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Managing Culture Shock:

Supporting First-Generation Transitions to Higher Education

Ashley Kish

Diversity is one of the greatest challenges facing higher education. As educators, we explore services to support the variety of populations on campus, as well as the means to work through the difficulties that arise from bringing differences together. We focus on how we can improve our students education, to enhance their individual experiences and development. Each university addresses these challenges in unique and insightful ways. The following essay reflects my personal experience as a first-generation student at The University of Vermont, interning with Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC).

Cultural pluralism is a theme that has developed over the past several decades. Invoked by societal changes like civil and women's rights, the progression has had a direct impact on the sundry population of students entering our academies. As we work towards creating awareness and acceptance of the varying lifestyles, racial constructs, and ethnic practices that are present on each campus, we must also address the impact higher education has within each of these individual communities and on the collective student population. Administrators regularly pose questions about ways to improve our diversity initiatives through retention and recruitment efforts, as well as academic, financial, and counseling support services.

When we use the word "diversity," however, what categories do we include in the discussion? Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic social class seem to be at the forefront of our conversations. One group, however, is excluded from the dialogue. Though we consider social class, we do not relate it back to those students who are the first of their families to pursue higher education. First-generation students are among the population of students that bring special needs to university campuses. These students exist among the previously mentioned and regularly discussed populations. The first-generation identity, however, is not often addressed as a part of the other diverse factions. Nor is it mentioned with exclusivity outside these regularly specified identities. First-generation, then, is a hidden identity (J. Diaz, personal communication, February 15, 2002) in the eyes of the university.

First-Generation Identity

A first-generation student is someone whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez & Carroll, 1998). Many are also from low-income families. Because of these factors, first-generation students who decide to enter higher education often find themselves in difficult and alienating relationships with their friends and families.

Students, administrators, or faculty may notice first-generation individuals by their manner of dress, hairstyle, or use of language. Because first-generation is a hidden status, some may never be recognized as individuals within this group. The uniqueness of their experience, their culture, or the special needs they bring as they attend an institution of higher education are often overlooked. These students are required to function on a level unfamiliar to many non-first-generation college-going individuals, one that demands intense personal motivation, concentration, and perseverance.

According to Sean Collins (2000), issues of relative poverty, naïveté about large institutions, the role of family in their lives, and themes of resilience are common among first-generation students. Collins states that many first-generation students arrive at their college campus on their own, bringing with them a curious mixture of hope, confidence, and self-doubt, and a suitcase gripped in each hand, packed with clothes, paper and pens, compact disks, soap, shampoo, and toothpaste (p. 140).

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The University of Vermont's (UVM) 'Move-In Day' provides an accurate example of the unrecognized marginalization that occurs regularly on campuses. Some first-generation students grow up working on their parents' farms in order to contribute to the family income. Because of financial constraints, many have never traveled outside of Vermont. These students often move into residence halls with non-first-generation students that drive sport-utility vehicles loaded with outdoor sporting equipment, bass-pumping stereos, and tinted windows. Within the first hour of their arrival on campus, first-generation students are reminded of their financial, cultural, and familial differences. If they are able to survive the first semester, they will continue to encounter these types of personal comparisons.

The Cultural Divide

In *There Are Days I Wonder: First-Generation College Students Search for Cultural Membership in Higher Education*, Collins (2000) brings to the reader personal stories of several first-generation college students. In his dissertation, Collins notes,

Some felt familial support, others familial pressure, and others, the absence of family in their pursuit of an education. Those who were the first of their families to go to college spoke of having left friends and families – the familiar – for a new culture where full membership felt just out of reach. (2000, p. 87)

Torn between two cultures, family and education, first-generation students are in constant conflict. Their education separates them from the culture of family, but the university culture never fully welcomes them. R.L. Park's definition of marginality speaks in reference to this dichotomy (London, 1992, p. 2). He states that these students live and share in the life and traditions of two distinct cultures. They never quite want or are willing to break with their past, even if permitted to do so. Nor are they ever fully accepted, because of prejudice, in the culture in which they seek a place.

As many first-generation students move through the academy, their understanding of self is challenged. They change and mature as individuals through education, often becoming unrecognizable even to themselves. They grow distant from their past. Their relationships with family become strained. They find themselves unable to connect, or even feel comfortable, in the place they once called home.

