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First-Generation College Students: How Co-Curricular Involvement Can Assist with Success

Valerie Garcia

First-generation college students are students whose parents do not have any postsecondary education (Choy, 2001). These students differ from continuing-generation students in many ways including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. When compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students face greater challenges in the areas of access to college, persistence throughout college, and attainment of a degree. Research positively links students' co-curricular involvement with attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and persistence (Astin, 1977). Although this positive link has been discovered, there is minimal research that specifically addresses first-generation students and their involvement. This article will discuss characteristics and challenges that first-generation students experience as well as how involvement may result in positive links to their attainment and persistence.

Students who are the first in their family to attend postsecondary education are known as first-generation college students. When compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students face greater challenges in college as a result of being the first in their family to attend postsecondary education. Access, attainment, and persistence are some of the challenges first-generation students encounter. Alexander Astin's (1984) research indicated there is a positive correlation between students' co-curricular involvement and their college success. Because of the high number of first-generation students now enrolled in institutions of higher education, more research needs to be conducted specifically on first-generation students and how their involvement can lead them to success.

First Generation College Students

Characteristics

There are several characteristics that distinguish first-generation students from

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continuing-generation students. For example, first-generation students tend to be older than the average college student. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study found in 1995-96 that first-generation students beginning postsecondary education are more likely than others to be 24 years old or older (Choy, 2001). "If they were younger than 24 and financially dependent on their parents (as most students that age are), they were more likely than others to be in the lowest family income quartile" (Choy, p. 20). This means that first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families. It is likely that older students and students coming from low-income families have other responsibilities in addition to school. For instance, work can be another primary concern. Working while attending school means less time for studying, which is more likely to result in poor grades.

Another characteristic of first-generation students is that they are typically less academically prepared for college than continuing-generation students. First-generation students are less likely to discuss preparation for the SAT or ACT with their parents and less likely to take advanced placement tests, which can assist with college admission. These characteristics lead to first-generation students not meeting admissions requirements and not performing as highly as students who have the opportunity to take advanced placement classes and who prepare for entrance exams. Those who do meet admissions requirements may be in for a shock once they begin classes and realize the difficulty of college academics. This is a result of first-generation students being more likely to attend high schools with less rigorous curricula (Choy, 2001). Other characteristics of first-generation students include being students of historically marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds, female, having children, and possessing lower degree aspirations (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Enrolling in College

Some students grow up with the expectation that they will go to college. Other students, such as those who are first-generation, will not decide to attend college until they are in high school. One of the factors determining whether or not a student will attend college is the education level of their parents. The higher the parents' education level, the more likely a student is to enroll in college even when other factors such as family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence are taken into account (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). Among high school graduates in 1992 whose parents did not attend college, 59% enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75% among those whose parents had some college education, and to 93% among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

Part of these students' decisions not to enroll can be attributed to the lack of family support, failure to meet the admissions requirements, or lack of familiarity with the application process (Choy, 2001). Since they are the first in their family to attend college, first-generation students may not be able to ask family members about the application process or what qualities to look for in a school. When first-generation students decide to apply to college, they may realize they do not have the necessary funds to pay for college. Coming to this realization may discourage them from continuing with the application process.

As first-generation students enroll in college, there are still differences between them and continuing-generation students. These differences are seen in the types of institutions that first-generation students attend. For example, first-generation students are more likely to attend public, two-year institutions rather than four-year institutions, and they are less likely to attend full time (Choy, 2001). Choosing to enroll part-time in a public, two-year institution may be because of their need to work more hours, finish their degree faster, commute a distance from home, and manage financial burdens. First-generation students are more likely to state that completing their coursework quickly, living at home, working while attending school, or receiving adequate financial aid are important factors in their decision to enroll in a particular postsecondary institution (Choy). Co-curricular involvement requires an extra time commitment, therefore first-generation students who want to finish college quickly or work while attending college may choose not to participate in these activities. Co-curricular activities can also involve additional costs, which can hinder first-generation students from participating, especially if finances are a concern.

