

Accommodating the First-Generation College Student

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London in 1996 described first-generation college students as “educational pioneers”—the first or one of the first in their families to attend college, “who must adjust to a new culture—the academic and social culture of college life” (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007, p.404). Inkelas et al. (2007) indicate a number of characteristics frequently common to first-generation college students. They are often from lower socioeconomic income, often from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. First-generation college students are often women, older and may have children. Some may have less encouragement from family to attend college. They may have lower degree aspirations, enroll in and earn fewer credit hours, and may need additional time to complete their degrees. First-generation students often live off-campus, work more hours per week than their peers and consequently, participate less in out-of-class academic and social activities. Inkelas et al. also state that first-generation college students earn lower grades and are less academically prepared. They may have lower reading, math, and critical thinking skills. Twenty-three percent leave before their second year while twenty-nine percent leave college without earning a degree.

Similar to these characteristics, Reid & Moore (2008) identified five differences between first-generation college students and their peers whose parents attended college.

First-generation college students face the college admissions process without the experiential advice of their parents;

First-generation students enter college at a disadvantage without a clear understanding of what to expect from college life;

First-generation students often lack the rigorous academic preparation for college because their parents could not advise them on wise course choices while in high school;

First-generation students often choose a college close to home, where they can commute, but which may not necessarily be the right choice for them; thus they frequently leaving college before completing their degrees; and

First-generation college students often live at home and work part time at jobs, resulting in spending less time on campus.

The preceding characteristics align directly or indirectly with Bourdieu’s (1993) ideas of social class reproduction. Social capital impacts what and how first-generation college students learn about their educational choices. Unlike their peers whose parents attended college, first-generation students are not fully aware of their educational choices or how to seek the best financial aid options. Furthermore, lacking cultural capital, first-generation students may feel disconnected from the academic and social life in college, and according to Bergerson (2007), often choose to attend colleges and universities where they feel they fit in. The following studies reveal findings and provide suggestions for colleges and universities as they seek to accommodate the first-generation college student.

Recent Studies

Byrd and MacDonald (2005) conducted a qualitative study of eight participants, all of whom were first-generation college students, to identify specific characteristics and skills relevant to college readiness. Based on data from interviews, journals and field notes, ten themes emerged which the researchers classified as college readiness skills and abilities, background factors, or student self-concept.

Participants revealed four themes representing specific skills and abilities needed to succeed as first-generation college students: academic skills, time management skills, identification and focus on a goal, and ability to self-advocate. Academic skills included reading, writing, math, technology, communication, and study skills. Surprisingly, first-generation students indicated a greater need to arrive in college with reading skills than writing skills. Participants described having problems with vocabulary and realizing the amount of time required to complete reading requirements. Time management skills included balancing studying with work, family, activities and social life. Furthermore, data revealed the necessity to arrive at college having a goal and focusing efforts to achieve that goal. Finally, age and maturity contributed to the ability to speak up for one's needs and to seek help as necessary.

The researchers' (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005) discussion of background factors revealed four themes: family factors, career influences, financial concerns, and college preparation. Among family factors, participants indicated family expectations and experiences as direct influences on their decision to attend college, as well as the desire to do better than their parents, having witnessed how much their parents struggled economically. Work experiences and career aspirations also influenced this decision. Issues around finances suggest the need for first-generation college students to be aware of financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Advanced placement courses taken in high school were the only courses participants identified as helping prepare them for college.

In the last category, student self-concept, the researchers (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005) identified two themes: self-concept and college system. Older students, those who had attended community colleges prior to four year colleges or who took time to pursue possible careers, had more strength in self-concept, self-advocacy, goal focus, and time management than traditional students. The researchers felt non-traditional students were more prepared and ready for the college experience than they thought. Finally, participants indicated the need to understand the college system, college standards, and the culture of the college, and that lacking this knowledge put them at a disadvantage. As supportive as families were, they were not able to offer direction or advice because they themselves had not attended college.

In a longitudinal study of first-generation college students over a three year period, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) determined a number of factors contributing to student learning and cognitive development. Discussion included the fact that first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital necessary for making a smooth transition from secondary education. In spite of this, the researchers recognized that these students often acquire greater cultural and social capital than their peers who have one or both parents who were college graduates and who arrive at college with some guidance and possible experiences contributing to cultural and social capital.

Findings were arranged in three categories: college experiences, college outcomes, and conditional effects (Pascarella et al., 2004). The first finding involving college experiences determined that first-generation college students exhibited significant deficit in their choice of college, whereas their peers had the guidance of their parents who were college graduates to advise them. Many first-generation college students held part-time jobs, often working more than 20 hours per week, completed fewer credit hours than their peers, were more likely to live off campus, and consequently, were less apt to become involved in extracurricular activities, clubs and organizations. Growing evidence suggested that extracurricular involvement and interaction with peers contribute to both intellectual and personal development during college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

In the area of college outcomes, researchers (Pascarella et al., 2004) found that over time and with persistence the gaps in writing skills, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning lessened between first-generation college students and their peers. Several additional findings were classified as conditional effects. Social and cultural capital acquired during college for first-generation college students resulted from their level of engagement with social and peer networks at the college. Furthermore, involvement in extracurricular activities had positive effects on critical thinking, plans for advanced degrees, self-confidence and control over academic success, and tasks involving higher order thinking. Researchers (Pascarella et al., 2004) found similar positive effects for first-generation college students involved in non-academic related interactions with peers on quantitative reasoning, writing skills, as well as future degree plans. Pascarella et al. concluded that social interaction with peers both within

and outside classrooms, along with extracurricular activities, contributed to gains in social and cultural capital, as well as academic advancements.