If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about that fact. (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 72)

Richard Rodriguez, a Mexican-American writer, speaks about his personal pursuit of education in *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Taking the reader through his personal journey, Rodriguez looks through 20/20 hindsight on his personal struggles with the power of education. Coming from a place where education was the root of growing separation with his parents, as well as the trigger for self-reflective questions, he discusses his personal struggle with the cultural divide. In his reflection, Rodriguez shares,

One chooses to become a student. (Education is not an inevitable or natural step in growing up.) Here is a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself. (1982, p. 48)

Making the Decision

Rodriguez (1982) made the decision to become educated and pursue what his father considered the life of leisure through papers and books. For Collins (2000), the question (or lack thereof) about the pursuit was very different:

If education was the keystone of an overarching concept of opportunity, what was the connection between access and education? Education, for twelve years, had been partly an obligation and partly a place of comfort. In a quick turn, however, at the completion of the last year in high school, getting an education shifted from a requirement to an option of the privileged. Some of my intelligent and articulate peers 'chose' not to pursue

college while others, like myself, moved on without more thought than what was minimally required to complete the applications. When I contemplate those choice points, they seem so subtle and unannounced, and they have such profound implications. (p. 85)

First-generation students experience hope by idealizing the power of higher education. Education becomes the means to an end: the end of their familial financial struggle. Education is often perceived as the key to making life easier, the opportunity to work less and be paid more, reducing financial stress and solving the burdens of life. For some, there is a sense of achievement that comes when they receive acceptance into an institution, especially if accentuated with familial praise. Others will question if “success” in the academy is personally attainable. They will question whether they belong at an academic institution, where and if they will be accepted, as well as repeatedly struggle with their decision to attend.

Wrestling with the decision to attend or not to attend is more difficult for some than others. Students will have to seek a balance between their personal life expectations and family support or history. Some first-generation students will complete their education, seek a high paying job post-graduation, and work towards an easier life. Others will have difficulty dealing with the personal separation from family. They will have to decide whether or not they are able to stop working, removing a partial income that once aided their family. Finally, education will cause first-generation students to become different from the members of their family. They will have to find the balance between accepting their personal transition through education while maintaining a positive relationship with loved ones. They will feel distant from the life they once led.

According to London (1992), in order to experience academic success and social mobility, first-generation college students must shed one social identity and take on another. This identity transition is a slow, painful process. And unfortunately, all that is granted is often offset by both personal and social losses. Many students will mask their transition. Some will pretend to feel comfortable or happy. They will smile while quietly lurking in a place where they feel unwelcome. To move past the initial struggle it takes a first-generation student to arrive at the university, it is important to recognize what factors help or hinder their success.

Support Services

Building Bridges

London (1992) states that the most effective programs in terms of student success involve collaboration among universities, community colleges, and public schools to provide support for under-prepared students. These bridge programs, as well as systematic and comprehensive academic support until a student is firmly established within the institution, aid first-generation students in their transition to higher education. In order to support first-generation college students, universities should begin by developing a relationship with these students before they even enter the Academy.

In 1965, Congress established student service programs to help limited-income Americans enter universities and graduate. The TRiO Program is a result of that effort. The TRiO Program at The University of Vermont is housed in Academic Support Programs. The TRiO Program includes efforts like Project STAY (Services to Advance Yourself) and Upward Bound, sustaining university efforts to connect with first-generation students. Upward Bound is an assistance program designed to help high school students realize their goals for the future. Project STAY is a federally-funded program designed to provide tutorial and support services to students from limited-income families and those who are first-generation college students (UVM TRiO, 2002).

At The University of Vermont, Project STAY offers first-generation students programs that include graduate school exploration, laptop lending, free tutoring, tickets for cultural events donated to the University, a quiet study space, and a mentoring program. They are also granted parent scholarships to attend orientation, a TREK (outdoor orientation program) scholarship, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) fee waivers, and GRE prep courses through Continuing Education.

According to Carolyn Donahue, Outreach Coordinator for Project STAY/TRiO Programs at UVM, success with first-generation students comes by forming an early relationship (C. Donahue, personal communication,

March 2002). Meeting with students before they arrive on campus gives them a face to recognize and a place to find comfort where initial reassurance is lacking.

Organizations like Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) help with this process. VSAC is a non-profit public agency that works with Vermont students and adults interested in attending college or other forms of educational training after high school. Outreach Counselors work specifically with potential first-generation, limited-income, high school students interested in continuing their education. VSAC provides financial support, cultural programming, university field trips, and mentoring relationships, to aid individuals as they seek further education.

Donahue works directly with the VSAC Outreach Counselors once the students have entered The University of Vermont. Through the relationship she establishes with students and counselors, she is able to facilitate the connection between the students' history and their current needs from university services, therefore establishing a path for their success.

