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The First-Generation Student Journey: Dismantling Obstacles to Success

Gretchenrae Callanta & Adam J. Ortiz

This article addresses the importance for student affairs professionals to have proficient knowledge of the issues facing first-generation college students. A first-generation college student, the child of parents who never attended or completed college, often faces much adversity due to the lack of cultural capital, familial animosity, confusion about socioeconomic status, and a shortage of institutional support. In most cases, the identity of a first-generation college student is entirely invisible to others unless the individual makes other people aware—an oftentimes embarrassing disclosure. The Documenting Effective Education Practice (DEEP) project “examined the everyday workings of a variety of educationally effective colleges and universities to learn what they do to promote student success” (Project DEEP Overview, n.d.). Campuses involved in Project DEEP focus specifically on first-generation students. In this article, the authors will explore the methodology and practices of these campuses, share personal stories as first-generation students, and highlight the importance of student affairs professionals who focus on the support and development of first-generation college students.

Background

First-generation college students are a difficult group to visibly identify. Whereas many marginalized identities are often visible due to physical identifiers such as gender or race, the first-generation college student exists in a world where, in most circumstances, he/she/ze must actively choose to disclose his/her/hir first-generation status. Scholarly research and personal experience has demonstrated that first-generation students face a high level of difficulty upon enter-

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Adam J. Ortiz is a first-year HESA student who received his B.A. in English from Wheaton College (MA) in 2005. His experiences as a bi-racial, first-generation student have led him to focus largely on the schism that exists between higher education and traditionally underrepresented identity groups. Adam aspires to one day become a faculty member and maybe even write a good book of poetry.

ing college. As future student affairs professionals and first-generation students ourselves, we have chosen to write about the importance of student affairs in the lives of this frequently ignored and potentially invisible minority group.

While institutions of higher education have traditionally been reserved for the cultural elite, institutional types such as junior colleges, community colleges, private colleges, online colleges, and an emphasis on diversity and access have opened up many doors to higher education for first-generation students. As a result, the attendance rate of first-generation students is at its highest level ever. In 1994, 59% of first-generation college hopefuls enrolled in some type of higher education institution within 2 years of graduating high school (Choy, 2001). As the numbers continue to climb, student affairs professionals must actively seek these students out and provide them with the support necessary to successfully complete a degree in higher education. First-generation students who attend 4-year colleges are twice as likely to drop out of school than are students with at least one parent who has earned a Bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). This startling statistic should serve as a warning sign that without proper support, first-generation college students face major roadblocks on the way to graduating. Student affairs professionals must be proactive in supporting first-generation students through as many functional areas as possible. Failing to do so will undoubtedly lead to the disadvantage of a struggling minority in higher education.

Project DEEP

Some of the most common difficulties faced by first-generation college students include: lack of academic preparedness prior to entering college, lack of admissions and financial aid prowess, lack of familial support, and a lack of general navigational ability within the higher education experience (Vargas, 2004). Since higher education is foreign to most first-generation students, healthy socialization, pre-college preparation, and confidence are constant struggles. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project, conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), assessed how institutions provided the services and support needed to ensure student success—specifically to those who identify as first-generation students. This project was formed “to examine the everyday workings of a variety of educationally effective colleges and universities to learn what they do to promote student success” (Project DEEP Overview, n.d.). Diverse types of campuses were involved in this project: large, small, public, private, selective, and non-selective. The campuses involved in Project DEEP have had remarkable success in maintaining increased graduation rates and ensuring all campus community members are invested in the success of their students by providing efficient while effective services and building intentional and long-lasting relationships.

Effective institutions have six common factors and conditions that contribute to their success: a “living” mission and a “lived” education philosophy, unshakable focus on student learning, clear pathways to student success, environments adapted for education enrichment, improvement-oriented campus culture, and shared responsibility for educational quality and student success (Project DEEP Overview, n.d.).

Our research will delve into Project DEEP while exploring our own higher education experiences as first-generation college students. One of us attended a DEEP campus while the other did not. Based on our experiences, we will make suggestions for how student affairs professionals can further enrich the time spent in higher education by those students who endure the struggles of the first-generation college student.

Adam’s Story

I do not quite remember the exact moment I decided to apply for college. If memory serves me correctly, I believe the only sincere impetus I had for doing so was a whimsical fantasy I had of some day becoming an English professor—having no real concept of what that meant. Despite coming from a family where no one had attended college, my mother always encouraged me to embrace my imagination and strengthen my mind by reading. As a result, I became fond of introspective poetry as a teenager and, based primarily on cinematic portrayals, decided it would be pretty cool to be Professor Ortiz. I still do.

