

Obstacles Faced by First-Generation College Students and Possible Avenues to Increase
Both Personal and Academic Success

Author: joshuah whittinghill

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Abstract

First-Generation College Students are facing a variety of obstacles as they enter universities and community colleges across the United States. As tens-of-thousands of students become the first in their family to embark on the journey through higher education it becomes clear they have taken many different paths to get there and face many different obstacles that continuing-generation students don't. With the rapid increase of first-generation college students enrolling into higher education campuses are beginning to discover their institutions are underprepared to fully support the needs of these new students. This review will work to discuss obstacles for first-generation college students, outline possible solutions to improve support for them and pose questions concerning the future for their academic success.

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Introduction

The year was 1968 and a handful of administrators in the CSU system, politicians in Sacramento, along with concerned students and civil rights activists throughout the state recognized a new trend in who was applying to and attending California universities. The shift in education was being created by a new population on campuses—first-generation college students. It was clear this new wave of students was not just a passing fad, and the landscape of education was going to be changed forever. So, to help disabuse the lack of access and equity being experienced by youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the CSU system implemented a pilot program on two of the CSU campuses (Chico and Humboldt). Then in 1969

the cause to support CSU's new population of students was burgeoned by the passing of Senate Bill 1072, which established the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and secured the financial means needed for the ever growing demand placed on college campuses.

The term first-generation is clearly defined on CSU, Chico EOP (2012), admissions website:

The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) is designed to improve the access and retention of low-income and first-generation college students at CSU, Chico. EOP applicants must have the motivation to succeed and have the potential to perform satisfactorily at CSU, Chico, but may not have been previously able to realize their potential because of their economic or educational background. (para. 1)

First-generation college students represent a variety of countries, cultures, languages and beliefs (Cushman, 2007). It is these differences that create many obstacles for first-generation college students. For example Hmong and Latina females grow up learning that they are to be seen and not heard, and that they are not to question their elders or authority figures or look them in the eye when talking with them. These cultural characteristics render the students at a disadvantage when it comes to class discussion, office hours and group work. Likewise while trying to alter their futures for the better, latino and black males find themselves facing stereotypes such as criminal, hard, aggressive, or unintelligent to name a few as well as the biases and prejudices that accompany such labels (Owens, Lynch, 2012). These stereotypes are often carried not only by their fellow students but by administration, faculty and staff who should

be working as educators to enhance all student experiences with equity, leadership and service. Working against such distractions, first-generation students experience many more stressors as they strive to avoid both failure and reinforcement of such negative views about them and their communities on a whole (Owens, 2012; Housel, 2012). From my experiences in and out the class room I have been able to work with thousands of first-generation students; and in some of my discussions with them I have learned they often find opportunities to serve or lead are few and far between, many times even despite their concerted efforts to get involved.

Obstacles and Struggles for First-Year Students

The number of first-generation college students is reaching unprecedented numbers across the United States. Four-year universities are seeing one in every six students to be first generation students (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, Phillips, 2012) meanwhile between community colleges and four-year universities an astounding one in every three students is first generation (Ward, Siegel & Davenport, 2012). With first-generation students representing such a significant number of college students today, it is difficult to not recognize their presence on campuses, however Ward, Siegel and Davenport refer to them as the “invisible minority” (2012). Invisibility for first-generation students is perpetuated in part by others blinded efforts to consider everyone equal not wanting to single them out (Ward, 2012).

This approach is extremely short sighted, as it fails to live in reality. By definition first-generation students are historically disadvantaged when it comes to economics and academics (EOP 2012). First-generation students begin their college careers underprepared, mostly ill-

equipped for the challenges that await them, and uncertain of how to wade through the labyrinth of academics (Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP, 2011).

First-generation students' level of preparedness and academic achievements are noticeably below their non-first-generation peers (Taylor, Baker, 2012). Preparedness and academic achievement among first-generation students is influenced by a variety of common social and educational factors (Radomski, 2011). First-generation students are the primary population affected by college costs and accumulating debt due to rapidly increasing tuition and fee hikes over the past few years (Ward, 2012). The economic background of first-generation student is a significant factor when it comes to their transition to a college campus. The transition is defined for students from working-class to become part of an institution which was founded on and is primarily still based on middle and upper-class ideals (Housel, 2012; Stephens, 2012). How first-generation students fit into a college environment is influenced by a myriad of social or familial variables which include, but are not limited to—poverty, ethnic minority male, single parent family, lack of parental involvement or concern in regards to education (Cushman, 2007) and being straddled with adult responsibilities i.e. caring for siblings, providing economic support for entire family, or acting as translator for parents and grandparents affairs (Cushman, 2007; Housel, 2012; Ward 2012). The academic potential, successes and failures for first-generation college students are also influenced by common educational histories (Stephens, 2012). Many histories which include subpar academic performance in high school often defined by falling behind academically, struggling to connect within the classroom, earning failing grades in English and math, isolation, underdeveloped classroom decorum, lack of interest in

extracurricular activities, skipping school, and unhealthy relationships with peers, faculty and administration (Cushman, 2007; Housel, 2012; Johnson 2010).