Challenges

Gaining admission to college is not the only challenge for first-generation students. One of the first challenges they face upon starting college is the transition from high school. A successful transition bridges the student's home environment with the collegiate environment, which is critical especially in the student's first year of study (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2006). Family and friends of first-generation students sometimes contribute to an uneasy transition. For instance, first-generation students view going to college as something that separates them from their family and friends, and this separation can make the transition difficult (Terenzini et al., 1994). Maintaining active, non-supportive ties off campus could pull the first-generation student away from integrating into the campus social life (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996). Simply lacking the support of family and friends can make the transition more difficult for a first-generation student (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). When students successfully separate from their home and become academically and socially integrated into the college environment, they are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Involve-

ment in student organizations, presence at campus programs, participation in study groups, or attendance at outside lectures are ways first-generation students can become academically and socially integrated in campus life, which can assist with persistence.

While in college, first-generation students enroll in and earn fewer credit hours, are more likely to live off campus, work more hours, participate less in out-of-class activities, have fewer non-academic peer interactions, and earn lower grades than their peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Enrolling in fewer hours and earning lower grades may be a consequence of working while attending college. Working more hours and living off campus can increase the likelihood that these students will participate less in extracurricular activities, athletic events, and volunteer work (Pascarella et al.). As a result of having less participation in these activities, first-generation students may have fewer non-academic interactions. Additionally, first-generation students tend to enroll in fewer humanities and fine arts courses, study fewer hours per week, and are less likely to participate in an honors program while in college (Pascarella et al.).

Unfortunately, there is additional discouraging information on first-generation college students. According to Choy (2001), first-generation college students are more than twice as likely to leave a four-year institution before their second year when compared to continuing-generation students. Leaving before their second year may be the result of low grades, working 35 or more hours per week, and low or moderate participation in campus activities. Even after three years, first-generation students are less likely to persist to a bachelor's degree. After five years, they are less likely to remain enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree (Pascarella et al., 2004). The lack of persistence is often attributed to enrolling part-time, working full-time, and being married (Choy).

Student Involvement Theory

The Effects of Involvement

Significant research has been conducted regarding the involvement of students in and out of the classroom in correlation to success in college. In particular, student involvement theory links the amount of time and energy a student spends on the collegiate experience to persistence (Astin, 1984). The more involved college students are in the academic and social aspects of campus life, the more they benefit in terms of learning and personal development (Huang & Chang, 2004). Astin's (1977) study of college students found that those students who devote much more time and effort to academic pursuits tend to become isolated from their peers, therefore showing below average changes in personalities and behaviors. Fischer (2007) found that through interactions in the social and academic

realms, students either reaffirm or reevaluate their initial goals and commitments. Students who lack sufficient interaction with others on campus or have negative experiences may decide to depart the university as a result of this reevaluation.

A primary concern is the amount of time spent on out-of-class activities and the effect it has on academics. Some faculty members believe spending too much time on co-curricular activities means students do not spend the required time needed to study and complete homework. However, Huang and Chang (2004) found a positive relationship between academic and co-curricular involvement. Therefore, when involvement in co-curricular activities increases, there is a corresponding increase in academic involvement. Some of these co-curricular involvements included participation in campus-wide activities, departmental activities, student clubs, serving on committees, and designing activities for clubs or departments.

Involvement and First-Generation Students

Although significant research has been conducted on students' involvement and success, very little has been conducted specifically on first-generation students' involvement leading to their success. When researching college experiences and outcomes, Pascarella et al. (2004) found that first-generation students who participated in extracurricular involvement experienced stronger positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, sense of control over their own academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks. Additionally, some programs have been examined to see if involvement by first-generation students has any positive effects on their success. For example, Inkelas et al. (2006) studied the effect of living-learning (L/L) programs on transition issues of first-generation students. The study found that after controlling for individual levels of self-confidence, L/L programs significantly helped first-generation students with academic and social transitions to college compared to first-generation college students who were not participants in a L/L program (Inkelas et al.). Further research may provide a direct link between involvement and first-generation students.

Discussion

Even before first-generation students enroll in postsecondary education, research shows they are clearly at a disadvantage when compared to continuing-generation students. Their lack of knowledge and preparation makes it difficult to begin the process of enrolling in postsecondary education. Once first-generation students enter college, they continue to face challenges that are difficult to overcome unless the student is involved in and out of the classroom. Little research has been done on the effect of involvement on first-generation student success, but the research that has been conducted yields positive results.

Further studies should include research on first-generation students attending different types of institutions, such as two-year and four-year institutions. Research on non-traditional aged first-generation students is also necessary. Discovering if certain types of involvement lead to various levels of success would be beneficial. Since the numbers of first-generation students enrolling in postsecondary education are increasing, it is my hope that additional research becomes available on the experiences of this student population.

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