As I said, no one in my family has ever attended college. My father has spent his life working in the radio business while my mother has devoted her energy to creating a beautiful home and family life for her children. Both of them, in their fields of focus, have been successful. The most important lesson I have learned from my parents is that happiness comes from embracing what we as human beings are good at. It would not be hyperbole to state that for as long as I can remember, I have been both plagued and blessed with an overactive imagination and an obsession with recondite philosophical ideas. Again, based on what I had seen in movies like *The Dead Poets Society* and *Finding Forrester*, I felt that my home would be in academia.

Unfortunately, I did not know where to begin. Because of various factors, my high school education was completed through a state-sanctioned correspondence program—the same type of program in which peripatetic adolescent celebrities enroll. As a result, when the time came to start thinking about applying to college, I was clueless about where to begin. I did not even know what college *was*. I distinctly remember sitting around the dinner table one afternoon with my mother musing over what type of degree I should apply for. During this particu-

lar conversation, we came to the conclusion that a Bachelor's degree is an intro-level degree for men and figured the female equivalent must be a Bachelorette's degree. Thankfully, we realized we needed help and sought the assistance of a college admissions counselor advertised in the newspaper.

At our initial meeting, the counselor was shocked by how little I knew about the college process. When she asked if I wanted to go to a state or private school, I shrugged. When she asked what I wanted to major in, I told her I did not know what that meant. When she asked what type of school I was looking for, I told her I wanted to go to one where I could become an English professor. In retrospect, I cannot help but wonder if she doubted I could survive in such a place, having so little knowledge. She used foreign words like "FAFSA" (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and "registrar." Again, I was clueless. Abysmally lost and disenchanted, I felt powerful discomfort and disbelief that I could ever fully understand the realm of higher education.

After our initial meeting, I gave up hope and started researching jobs that require no degree. I did not answer the counselor's follow-up phone calls, I did not work on applications, and I did not research schools. Every time I thought about doing so, I was reminded of the barrage of words I did not understand. Finally, one snowy night in December, I received a fiery telephone message from the counselor, informing me that her help was going to disappear if I did not take action immediately. She suggested, at the very least, that I visit Wheaton College—a school only 15 minutes from my house—and fill out their application. That night, I wrote a statement of purpose essay in which I described how I had fortuitously discovered Walt Whitman. My college experience, I always felt, would be equally providential.

The time I spent applying to Wheaton was tremendously emotional. Upon taking a campus tour of my future alma mater, I was overwhelmed with how peaceful a place the institution seemed to be. Located in the quaint town of Norton, MA, Wheaton is an archetypal old, private New England college, and has been used as a mock Harvard in a number of films. Among the brick buildings and ivory columns were students dressed in preppy winter attire, seemingly content within their comfortable, educated world. Every person I had the opportunity to speak to enthusiastically lauded their experiences at Wheaton College, noting that the pros outweighed the cons. One woman in particular, a student admissions interviewer, even went so far as to write me a personalized note after our talk, informing me that she had gone through pains to make sure the admissions office paid special attention to me. I would not know until studying student affairs, nearly 7 years later, how meaningful her action was.

Despite the high level of enthusiasm I felt for Wheaton, I felt a crushing blow the

moment my family received our FAFSA statement, indicating that our payment would be an amount that neither I nor my parents could realistically fathom. We were all floored—completely dumbfounded that anybody could afford to pay so much money. Again, I sank back into the hopeless feeling that my prospects of going to college were dim. I did not know about loans. I did not know about state schools. I did not understand community college options. I just knew that for a few weeks I had fantasized about some day wearing a Wheaton College sweater and getting that doctorate, and now the dream was over because of money. Still, I applied.

I was working at Barnes and Noble the day my decision letter arrived. My mom and sister got on the telephone and called me while I was at work, asking me if I wanted them to open up the envelope with a Wheaton logo on it. I recall saying something along the lines of, “Well, it doesn’t matter anyway since we can’t afford it. Go for it!” Within the next two minutes, my mom read me an acceptance letter, along with a notice informing me that I was being awarded an illustrious scholarship. I started crying because I was so overwhelmed with happiness. I immediately envisioned walking across the college green, book in hand, heading to class with those same students who were so enthusiastic when I visited.