Utilizing the *College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ)*, Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Miller (2007) used a random sample of 4501 undergraduate students, an equal number of 643 students from seven racial and ethnic groups to discover where students applied effort and what they learned from the college experience. The researchers conjectured that educational and social involvement of first-generation college students led to academic and personal gains and discovered that race and ethnicity had mostly positive effects on involvement. Lundberg et al. defined involvement as use of library, computers and other technologies, course learning, writing, faculty interactions, involvement in fine arts, clubs and organizations, personal experiences and peer interactions, science and quantitative experiences, and discussion of topics and integration of ideas. African American, Native American and some Hispanic students were less involved in campus experiences. Mexican American students were the only ethnic group with a positive effect on personal learning gains and were most likely to interact and to engage in discussions with students unlike themselves. Asian and Pacific Islander students needed encouragement to engage in public discourse, however, the researchers also speculated this could be a result of cultural appropriateness (Lundberg et al., 2007).

Similar to Lundberg et al. (2007), Pike and Kuh (2005) found successful gains for first-generation college students resulted from academic and social engagement and the college environment. First-generation students were less engaged and less likely to integrate diverse college experiences than peers whose parents were college graduates. Female and minority students who lived on campus were more likely to be involved in college life and reported greater gains in their learning and intellectual development than other first-generation students who commuted (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Using interviews and biographical questionnaires, Reid and Moore (2008) reported on a qualitative study of 13 first-generation college students all of which attended and graduated from the same urban high school, to discover their experiences and perceptions on how their high school prepared them for post-secondary education. The participants revealed how their high school helped prepare them for college in four ways: by offering a variety of AP courses; by providing connections with adults as mentors, advisors, as well as caring classroom teachers; by making available various programs specifically for preparing students for college; and through numerous extracurricular activities such as athletics, which developed management and leadership skills.

Furthermore, the participants indicated their high school did not provide a number of skills necessary for college success. Several participants stated that not all courses were challenging, and ELL students were not challenged in writing skills, often given the answers to questions, instead of challenged to learn (254) on their own. Consequently, with little need to study, participants did not develop study skills or time management skills, which one participant revealed as the most difficult part of the transition from high school to college (256). Several participants shared missed opportunities while in high school: not taking challenging courses; not filling out scholarship applications; not starting the college application process early enough; and not taking high school coursework serious enough (256).

Reid and Moore (2008) reveal three significant findings. Although most of the participants received excellent grades in high school, they were unexpectedly challenged in their college course work. Teachers, counselors, parents, as well as students, must work together to maintain high expectations while students are still in high school. Finally, the participants revealed the need to develop early planning for postsecondary education, by focusing on challenging courses, developing study skills and time management skills while still in high school, cultivating reading for pleasure, and striving for excellence (257).

Recommendations

Reid and Moore (2008) offer a number of recommendations for teachers, counselors and high school administrators and, they conclude with recommendations for postsecondary educators. College and universities need to provide support and guidance for first-generation college students; offer opportunities for first-generation students to meet in groups with other first-generation students where they might feel comfortable voicing their concerns; make clear to students what academic and support systems are

available on campus and to encourage them to take advantage of these services; and finally, to connect first-generation freshmen with upper class first-generation students who could act as peer mentors.

Research suggests that colleges establish programs to assist first-generation college students adjust to college (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Gibbons & Shooner, 2004; Laden, 2004; Lundberg et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Summer enrichment programs led by peer groups on college campuses provide guidance to incoming first-generation students on how to manage academic and social demands and on the importance of building relationships with faculty (Folger et al., 2004; Gibbons & Shooner, 2004; Laden, 2004, Lundberg et al., 2007). Lundberg et al. (2007) detail specific recommendations for instituting summer programs that orientate first-generation students and regularly meet with the students throughout the academic year to discuss their progress and needs. Furthermore, the researchers suggest enlightening the teaching faculty on the specific needs of this population of students and how they can assist these students in such areas as class participation and peer collaboration. Laden (2004) stated six specific recommendations for colleges to assist racially diverse student populations in making successful transition to the culture of higher education. Colleges should acknowledge and integrate the culture and experiences diverse populations bring to the campus. Colleges should create inclusive, comprehensive techniques for curriculum, instructional practices and student services that support academic and social needs. Colleges should provide direction for first-generation college students to learn the college system and to make use of such resources as financial aid, writing and academic support services, tutoring services and peer assistance programs. Colleges should cultivate a system devoted to early detection of academic, financial, or other concerns that might stand in the way of success for first-generation students. Colleges should seek to hire administrators, faculty, and staff representative of the student demographics who could be role models, mentors and advisors. Finally, colleges should explore ways for the concerns, ideas, and views of this population to be heard and integrated as part of college life (Laden, 2004).

Furthermore, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) in its 2008 report on institutions of higher education policy and practices, reveal additional recommendations that specifically focus on parents. Colleges and universities should place diversity as priority in serving students and their parents. Colleges and universities should assume the responsibility of working with parents of first-generation students to educate them in the college process and beyond. Colleges and universities should research the experiences of college students and parents from lower socioeconomic classes, as well as how the parent-student relationship affects retention. Lastly, colleges and universities should have a mission-driven parent program that reflects the culture of the institution and the goals of student development, stating that “if policy and practice are designed to serve only one type of parent, they may leave out others such as parents of first-generation college students who could provide an important source of support for their students in college” (p. 100.)

In conclusion, colleges and universities must consider their mission, the size of the institution, the demographics of the student body and numerous other factors in exploring ways to meet the needs of first-generation students seeking a quality postsecondary educational experience at their institution.

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