the stakes are lower) helped them feel more settled when they did it "for real." A university campus itself can be intimidating and daunting, and several students expressed that they felt anxious about getting lost the first week. During Kick Start, participants became familiar with many different locations on the campus, first needing to find the building and room where the program began, and later locating restrooms, cafes, classrooms, and other important locations. Interestingly, one of the first things that came to Jennifer's mind regarding studying on campus was summarised in her hypothetical scenario, when she "only has 20 minutes before class starts", could she get coffee and still get to class on time? She was able to resolve and stated "… by going to Kick Start I felt a lot better about it because I knew about the layout of the university, so I know where to get the best coffee or that sort of stuff." This might seem minor, but this comfort was the foundation for building later confidence.

In the weeks following Kick Start, the participants reported a great amount of depth in their understanding about the physicality of a space. For example, Taylah described the library as "a place to do my thing", and James appreciated the "beautiful view" from the library window, whereby both established a link between their needs and the functionality of the space. Moreover, in Shawn's case, he observed both the ambience and people in the library while spending time there. The realisation that other people who share the same space also showed "maturity" which he inferred from observable signs, and which he associated his own university student identity with, together made him feel included and more settled, as he stated:

> It is the fact that everyone's here to learn… They are always willing to help they are there
> for the same reason as you are. It is the environment where everyone shares that sort of
> same, I believe, reason why they are at the university, and what makes it appealing to me.

It is different from high school, because everyone is there because they need to. There is a big maturity gap there.

Establishing Connections

Understanding the people is an integral process of understanding a place. Kick Start aimed to provide the attendees opportunities to meet and interact with their peers. This involved ice breaker activities in small groups and inviting second and third-year FiF students to talk about their experience and answer questions from the attendees. Meeting peers was also identified as a key motivator for the attendees to participate in the Kick Start program. None of the participants interviewed knew anyone at the university, as their close friends were going to other universities or not going to university at all. Coby, for example, reported barriers for him to "know people" in his life as he migrated to Australia in his 20s and had not established any close connections, which, for him, was attributed to the fact that he did not attend school here in Australia. Coby regarded Kick Start as an opportunity for him to get to know people, and perhaps become familiar with other aspects of Australian society. He valued the face-to-face interaction, he said, "I meant to learn different [things from] people, I want to learn critical stuff about them."

Furthermore, the improved social connectedness associated with the Kick Start support facilitated making connections with peers once classes began. Taylah explained how she was able to make new friends by sharing the knowledge she learnt from Kick Start. Interestingly, Taylah reported a sense of insecurity navigating through university where none of the peers she met at Kick Start was enrolled in her course, as she "always had someone to lean on" going through school. She was empowered to become someone other people can lean on by sharing her knowledge of the place. Taylah stated:

Yeah, I met a few people they all have morning classes; all my classes are in the afternoon. I see them sometimes. I also made friends from my course. I start helping people with what I was taught from Kick Start. I was feeling pretty good.

In addition, participants felt connected to the wider student cohort. There was a sense that they shared values with the university community about the importance of education, individual career development, and taking opportunities to "go further" than their families.

Feeling More Relaxed

After familiarising the attendees with the virtual space and physical space of university, Kick Start invited the attendees to turn to the academic demands they would encounter and the time involved. In one Kick Start activity, they wrote some concrete goals for their first class and the steps to get there. Prior to Kick Start, all the participants reported anxiety about workload. Specifically, amongst all the research participants, Kaylen reported a meltdown before her first day at university as she was overwhelmed by what was expected from her in the new environment. However, Kaylen found the goal-setting worksheet from Kick Start assisted her in focusing on one thing at a time, which made university a less daunting experience. During the interview, she also produced her worksheet from her folder and explained what her personal goals were for the semester. She commented:

(Kick Start taught me) how to use the website, how to prepare, as in how to, the five tips…I think I still got the handouts here…yeah the goal worksheet, to focus on one thing, one goal you want to achieve. That was a good thing to get prepared, to focus on one thing about the subject and hopefully achieve it.