I wish I had the space to detail all of my experiences at Wheaton, especially those that led me to become a graduate student studying higher education and student affairs. I learned a lot from an abundance of wonderful, influential people and ultimately feel as though I graduated with a high level of respect from both my peers and my mentors. Wheaton’s status as a DEEP campus undoubtedly played a significant role in my success. Yet, I experienced a tremendous number of challenges. I will focus on those experiences that I feel were most related to my background as a first-generation student. These experiences have driven me to a firm belief that first-generation students are a frequently ignored identity group on college campuses, and need as much assistance from student affairs professionals as possible.

One of Wheaton’s most effective practices, in my opinion, is its emphasis on the first-year experience. Prior to move-in day, incoming first-year students are required to read a social justice-related book and write a three-to-five-page reflection paper on what they found particularly interesting. Students also choose a first-year seminar course; an engaging class that serves as a semester-long introduction to the institution of higher education. The class facilitators make the courses intensely thought-provoking and also become the academic advisors for the group. I chose “Dracula, Frankenstein, and Mephistopheles: The Other in Film and Literature.” Upon moving into Wheaton I learned that those of us who chose the class were also put in the same residence hall. The value of this practice, in my opinion, cannot be overstated. The situation we were in—taking a

first-year seminar with students who possessed similar interests and who shared a residence hall—created a feeling of solidarity that was crucial to our healthy adjustment. The experience developed a social support network and allowed most of us to find friendships that would last the duration of the college experience.

Despite Wheaton's exceptional policies, however, there were still considerable challenges. During the first week of classes I found myself disheartened and scared because I realized how little I knew about so many areas of academics. In an introductory writing class, for instance, my professor mentioned the importance of a strong thesis statement, at which point I raised my hand and asked what a thesis statement was. The looks on the faces of my classmates made me feel like the weakest person in the room. Throughout my first 2 years at college, this was a common occurrence. While one could argue that this was purely the result of my home schooling, there were countless moments where fellow students were familiar with concepts and had cultural knowledge because they had grown up with the information circulating in their families. Thankfully, my strengths were creativity and critical thinking; two floatation devices I used while learning how to swim in the sea of academics.

How little I knew about the world of college further demonstrated my lack of cultural capital. Over the course of my 4 years at Wheaton, I accrued a substantial amount of cultural capital from many people, but one person in particular helped “train” me in the ways of fitting into the college environment. My best friend, and also the first person I met in my residence hall, is a gentleman named Matthew Wolfson. During our initial meeting, Matthew playfully claimed to be an Aristocrat with a yearning to someday become a Dandy. Hearing this, I let out a chuckle and pretended to understand his joke. Upon looking up those words in the dictionary, I still did not grasp the humor. Regardless, Matthew became my closest ally, and through the course of 4 years he helped transform me from an awkward, first-generation novice into a refined young academic. He taught me how to dress “properly,” the decorum of public dining, and how to use powerful words while speaking. People often use the film *Pretty Woman* to illustrate examples of accruing cultural capital. Vivian's transformation from a street prostitute to a posh “lady” has many parallels to my own journey from academic neophyte to well-informed graduate student.

Another area in which I struggled was reconciling my home and academic lives. My entry into the world of higher education meant an exit from the world of family, a common experience among first-generation students. Since neither I nor my parents had any idea what to expect in this experience, hurt feelings and misunderstanding formed a deep schism between us. While I was embarking on new and exciting adventures, my parents felt that I was abandoning them and rapidly becoming an academic snob. To a certain extent, they were right. As a

result of my own insecurities, I suddenly felt as though every ideological position I had been exposed to while growing up was incorrect and that the enlightened path could only be found within the confines of the intellectual mind. We often went weeks without speaking to one another, and when we did, it was almost always a superficial conversation. Simply put, I felt like my parents could not relate to my experiences and thus lost the desire to share them. It was not until commencement, when my parents playfully blew an air horn when my name was called, that I realized they were proud of my accomplishments in school. Fortunately, since then, we have reconciled our relationship and it was my mother who encouraged me the most to go to graduate school.