Social Struggles

Students must adapt academically and socially to their new institutional surroundings, and the extent to which they adapt can play a role in their postsecondary outcomes. Poor academic preparation, family responsibilities, and full-time work, for instance, can pose severe challenges to a student's ability to integrate into postsecondary institutional life. In addition to these social and academic adaptations, first-generation students face the additional task of cultural adaptation. Specifically, there is a distinct element of "cultural mobility" associated with postsecondary enrollment, particularly if no other family member has had any postsecondary education. While many students have no trouble making this transition, others may encounter conflict between the cultures of their families/friends and their new college culture. How first-generation students negotiate these conflicts may influence their ultimate success. (Nunez & Carroll, 1998, p. 2)

First-generation students within the Academy have an opportunity that was not accessible to their parents. Their education begins to transform how they think. It helps them further define what they believe, and it creates new images of life and understanding about the world around them. Conversations about the experience of first-generation college students are necessary in order to provide an environment where these students can be successful. Denying this population attention, as well as any other underrepresented population, draws away the support, recognition, and relationships they deserve in order to feel connected to the university. Initiatives like Upward Bound and Project STAY help create the opportunity for limited-income, first-generation students to find a welcoming community within institutions. At times, these programs will not be enough.

Habitus, for first-generation students, is a complex interplay between the culture of origin and the culture of college. It is successfully straddled for some, and for others it requires a leap or a dash to the end. Students who feel marginalized experience feelings of disconnection, a sense of dissatisfaction, and may in some cases withdraw from college culture, or just plain withdraw from college. (Collins, 2000, p. 59)

Administrators, as well as students, are guilty of assuming a level of privilege that comes with attending institutions of higher education. These assumptions of educational, financial, and social background generate the feelings of marginalization first-generation students experience. Social opportunities and discussions outside the academic classroom setting, as well as within, often perpetuate feelings of inferiority. When students are unable to participate in campus activities because of outside work requirements necessary to maintain income, they are held back from common university socializing. This sparks further awareness of their financial burden and may cause resentment towards others.

In the classroom, first-generation students recognize their lack of academic preparedness as it creates feelings of anxiety, frustration, or sadness. For some, these feelings of isolation provoke departure. For others, it becomes an experiment they are willing to try, albeit apprehensively. A student's acceptance to pursue education transforms their understanding and way of life. By gaining access to something no one in their family has experienced, these students are challenging their identity.

In the innocent belief that mobility is unproblematic, students are often unaware, at least initially, of its potential costs in personal and social dislocation. It soon becomes apparent, however, that old relations are changing and that new ones must be forged. It is not only when we see that negotiating cultural obstacles involved [sic] not just gain but loss – most of all the loss of a familiar past, including past self – that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish reported by first-generation students. (London, 1992, p. 10)

A common theme throughout research on first-generation students is the importance of personal relationships. Whether these relationships are formed with instructors, identified mentors and advisers, or developed support networks with fellow students they, along with support programs, have been identified as the primary resource aiding in the students' success. (London)

Familial Support

'I know my parents wonder about why I'm here sometimes. They wonder why I pay the money to take, like, a philosophy class – something that's not going to be a career move. At the same time, I feel like I'm living at the edge of being a college student, you know? Like everyone else here knows I'm from a poor town...that I'm poor, and I don't always feel like I belong with the rich people at school.' First-generation college freshman. (Collins, 2000, p. 47)

Nunez and Carroll (1998) report that the value families place on attaining postsecondary education influences the extent to which students choose to involve themselves in the institutional community. When working with first-generation students, research indicates that family participation and support varies. The spectrum includes students who have abandoned their homes in choosing to attend higher education, to parents who support their students throughout every step of the educational process.

Donahue (Personal, 2002) suggests that familial support is directly correlated to the success of many first-generation students. London (1992) reiterates that point and emphasizes the recruitment efforts to target first-generation students must also involve targeting appropriate family members who can provide support. The difficulty remains; family support may be an option for some, but it is not an option for all.

Collins (2000) refers to "The Shooting Star" archetype. The Shooting Stars are students who have had to sever relationships with family members and acquaintances back home in order to prosper in the college milieu. For these students the university becomes their primary support system when they are in need. Universities are not meant to serve as caretakers, nor as babysitters. They are, however, meant to provide guidance and support, which are the primary needs of Shooting Stars. Through academic advising, peer counseling, and mentor support, Shooting Stars have opportunities for assistance that aid where families may have left off.