Balancing University and Other Responsibilities

The interviewees also reported the need to balance university workload with other commitments in life, including part time jobs and looking after family members. During Kick Start there was discussion and an activity about time management which included scheduling time for fun and family, not just work and classes. How much time is required to spend at university therefore has become an important piece of information, as illustrated by Michael's quote below. By estimating the required time and planning ahead, Michael's anxiety of not being able to manage his studies and part-time job at the same time decreased. He stated:

> *So we went through and calculated how much free time I have, and I have loads of time. They were saying you will be doing 18 hours of study, I was like, it is not too bad, I get plenty of time to do my own things, to study and do my job, and still a few block of hours in the middle to do whatever I wanted.*

Discussion

The findings support the role of Kick Start in facilitating the transition to university for the FiF student participants. SoC was a useful framework for understanding the transition to university and the novelty of this research is to fill in the gap of inadequate understanding of individual-place relationship in previous literature that conceptualises FiF students' university engagement, and more importantly, informs practical support strategies. Figure 2 represents the way Kick Start first enhanced students' SoC and fostered a positive identity with the university, which led to students feeling empowered and prepared for the academic demands in their transition semester at university.

Figure 2

Process of Kick Start and university transition.
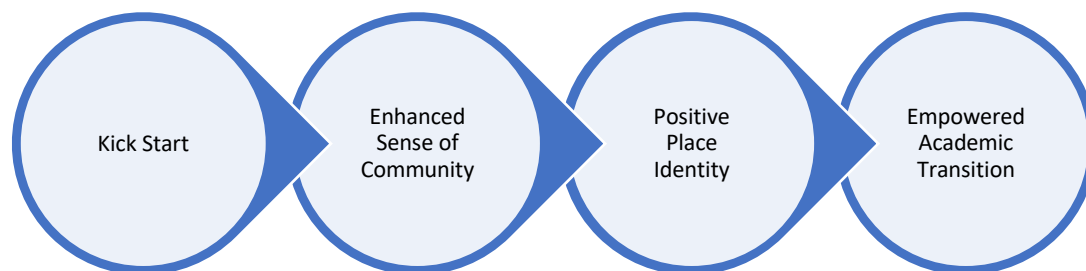
SoC and place identity upon transition

In essence, SoC situates individual experience with the students' environment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). While social and cultural context have been used almost synonymously in the analysis of environment, the physical dimension of an environment has been largely overlooked in studying individual development. The notion of place identity suggests that the formation of individual-place relationship is intertwined with social and cultural development, together contributing to one's identity development (Proshansky, 1983). The themes identified in the findings of this study illustrate the promotion of SoC as a pathway to improve FiF social integration and overall university experience. Specifically, transition to university is marked by

entering a new environment and after the adjustment period the participants described themselves as competent, confident, and settled.

In addition, there was a connectedness in the shared sense of university being a place for opportunities beyond what their family could provide. Subsequently, individuals will make sense of the place through figuring out strategies to manipulate the environment. For example, this was evident in participants' need to understand how they can navigate the campus to meet their individual needs, such as going to their class and engaging in other social activities of their choice. It is encouraging that Kick Start facilitated the students to feel competent in their surroundings and how this led them to feel more confident about being a student.

The changes in individual-place relationship after the implemented program, are captured in all six themes. It seems that when social relationships were involved, particularly student-staff ones, greater shifts were observed in the sense that the theme is mapped to a higher level of SoC. For example, competence related to knowing how learning activities work is related to a sense of membership of being a university student in SoC, as learning is an important part of this identity. The understanding of how individuals can engage in learning activities by focusing on one task or goal at a time fosters a sense of feeling relaxed, where the ability to control the physical task was generalised to the control of the environment in SoC. Additionally, the reported sense of relatedness as a result of being able to situate university commitments within one's overall life commitment, fostered a sense of their needs being fulfilled in SoC.

The environmental opportunity to form quality social relationships tends to foster stronger SoC, as captured in the shared emotional connectedness (Rappaport, 1981). For example, the findings demonstrate the rich context face-to-face interaction can provide for individuals to draw their environmental understanding of others from, such as observing others' physical features and behaviours. The role of place is also evident as sharing a same space, as well as the same symbolic understanding of a place, which is generalised into a sense of solidarity (Proshansky, 1983). For example, the physical immersion in the library can develop a feeling of being part of a bigger group who share the same goals, which was communicated through observable signs (being quiet and studying at the library). Furthermore, the shared emotional connectedness is further enhanced through the staff- student relationship (Scanlon et al., 2007). A small classroom inherently signifies physical closeness and openness, which increases staff's accessibility and provides ample opportunities to strike a personal conversation with others, and can contribute to feeling settled. The resultant shared emotional connectedness was evident in participants' increased confidence when their personal questions about university were answered. The reassurance further solidifies the participants' environmental understanding, which encouraged them to access the resources for their personal growth (Proshansky, 1986; Chavis & Newbrough, 1986).