The most difficult element of college for me, as a first-generation student, was in knowing where to invest my time and energy. I knew I had to do well in classes. Aside from that, I received virtually no guidance in my decisions regarding my involvement. In most instances, my choices for extracurricular activities were accidental. For example, during my first year I got a job working in media services because I happened to bump into a recruiter looking for student employees. As a result, film editing became my campus job. With the sole intention of supporting my shy musician roommate, we both tried out for an a cappella group during sophomore year. Much to my surprise, I was selected. In addition, I wrote for the campus newspaper, acted in plays, produced the college president's tribute video, studied abroad, and for 2 years facilitated an education-based residential suite.

As enriching as many of these experiences were, they all served as an icy glass of water that would hit me in the face upon graduating. Had I come from a well-off family that supported the leisurely activities I chose to embrace in college, I probably would not have been so panicked while approaching commencement. Instead, I found myself holding a diploma, a student loan bill for \$60,000, and a resume that included "singing in an a cappella group." Given the opportunity, however, I would not change my college experience. I was exposed to some dynamic thought that formed the essence of who I am today, even though I found difficulty even getting a job waiting on tables due to my lack of preparedness and practical guidance. These particular experiences were the direct result of being a first-generation student trying to navigate an institution rich in history and tradition. While Wheaton's DEEP status—with its emphasis on first-year development and mentorship—no doubt helped me succeed in college, I still feel as though there are other crucial needs that could have been addressed. I would have benefited from a basic introduction to higher education as an institution, as well as financial, career, and social guidance.

Gretchenrae's Story

Neither of my parents went to college, even though my mother's parents had

worked in higher education as a financial aid officer and as a faculty member. My mother has worked jobs here and there while taking care of three children. My father has worked as a mechanic with the Boeing Company since 1986. Even so, college was encouraged and, in some ways, expected in my family. Together they moved to the United States from the Philippines in hopes of providing what most Filipino immigrant parents want for their children: better education and job opportunities (Espiritu, 2003, p. 179). My parents emphasized the importance of furthering my education to create a better life for myself—better than what they could provide for me. At that time, their desire for a better life for me ultimately motivated me to pursue higher education.

There was a buzz around the concept of college created by my family and my high school teachers. I was formally introduced to college and the application process during my junior year of high school. The thought of college was pleasant until I met the application process. My senior year of high school, I was enrolled in a study hall class that focused on excellence in academia and assisted students in the college application process. I can clearly recall the feeling of unfamiliarity when it came time to seriously pursue college. It seemed to come so naturally for some of my peers. I assumed it would come naturally for me too.

The class gave me an opportunity to visit one of our local colleges where I got a glimpse of post-secondary education—the world that I had only dreamt about. I was eager to explore the mysteries of college life. I wanted to know more than what I had seen in the movies or what I had heard from teachers. The class took a trip to Western Washington University (WWU) that spring. When we unloaded the bus to meet our tour guide, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sights. My heart warmed. As I saw bits and pieces of campus, I closed my eyes and tried to envision myself as one of “them”—college sweatshirt on, textbook in hand, chatting about philosophy. I was going to be in college, and I committed myself to doing what it would take to get there. Little did I know, I was only starting my marathon run to higher education.

I opened my eyes, and reality hit me. I went from touring WWU to applying to colleges in a snap. The application process was foreign to me, like studying a different language. I did not know what a personal statement was or what required paperwork like the “FAFSA” meant. The process evoked a sense of doubt and self-consciousness. I doubted whether or not I was meant to go to college because I could barely fill out the paperwork. I questioned my strength in surviving the academic rigor and the intensities of college life.

I decided to apply to Seattle University. I had a close family friend attending, and I had heard good things about the institution. Although far-fetched, I dreamt of going to school out of state at Stanford University, Brown University, or New

York University. Those were the big names in my head. My parents refused to allow me move out of state. Although I was expected to attend college, I felt forced to apply to schools close to home—similar to other Filipina women who are first-generation college students (Maramba, 2008). With that said, I knew that I could not get there anyway. Their refusal reinforced that.

I had very little familial support in college, let alone in the process of applying. It is common for children of parents who had not attended college to receive less help from their parents in applying to college (Choy, 2001). Their knowledge was limited. As my parents signed papers, they asked what each document was and what it meant. I described the bits and pieces of the document without really knowing them myself. It got to the point where they stopped asking me what they were signing, because we were all so frustrated by not knowing how to get through the process with ease. Their lack of investment in the application process rubbed off on me. It was tough to follow a new and unfamiliar process without the proper support—especially from the ones that had encouraged me from the beginning.