Remaining Difficulties

UVM and VSAC have developed a strong community focus on helping first-generation students succeed. In their efforts to aid students, however, their struggles and frustrations are endless. The Outreach Counselors at VSAC encourage students to apply for admission to several universities. As admission letters arrive, the financial aid letters soon follow and serve as rejection notices. Though a student may receive academic admittance into a university, without adequate financial aid their academic admittance soon becomes financial denial.

Susie Moakley, an Outreach Counselor at VSAC, spoke of the disappointment and heartache students will experience when reviewing their financial aid package from universities ignorant or dismissive about the needs of first-generation students (Personal, 2002). Because many institutions have not placed value on meeting the needs of first-generation students, or they are unable to fulfill the funding required for a first-generation student's attendance, financial packages often become a first-generation student's deciding factor in admission. One of Moakley's aspiring veterinary students was recently accepted to a top school in animal science, but was disappointed as she read the financial aid letter and realized there was \$12,000 of unmet need. Her family income is \$15,000 a year.

University applications can also neglect first-generation students' determination. As activities are listed, part-time/full-time work is often disregarded. Because many first-generation students contribute to their family income, they work to provide rent, clothing, and food. This work replaces extra-curricular activities. Therefore, not only are first-generation students unable to speak about extracurricular school activities that often help determine admission, but they also have limited familiarity with any social activities that take place outside the direct academic environment.

Though we would like to watch all students graduate, it is important to recognize that graduation is not necessarily the goal of every student. Some first-generation students will choose to attend vocational schools in order to develop skills necessary to perform a given trade. Others prefer to attend four-year institutions and walk through graduation with their liberal arts degrees. For some, simply spending two years studying at a university will be an accomplishment. Emphasizing the importance of education is essential, but providing them with the capability to define their own level of achievement is even more crucial. All too often we expect, or presume, that each one of our students is here to graduate. For some, that admittance letter is a huge step. To be an ally for first-generation students, we must first recognize where they are coming from and allow them to define their own success.

Conclusion

This article is meant to initiate discussion about the difficulties, solutions, and value in retaining first-generation students. Diversity on university campuses is essential in creating communities of awareness. Recognizing that first-generation students are members of this essential concern is equally important. Ensuring the success of diversity through support services for first-generation students struggling within the campus culture is one avenue of meeting their needs while maintaining a culturally pluralistic community.

Unfortunately, first-generation is not only a hidden identity but also one that a student can rarely escape. First-generation undergraduate and graduate students alike share many of the same concerns, experiences, and struggles when entering or re-entering the Academy.

The words of fellow graduate student, Wilfrido Cruz (2002) of the University of Vermont, are part of the reason I bring the issues of first-generation students forward.

Not wanting to bother those around me, fearing a possible rejection, I ended up spending some nights out on the streets – along the shores of Lake Champlain – anticipating the sunrise, fighting the cool September breeze as I had once done on my way to Santa Cruz, California years before. My initial experience to The University of Vermont made me bitter. I was confused and felt somewhat out of place. I trusted no one but myself. I expected nothing from anyone. I became detached from classmates and other students. My first-year experience was terrible, despite my constant effort to make it as positive and productive as I possibly could. Nothing seemed to work. But somehow, and very effectively, I managed to fake a convincing smile to those around me. (Cruz, 2002, p. 32)

The experience of first-generation is one that affects not only our undergraduate student population, but one that also exists among our graduate students and fellow coworkers. As a first-generation college student, I retain a personal connection to the difficulties and insecurities first-generation students face on university campuses as well as throughout their lifetime. It has taken 27 years for me to accept my identity as a first-generation college student. Through the experiences shared above, pieces of my own story come alive.

In his 53rd year, my father the steelworker has made the decision to pursue a degree in social work. After 33 years out of the classroom, his greatest fear is College Writing 101. Humbled and grateful for the decision, I have learned that it is never too late to encourage the journey of education. He, too, will be a first-generation student walking on one of our campuses.

Hoping that I left my first-generation identity behind when I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I have recently come to accept that it is an identity that continues to travel with me. Both family and friends represent the history of my educational transformation. They will remain everlasting pieces of my story.

As a graduate student, it is difficult and humbling to identify as a first-generation student. The struggle to balance past with present is continuous. Interactions and discussions vary depending on the audience and the time they were introduced into my life. Therefore, the importance exists in giving students the opportunity to find confidence in themselves, their family, and their history, so they may pursue education and create life as they wish.

This essay does not even begin to describe the magnitude of the battle these students face. First-generation crosses the borders of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. To let the stories of Wilfrido Cruz and many others develop without attention would be unfortunate. Instead, we must recognize first-generation as an identity and create a community where they can feel welcome.

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