Empowerment

SoC is often discussed hand-in-hand with the concept of empowerment, which can be viewed from both an individual and an organisational level as supporting people to feel control over their lives (Perkins et al., 2002). While Australian universities are seeing increasing enrolments of students from non-traditional backgrounds, including FiF students, their success at university can be impeded by the barriers imposed by the very education system. FiF students often struggle to form a cohesive identity when their existing identities are marginalised in the university community in the process of adopting the role of being a university student (O'Shea, 2016). In order to empower the FiF students upon their transition to university, several themes, such as competence and confidence with utilising the place, which lead to connectedness, suggest the importance of creating positive individual-place relationships. Kick Start provided a framework for students to be aware of their power and control they have as university students.

From a community psychology perspective, the structural change to create diversity in the very identity of university student is the key to address such disconnectedness. FiF students are

to be given the resources and choices to assert their own identity while pursuing their self-growth at university.

Implications for Remote Learning

This research was initiated and conducted entirely before COVID-19 disruptions to face-to-face learning, however there are important implications from the current findings. University students were forced to restrict or limit their campus contact for up to two years, with some reaching the end of their studies with little to no in person learning. The findings here indicate the environment is incredibly important in the development of student identity and confidence in a new role. For higher education students who completed much of their degrees remotely, there are certainly implications that future research should explore. A number of new research studies indicate the challenges of remote university classes. Besser et al. (2020) found Israeli university students forced to study remotely in 2020 reported face-to-face classes were more positive than online classes, in regard to mood, motivation, and performance. In a study conducted during late 2020 in the US with students studying remotely, academic motivation and academic belonging were each positively correlated with university identification, with no significant differences for FiF and non-FiF (DeRossett et al., 2021). The current study in conjunction with the research related to remote learning indicate that being on campus and developing connections in a classroom is a preferred learning environment and is related to positive academic outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this research can stem from the conceptualisation of the issues and the inherent disadvantage of a qualitative study design, favouring depth over quantity. While SoC has shifted the paradigm from individual-focused to multi-level analysis, due to the scope of this study the emphasis has only addressed the issue at the meso-level, individual interaction with the institutions. The influences of the broader sociopolitical culture, although briefly discussed, require more attention. Moreover, the study has only captured a snapshot at a specific time point. While it provides a thick description of the participants' experience, more data are needed to further ascertain a cause and effect relationship to effectively inform support strategies. All research is limited and potentially biased toward participants who volunteer to participate, and therefore we cannot make conclusions about students who do not choose to complete an interview.

Future research can explore how specific predisposing factors such as coping styles intersect support strategies aimed to develop FiF students SoC. This research conceptualised FiF students as one social group who share the same identity as being the first in their family to attend university, where the individual differences in this heterogeneous group were not explored. Moreover, longitudinal studies can also shed light on the changes of the individual-place relationship over time, and how university can develop and maintain SoC at different stages of the student life cycle.

Conclusion

For FiF students, the transition can be associated with anxiety and isolation. By contrast, non-FiF students' parents can provide personal accounts of the place which can guide their offspring to navigate the university system (O'Shea, 2015). The lack of university experience and connection also begins in high school, and there are implications that environmental familiarity should be fostered as early as possible (Pires & Chapin, 2022). As argued previously, the underlying theme that regarding university as a foreign place, which can contribute to FiF students' disengagement, has been ignored. In the exploration of strategies to address this, the

current research has proposed the utility of enhancing the individual development of environmental understanding, which was operationalised in the Kick Start program. Overall, this program provided contextualised learning for individuals to interact with place prior to starting university. The implications include an empowering approach with the focus on how individuals interact with the institutional system; and an inquiry into what resources are needed for FiF students to succeed, considering their unique social and cultural background.