Things continued to go downhill when I received the results from my FAFSA statement. My Expected Family Contribution (EFC) was higher than we could afford. It was discouraging because I knew they could not pay for it. I had not received my notification letter yet, and my heart broke as my potential to be a Seattle University student slipped through my fingers.

The day I got my acceptance letter from Seattle University is still so clear to me—even five years later. My mother and I were in the car pulling up to the mailbox to check the mail before pulling into our driveway. I collected the mail, got back in the car, and started rifling through it in my lap. There was a large envelope from Seattle University addressed to me. I remember being told that if I received a large envelope it meant I got accepted. If I got a small envelope, it meant that I got rejected. I was ecstatic, to say the least. I ripped open the envelope, read the letter aloud, and screamed. I jumped out of the car and raced inside to tell my brothers and my father. Their reaction was one that I least expected. They replied with a mumbled, “okay.” That was it. Like a poke to a bubble in mid-air, my excitement had burst.

The lack of enthusiasm from my family continued when I moved to college. As I said my goodbyes to my parents, I realized that I was moving onto something new. I was leaving part of my life behind. My relationship with my family slowly dwindled as I continued through my undergraduate career. As I began to excel, the distance between me and my family grew. Filipina women whose parents did not go to college believe that all their daughter does in college is “just study” (Maramba, 2008, p. 340). My parents thought I had nothing else to do. They

wanted me home every weekend to take care of the household and to disregard anything that had to do with college while visiting. So, I tucked my homework away every weekend for the first year. They held me back, and I fell behind. They did not know that I needed to study to get the degree that they wanted for me.

I struggled in all aspects of college life—academically, socially, and emotionally. I doubted myself in the classroom, and I did not feel like I was at the intellectual level of my peers. I am still weighted by those feelings of doubt and lack of intelligence. I constantly compared myself to “them” and fed myself the idea that I was not fit for college. There were many moments when I felt silenced because I could not articulate myself in the way my peers could. I skipped class frequently to take jaunts to downtown Seattle where I got lost in the crowds of people who succumb to retail therapy. Socially, I did not connect with my fellow floor mates in my residence hall. I spent a lot of time with my roommate who I had known since high school. I found security in her. In addition, I did not get involved in extracurricular activities. Traditional Filipino parents believe that extracurricular activities are a “waste of time” (Maramba, 2008, p. 340). I felt as if college clubs and organizations and the students involved in them were out of my league anyway. I felt inadequate, because I did not possess the experience or skills to engage with other students.

I was doggy-paddling through the waves of college life. I started my first job as an Office Assistant at our on-campus Career Development Center (CDC). I hid it from my parents for awhile, because they only wanted me to focus on my studies. I knew I needed the financial assistance. Working in the office turned out to be one of the best experiences of my undergraduate career. The office was invested in me—not just as a work-study, but as a person and college student. They provided an outlet for me to unpack the feelings I had about my transition into college and struggling in academia. They helped me navigate my way across campus and seek services that would help me write college-level papers, get connected to student organizations, and build relationships with my faculty members.

They also helped me see a different side of college life. I had been so caught up in the notion of college being a place where one gets a degree to get a high-paying job upon graduation. The staff introduced me to the concept of vocation which Palmer (2000) defined as “a calling that I hear” (p. 4). Knowing that I was the first in my family to go to college, they knew there was a fire for success burning within me. They could tell that the fire for success was being smothered by my lack of knowledge of how to navigate college. I could not focus on what it really meant for me to be in college. Little did I know that I would define the college experience not by education in order to get a good job, but by finding meaning in life and utilizing one’s strengths.

In my second year at the CDC office, the director encouraged me to run for our student government, the Associated Students of Seattle University (ASSU). Serving as the Minority Representative on ASSU, I began my work with student affairs professionals and served on several university committees. While sitting down with our Dean of Students one day, he asked if I had thought about a career in student affairs. I had gotten so lost in trying to survive in the world of academia that I had not thought about what I was going to do after graduation. He encouraged me to attend the 2007 NASPA/ACPA Joint Conference and introduced me to the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP). A key component of the program is connecting with a student affairs professional who serves as a mentor for the year. I found a mentor, applied, and was accepted into the program for the 2007-2008 academic year. The program and my mentor helped me make meaning of my undergraduate experience and uncover what I was being called to do—become a student affairs professional.