With the numerous social and educational factors working in direct opposition to the structure and ideals of college campuses, first-generation college students not only struggle to persist, as their disqualification and stop-out rates exceed those of non-first-generation students (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott & Pierce, 2012) they are less likely to ever return to college. In addition they also exhibit lowered levels of personal goals, accomplishments, abilities and academic efficacy (Aspelmeier, 2012; Housel, 2012; Ward, 2012). As a result first-generation students quite often present lowered self-esteem levels, feel like outsiders, fail to connect with faculty, staff and student organizations and have a diminished knowledge and trust in services available to them (IHEP, 2011).

As a result, which is reflected in recent national data, after six years of college enrollment, first-generation students are earning four-year degrees at a much lower level than non-first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). According to Engle and Tinto one study shows that low-income, first-generation students were four times more likely to leave college after their first year (2008).

How to burgeon first-generation student academic experiences

Because first-generation students are entering college at unprecedented numbers it is becoming more and more clear, as a group, many of them are in need of critical resources, opportunities and guidance in order to find academic success (Radomski, 2011).

Despite efforts like the Educational Opportunity Program, first-generation students are finding themselves posited on campuses with sometimes very little to no infrastructure in place to support their needs. College campus' structures of support and levels of understanding are areas to look at when addressing first-generation college students, but not the first. It is important to look at how first-generation college students are being educated about the demands, expectations and opportunities that are part of college life (Cushman, 2007; Rodriguez 2003). What sort of K-12 partnerships are in place on college campuses? For example at CSU, Chico there are three programs dedicated to educating K-12 students and their parents—Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound and Chico Student Success Center. All three include forms of outreach, recruitment, parent discussion groups, study skills, wellness workshops, and financial aid workshops as well as extensive focus on becoming part of the campus (Taylor & Baker 2012).

As Ward reports, first-year generation students indicate they feel isolated, not part of and subsequently outcasts, which leads to lower retention rates than non-first generation students (2012). To improve on this, students need to actively become involved with a variety of resources at least one year prior to stepping on a college campus (Sherwin, 2012; Ward, 2012; Taylor, 2012). If personal contact is not possible prior to entering college first-generation students must become their own advocates once they do arrive on campus. Certain areas students can focus on to increase their opportunities and improve their success include joining student groups wherein they can openly express themselves, thus developing trust among others, cultivate honest and healthy outlets to work through stressful situations, difficult obstacles and both internal and external conflicts (Taylor, 2012). Connections with faculty and staff, on and off

campus are vital in developing self-efficacy, increasing retention, and enhancing leadership skills (Bauer-Liang, 2003; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

How are campuses structured to help students? Faculty and staff across campuses need to be educated on and knowledgeable about what first-generation students experience to get to college. This massive undertaking would entail those already working with first-generation students and first-generation students getting the word out, educating through campus presentations and workshops (Cushman, 2007; Rodriquez, 2003).

Conclusion

The choice to go to college is just one step on the path to earning a college degree. Thirty years ago, for first-generation college students, it was a seminal decision which was backed by little support. Campuses and the students attending were vastly underprepared, support was far from adequate (Sherwin, 2012). Myriad variables were in play: students were dealing with previous academic experiences, home life, peer interactions, socioeconomics, and confidence to name a few; meanwhile campuses employed staff and faculty majorly ill-equipped and unfamiliar with first-generation students, did not have support services in place to help the students, and had little funding to implement needed improvements (Merullo, 2002). After thirty years of working with first-generation students the focus or concern for all involved has shifted from access to equity. With numerous programs in place and three decades of data collection, campuses have the opportunities to establish support systems sufficient to help first-generation students find success.

In spite of how much is known about first-generation college students, their academic journeys to graduate high school and struggles to persist and eventually graduate college, many universities lack a true democratic open structure for the students to be heard and help create the infrastructural support they need. Rather, higher education is a collection of loose bureaucratic partnerships backed by many unspoken guidelines and rules for success (Rodriguez, 2012), which are not easily accessible to first-generation students. With first-generation numbers at an all-time high, institutions and the United States are teetering on the precipice of change. While many first-generation students are struggling to connect and succeed in college, others, despite being underprepared, are finding ways to persist and earn the degree they set out for, which helps to disabuse the short-sighted notion that their experiences are pretexts to failure (Merullo, 2002). College campuses not only have the opportunity to improve first-generation support services, but are face to face with a watershed moment in history wherein they can partner with the very students they are working for to rewrite the guidelines and rules that dictate academic success. Utilizing students in this process would help to develop a stronger sense of equity, conceptualize opportunities for authenticity and leadership, and meanwhile cultivate student service throughout the campus and community. All of which are crucial elements to increasing the success rates for first-generation college students.

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