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Moving from Access to Success: How First-Generation Students of Color Can Build Resilience in Higher Education through Mentorship

Bianca N. Ramos

In recent years, the enrollment of first-generation students of color in higher education has increased across the nation, reflecting a slight improvement in college access for them. However, first-generation students of color continue to face a variety of challenges which impede their social and academic success and contribute to low retention rates at the university. In this article, I propose a holistic approach to mentorship to support first-generation students of color in their transition to college. I start this article with my scholarly narrative as a first-generation student of color and how my mentors played an important role in helping me build resilience in higher education. I also discuss guidelines to model an ethic of care and build resilience through mentorship.

Throughout my undergraduate years, my mentors played an important role in helping me build resilience. As a first-generation student of color from a low-income background, I battled with feelings of anxiety and self-doubt when I first arrived at the University of California, Irvine because I felt unprepared to go to college. During my first year, I felt overwhelmed with navigating the demands of a new environment centered around taking rigorous classes and getting involved on campus. I experienced a lot of pressure from being the “first” and also the “best” in everything I did. I experienced depression that stemmed from homesickness, and I was too afraid to admit it to myself. I was also on the verge of failing a course after receiving two failing midterm grades and for the first time, I felt inadequate. I did not want to fall on academic probation, so I reached out to my academic advisor who was very supportive. She referred me to the Counseling Center, where I learned to cope with my homesickness and overcome my depression. She also advised me to go to my professor’s office hours to discuss study strategies that ultimately helped me pass the course I was failing. This experience taught me the importance of asking for help, utilizing campus resources, and engaging in self-care. Most importantly, I learned to believe in myself and persevere. I realized that college would be a continuous learning experience with valuable lessons and opportunities for personal and professional growth, and I learned to make the most of my college experience with the support of my mentors.

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During my undergraduate years, I found a sense of belonging and purpose due to the strong relationships I had established with my mentors, many of whom were my academic advisors and supervisors in student affairs. My mentors made a positive impact on my life and education by demonstrating a commitment to student engagement and success. They helped me feel engaged and connected to campus by providing me with networking opportunities and referring me to campus resources. They also modeled an ethic of care by attending to my holistic well-being, validating my experiences, and supporting me in my educational and personal development. I am convinced that the support from my mentors is one of the reasons I made it through college as an undergraduate and will help me succeed in my graduate program.

Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to mentor, advocate, and empower students in higher education. In this article, I use my personal experience as a reflection point to introduce a holistic approach to mentorship, which seeks to understand the whole student and their lived experiences. I apply this approach specifically to first-generation students of color. I start by introducing some of the challenges of being a first-generation college student. Then, I discuss the role of mentors in supporting first-generation students of color holistically. I highlight Sanford's (1962) challenge and support theory and introduce modeling an ethic of care and counterstorytelling in mentorship.

Being a First-Generation College Student

In recent years, the presence and enrollment of first-generation students of color has increased in higher education across the nation (Strayhorn, 2007). However, colleges and universities still need to improve college access and completion for first-generation students. First-generation students are students enrolled in postsecondary education whose parents did not attend or graduate from college. These students often come from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds (Engle, 2007). Today, about 33% of college students are first-generation, but only 27% of first-generation students will complete their degrees within four years in the United States (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018). First-generation students often face challenges in accessing higher education and completing a degree successfully once they are enrolled at the university. The transition from high school to college can be difficult for first-generation students especially because they cannot look to their parents for guidance in navigating financial aid and college coursework. Therefore, first-generation, underrepresented students are less likely to successfully complete their bachelor's degree and less likely to attend graduate school and doctoral degree programs than students whose parents did attend college (Engle, 2007).

Some factors that continuously impede access to higher education for first-generation students include poor academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, limited parental involvement, support, and encouragement to attend college, limited knowledge about applying to college, and insufficient resources to pay for college (Engle, 2007). These barriers are significant and still prevalent for first-generation students today, and they continue to limit their ability and decrease their motivation to apply to college in the first place.

There is a need to close the persistent gaps in degree attainment among first-generation students of color in higher education. Student affairs professionals must acknowledge the impact of the opportunity gap and be cognizant of its influence on first-generation students of color, who are attempting to move from access to success in higher education. To respond to these needs and challenges, student affairs professionals can serve as mentors to first-generation students of color and help them build resilience while providing them with an optimal balance of challenge and support.

The Role of Student Affairs Professionals as Mentors

Mentors have the opportunity to shape a student's personal and professional development as well as encourage students to pursue their goals and help them build resilience in higher education. Mentorship is a developmental relationship that encourages learning, socialization, leadership, and career development among students who are growing a knowledge base (Johnson, 2016). Although professors dominate mentorship for undergraduate students in the U.S. higher education system, students also seek out student affairs professionals as mentors who can give advice about academics, mental health, or personal and financial issues (June, 2018). Through mentorship, student affairs professionals can provide guidance, support, and opportunities for first-generation students of color. For example, mentors can help first-generation students develop effective time management and study skills, increase their financial aid literacy, and access campus resources and personal and professional development opportunities.

First-generation students benefit from having a mentor who can help them navigate the academic and social transitions into college (Engle, 2007). Since many first-generation students have limited financial knowledge that is necessary to apply for financial aid, mentors can refer them to the financial aid office to build their financial literacy as well as promote scholarships and work-study opportunities to alleviate financial hardships (Mimura, Koonce, Plunkett, & Pleskus, 2015). Considering that first-generation students report experiencing depression and stress more frequently than non-first-generation students, mentors can support first-generation students by promoting awareness of mental health resources and counseling services (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). In addition to holding

regular check-ins, mentors can provide validation that first-generation students of color matter, belong on campus, and have the ability to succeed in higher education.

