Experiences of First-Generation Students at The University of Kansas School of Medicine

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Introduction. This study captured the experiences of first-generation medical students at the University of Kansas School of Medicine (KUSM) to better understand their experiences related to academic performance, financial resources, psychological well-being, and social integration to identify areas in which the university can better support this population of students.

Methods. A qualitative research design was used to collect narrative responses and demographic data from first-generation students in KUSM's Classes of 2023-2026. At the time of the study, there was no publicly available demographic data reporting first-generation students at KUSM. Participants completed a survey with eight open-ended questions about their academic, financial, psychological, and social experiences. Data collection occurred between May 18, 2023, and June 28, 2023. An immersion-crystallization approach was used to analyze the content.

Results. Data from 14 students with at least one respondent from each class was included in the analysis. Six distinct themes were identified: pride and making it against the odds, hidden curriculum highlighting disadvantages, crippling debt and the emphasis on return on investment, sacrifices made by family members, individual sacrifices and mental health, and the role of community in one's sense of self.

Conclusions. Upon completion of theme analysis, recommendations were made to KUSM on how to better support future first-generation medical students in efforts to provide a more equitable learning environment. Specifically, the pillars of identification, mentorship, and scholarship were presented to address all themes from this study. The insights gained will inform the development of programming to support and celebrate first-generation medical students.