References

Besser, A., Flett, G. L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020). Adaptability to a sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: Understanding the challenges for students. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology 8*(2), 85-105. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000198

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Chapin, L., Oraison, H., Nguyen, T., Osmani, S., & Keohane, E. (2023). Giving Australian first-in-family students a kick start to university. *Student Success*, *14*(1), 60-70. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2762

Chavis, D. M., & Newbrough, J. R. (1986). The meaning of "community" in community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*(4), 335–340. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198610)14:4<335::AID-JCOP2290140402>3.0.CO;2-T

Cicognani, E., Pirini, Æ. C., Keyes, Æ. C., & Joshanloo, Æ. M. (2008). Social participation , sense of community and social well being: A study on American, Italian and Iranian university students. *Social Indicators Research*, *89*, 97-112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-007-9222-3

Creswell, J. W. (2007*). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. Sage.

Darawsheh, W. (2014). Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation, 21*(12), 560–568. https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2014.21.12.560

DeRossett, T., Marler, E. K., & Hatch, H. A. (2021). The role of identification, generational status, and COVID-19 in academic success. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000293

Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, *49*(2), 134-137. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622

Good Universities (2024). Undergraduate first generation rankings. https://www.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au/university-ratings-rankings/2023/undergraduate/first-generation

Harper, D. (2012). Choosing a qualitative research method. In D. Harper & A. R. Thompson (Eds.), *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy* (pp. 83–97). John Wiley & Sons.

Jason, L. (2016). Theories in the field of Community Psychology. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.7728/0702201601

Kim, D., Lee, Y., Leite, W. L., & Huggins-Manley, A. C. (2020). Exploring student and teacher usage patterns associated with student attrition in an open educational resource-supported online learning platform. *Computers and Education*, *156*, 103961. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103961

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*(1), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-

6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I

O'Shea, S. (2015). Arriving, surviving, and succeeding: First-in-family women and their experiences of transitioning into the first year of university. *Journal of College Student Development*, *56*(5), 499–517. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0053

O'Shea, S., May, J., & Stone, C. (2015). *Breaking the barriers: supporting and engaging first-in-family university learners and their families*. University of Wollongong.

O'Shea, S. (2016). First-in-family learners and higher education : Negotiating the ' silences ' of university transition and participation. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, *3*, 5–23.

O'Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2017). *First-in-family students, university experience and family life: Motivations, transitions and participation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Orbe, M. P. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: An analysis of first-generation college students. *Communication Education*, *53*(2), 131–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452041000168240 1

Patfield, S., Gore, J., Weaver, N. (2022). On 'being first': the case for first-generation status in Australian higher education equity policy. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 49*, 23-41.

Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2021). Stratification and the illusion of equitable choice in accessing higher education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2021.1912633

Perkins, D. D., Hughey, J., & Speer, P. W. (2002). Community Psychology perspectives on social capital theory and community development practice. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, *33*(1), 33–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330209490141

Pires, C. M., & Chapin, L. A. (2022). Barriers, support and resilience of prospective first in family university students: Australian high school educators' perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology, 50*(7), 3221-3236.

Proshansky, H. M. (1983). Place-identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology,* 1983(2),125-145.

Rappaport, J. (1981). In praise of paradox: A social policy of empowerment over prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *9*(1), 1-25.

Sampson, K. A., & Goodrich, C. G. (2009). Making place: Identity construction and community formation through "sense of place" in Westland, New Zealand. *Society & Natural Resources*, *22*(10), 901–915. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920802178172

Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). "You don't have like an identity you are just lost in a crowd": Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *10*(2), 223–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600983684

Southgate, E., Douglas, H., Scevak, J., Macqueen, S., Rubin, M., & Lindell, C. (2014). The academic outcomes of first-in-family in an Australian university: An exploratory study. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, *1*(2), 31–45.

Tate, K. A., Fouad, N. A., Marks, L. R., Young, G., Guzman, E., & Williams, E. G. (2015). Underrepresented first-generation, low-income college students' prsuit of a graduate education: Investigating the influence of self-efficacy, coping efficacy, and family influence. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *23*(3), 427–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072714547498

Victoria University. (2024). VU Block Model. https://www.vu.edu.au/study-at-vu/why-choose-vu/vu-block-model

Wilbur, T. G., & Roscigno, V. J. (2016). First-generation disadvantage and college enrollment/completion. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *2*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023116664351

Address for Correspondence

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laurie A Chapin, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne 8001 Australia. Email: laurie.chapin@vu.edu.au

Author Biographies

Laurie A. Chapin   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4080-7717
Humberto Oraison   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5997-6265