Mentorship can provide students with support that has positive effects on their college experience and cultivates grit and resilience. In this section, I discuss how mentors can support first-generation students of color by taking on a holistic approach to mentorship. I propose providing an optimal balance of challenge and support, modeling an ethic of care in mentorship, and engaging in counter-storytelling as a form of resistance.

Creating a Balance of Challenge and Support

Mentorship fosters genuine connections and provides support that first-generation students need when dealing with challenges in higher education. Mentors should assess students' needs and provide a balance of challenge and support, which is crucial for healthy development to transpire (Sanford, 1962). Too much support can lead students to become comfortable with what they know and rely heavily on their mentors to solve their problems, and too much challenge can overwhelm students (Jones & Abes, 2017). Bearing in mind that first-generation students of color face unique sets of challenges corresponding to each student's identities and lived experiences, mentors should assess what constitutes as support for their student mentees. For example, because many first-generation students have limited parental involvement and support, mentors can step in and fill the gaps in knowledge that first-generation students need to transition and navigate the demands of college (Engle, 2007). Ultimately, mentors can serve as a safety net while working to establish autonomy among first-generation students of color.

Through their guidance, mentors can provide a healthy balance of support and challenge by transferring responsibility to students for their own learning (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). In addition to providing support to first-generation students of color by listening and responding to their needs, mentors must also hold their mentees accountable to working towards their goals. To provide a level of challenge, mentors can encourage first-generation students to take ownership of their learning and development. For example, mentors can refer students to different resources that can help them make informed decisions, manage their academic workload, and attend to their mental health. Providing first-generation students with the opportunity to have agency in their learning and development can help them believe in themselves and build resilience in higher education.

Modeling an Ethic of Care in Mentorship

Having a mentor who genuinely cares and who is committed to student success can help first-generation students of color build resilience in higher education. Modeling an ethic of care in mentorship can improve the holistic well-being of students and foster a learning environment that inspires students to thrive, not just survive, in college (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). An ethic of care is best defined as “an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice” (Gilligan, 2011, para. 4), which requires one to be attentive, listen carefully and respectfully, and respond to an individual’s needs. In giving students the chance to have their own voice and share their narratives, mentors demonstrate care for the welfare of students and remind students that their experiences matter. This message is particularly significant for first-generation students of color because it is a step towards addressing individual, institutional, and systemic barriers that they continue to face.

With the ethic of care in mind, mentors can center the counternarratives of first-generation students of color by creating spaces to engage in counterstorytelling and challenge majoritarian stories. A majoritarian story tokenizes first-generation students of color and makes the assumption that they have access to the same educational opportunities as their white, non-first-generation peers (Yosso, 2006). Through counterstorytelling, first-generation students of color can challenge racialized assumptions, re-center their lived experiences as a form of resistance, and build community with other marginalized individuals who remind them that they are not alone in this struggle (Pendakur, 2016; Yosso, 2006). Rather than silencing or dismissing the voices of first-generation students of color, mentors can create spaces for this student population to engage in counterstorytelling to promote the welfare of students and amplify their resistance. It is important for mentors to listen to students’ stories and share their own narratives to provide a different perspective, as well as share resources to support students’ personal and professional development in higher education.

Modeling an ethic of care in mentorship promotes a holistic approach to supporting first-generation students of color. Caring about the holistic well-being of students requires mentors to evaluate students’ readiness to learn and achieve their goals as well as their engagement with the college environment (i.e. their perceived sense of belonging on campus) (Keeling, 2014). Mentors must understand that transitioning to college can be challenging for this unique student population, and they should dedicate ample time and attention to addressing academic and mental health issues and maintaining responsive, empathetic relationships with the students they support (Keeling 2014; Paine, 2013). Mentors can provide students with opportunities for self-reflection as well as create a safe space for students to discuss their concerns and process their emotions and

shortcomings (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). To demonstrate their commitment to student engagement and success, mentors can advocate for programs that foster student success as well as build partnerships and referral networks that increase the retention of first-generation students of color (Paine, 2013). An ethic of care can enhance student success by supporting students holistically and being responsive to their shifting needs.

Notably, mentors can make a positive impact on the lives of first-generation students of color through acts of caring. By modeling an ethic of care and demonstrating an interest in getting to know students holistically, mentors exhibit compassion that conveys to students that they matter and have the potential to succeed despite their ongoing challenges in higher education (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). Certainly, mentors can help shape students' success and build their resilience by modeling an ethic of care.

Conclusion

Despite the recent gains in access to higher education across the nation, first-generation students of color remain at a distinct disadvantage since they are at risk of not completing their college degree. This unique student population faces academic and non-academic challenges, and they must overcome financial, educational, and economic barriers in order to successfully graduate from college. In the interest of increasing college retention and graduation rates, student affairs professionals must serve as mentors and create success pathways for first-generation students of color by helping them discover, develop, and achieve their full potential. Mentors can provide holistic support and a level of challenge, model an ethic of care, and create opportunities to engage in counterstorytelling to give voice to first-generation students of color. Ultimately, mentors serve as a fundamental bridge to success and can help students build resilience in higher education. I am grateful for my mentors because they were instrumental in getting me to where I am now, and I hope to play an important role in promoting college access and success for first-generation students of color.

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