Student affairs had given so much to me as an undergraduate, and I wanted to be able to provide that kind of aid and guidance for others who were in my shoes. Student affairs is something that “I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling” (Palmer, 2000, p. 25). The values of social justice and holistic growth are very much complementary to my own. Ultimately, discerning student affairs as my vocation and having strong mentoring relationships led me to graduate school—something that had seemed so unattainable a couple of years before. It was the experience and the personal touch of a mentor that made it realistic for me.

It took me a couple of years, but I found my niche. The student affairs professionals at Seattle University played a significant role in the outcome of my college experience and saved me from falling into the depths of self-doubt. They recognized my potential and guided me on a path to discovering the type of work in which I would fulfill a growing passion.

Discussion & Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Upon reflection of our respective struggles, we acknowledge that other first-generation students may not all share the same experiences that we have had. The practices we propose would be beneficial to those students who may endure the obstacles that both scholarly research and personal narrative have offered. These would begin to improve the experiences of first-generation students in college, on both DEEP and non-DEEP campuses. Not only will it help institutions create a more collaborative community internally, but it will also aid in the recruitment and retention of first-generation college students.

First, there should be an intentional, proactive influence on first-generation students as soon as they have been accepted into an institution. This could manifest itself in multiple ways. Schools should include the option for students to disclose on their applications if they are first-generation. Institutions should approach accepted students who have identified as such with a compassionate understanding that the student is beginning a daunting expedition into the unknown and may require assistance in various parts of the beginning of their collegiate journey. These may include, but are not limited to, applying for financial aid, connecting with faculty members, and knowing what other services are provided to aid in student success inside and outside of the classroom.

Basic information pamphlets on the college application and transition process would be an excellent resource for first-generation students. While ample information about college exists, oftentimes first-generation students quite literally do not know what to look for. Furthermore, a mentorship program should be established so that students have the option of building a connection with at least one person on campus. The mentoring relationship should begin prior to arrival, establishing rapport as well as making certain the student feels prepared.

As the welcoming semester draws near, first-generation students should be invited to an early orientation to be “systematically introduced and acclimated to campus mores” (Kinzie & Kuh, 2005, p. 2). An ideal first-generation orientation would include an introduction to on-campus resources, a brief history of higher education and related language, team-building programs, staff mentorship, and exposure to academic advisors with familiarity of first-generation challenges. This will give them an advantage in learning institutional etiquette, such as how to appropriately interact with professors and professional decorum. This orientation should include both student affairs professionals and academic affairs professionals. Students would have the opportunity to meet and build relationships with others in a similar academic position, and receive special attention by the orientation staff. The collaboration between academic and student affairs help develop and sustain learning communities that support these students (Kuh, 2005).

Parents are also stakeholders in the educational journey taken by students. An additional part of the orientation should include information for parents to aid in their own personal transition. Both of us found that, for our parents, sending a student to college with no parental preparation is destructive and traumatic. Although it is important to focus on the student’s life on campus, it is also important to build a bridge between the student’s parents and college life. Because first-generation students are likely to receive less support from their families while attending college (Thayer, 2000), we must take a holistic approach to the student transition.

Finally, first-generation students need rigorous career counseling through the duration of their undergraduate years. Effective career counseling would pay explicit attention to first-generation students and debunk the myth that college degrees automatically lead to financial stability. Career counseling should offer these students guidance in how to effectively choose campus involvement that would be beneficial to their interests, passions, and/or career goals. It should also encourage students to take inventories such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to better understand their learning styles and personalities. This will help guide students through the process of vocational discernment: discovering what college means to them and what it is they are being called to do.

Despite many of these services being “available” on college campuses, it is a responsibility of student affairs professionals to be intentional about seeking out first-generation students and ensuring that their needs are being met. Access to available services is not enough for them to be successful because they are not aware of what services will benefit them. Student affairs professionals must be cognizant of the fact that first-generation students are navigating through a world that is, in many cases, entirely foreign and that they cannot assume any level of competence.

Student affairs professionals impact student lives on many levels. The profession is about building intentional and long-lasting relationships. In addition to supporting students personally, they must also take responsibility for assisting in professional development. We must invest in programs and initiatives that work. As we look forward, student affairs professionals must keep in mind the first-generation student identity. First-generation students are susceptible to having their needs, both personal and professional, underestimated or ignored by those in academia. We must keep in mind that we are “an extension of the classroom” (Kezar, 2005). If we keep them at the forefront of our efforts, we may find ourselves creating a generation of enthusiastic, successful alumni who will someday be able to guide their own children through the process—the tradition—of higher education in the United States.

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