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First Generation College Students: The Barriers Against and
Avenues Toward Success

Presented By

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Global and Historical Perspectives on Education

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Abstract

Through a review of literature currently available on first generation college students, this paper will highlight the barriers this group of students face. These barriers will be classified into two areas: *pre-college* and *early-college transition*. At the conclusion of this paper, suggestions aimed at both institutions of higher education and educators will be provided. The suggestions will assist these groups of individuals to both develop a greater understanding of this population, and aid them in assisting these students on their path towards successful completion of their college degree. Future research will be explored to assist in the design and implementation of curriculum and programs that are designed specifically with first generation students in mind.

Throughout history, there have been numerous examples of first generation college students. They were immigrants, Native Americans, and even freed slaves. Sheila Mondale and Sarah Patten noted in *School: The Story of the American Public Education*, 2001, that when the American Civil War ended, “four million Americans were now free.... and an entire race was trying to go to school” (p. 46).

During the development of the American *common school* system, hundreds of students began school for the first time. New schools were opening from Massachusetts through the Midwest. Some towns were said to be using the development of these schools as a means of “economic expansion.... towns were competing with each other to develop their institutions, hoping to become county seats and rail centers” (Mondale, 2001, pg. 15). This was done because “it was important to them to have something to offer settlers” (Mondale, 2001, p. 47).

Terrell Strayhorn (2006) noted, “In recent years, access to higher education has been improved by traditionally underserved and underrepresented groups of students” (p. 83). This underrepresented group of students, known as first generation students, as cited by Strayhorn (2006), represents approximately 30% of all college enrollments today. With retention as a hot button topic in higher education today, college admissions representatives and administrators need to take notice of this newly appreciated market of students. A market where fewer than 25% of all post secondary enrollments are first generation college students, indicating that fewer first generation college students enroll in college after completing high school (Strayhorn, 2006).

Introducing a new group of students into the realm of higher education does not come easy. Lucila Sanchez and Laura Nichols (2007) identified comparative studies by K.V.T Bui (2002) and R. Riehl (1994) indicating that first generation college students often encounter more

challenges than do their peers whose parent or parents attended college. Sancehez and Nichols (2007) also noted “this body of research indicated that first generation college students experience difficulties prior to and during their college experience that make them vulnerable to lower academic performance” (p. 6). Daniel Jean (2010) stated in his dissertation, *The Academic and Social Adjustment of First Generation College Students*, “the majority of the research suggests first generation college students will face many barriers that will decrease their chances of attaining a degree” (p. 4). Strayhorn (2006) cited the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in his statement, “first generation students are less likely to graduate from college within 8 years.... and as low as 24% earn a college degree in this period” (p. 83). Strayhorn (2006) also noted “first generation college students are more likely to dropout after their first semester” (p. 84). Comparatively, Andrew McMurray and Darrin Sorrells (n.d.) described first generation college students as “less likely to earn a four year degree” compared to their non-first generation peers (p. 211).

Non-first generation college students, better known as traditional college students, are quite different from their peers. According to Moises Propspero and Shetel Vohra-Gupta (2007), traditional college students are more likely to have: higher ACT/SAT scores, have higher GPA's, have taken more rigorous high school courses, are white, have higher family incomes, have taken fewer remedial college courses, and are more likely to be employed full-time while in college.

Problem Statement

First generation college students head to school each day with numerous barriers that prevent them from being successful. This literature review will bring to light some of these barriers and will give some insight into what techniques and strategies can be used by faculty, administrators, and support services while working with first generation college students.

Literature Review

Pre-College Assessment of First Generation Students, who are they? Andrew McMurray and Darrin Sorrells (n.d.) defined first generation students as those students that come from homes in which neither parent graduated from a college or university. Zaneeta Daver, Karen Inkelas, Jeannie Leonard, and Kristen Vogt (2007) define first generation college students as those for whom both parents did not begin a post secondary degree. Without having parents who attended college, first generation students “receive little or no social and family support in making decisions to attend college” (Gold, 1995 as cited in Strayhorn, 2006, p. 84). Because these parents lack this experience to fall back on, they are unable to provide support to their children with the decisions they have to make throughout this *pre-college* process. However, Leasha Barry, Cynthia Hudley, Melissa Kelly, and Su-Je Cho (2009) argued against the previous statement made by Gold where they noted, “first generation college students receive social and emotional support from parents, and educational encouragement from parents equivalent to that of peers” (p. 55), which provides evidence that these parents may not be utilizing past experience to aid their child, but they are still parenting.

The Vice President of Academic Affairs for the Charlotte Campus of Johnson & Wales University, Peter Lehmuller, Ed. D, described first generation college students as “individuals that are poorly prepared academically and have a lack of self-efficiency,” that they are students “that have no connection to their schools, and they have no family members who have a connection either” (Personal Communication, October 1, 2010). Barry et al. agreed with Lehmuller in that first generation college students are “likely to have fewer individuals in their immediate social network who can understand and relate to their college experiences” (p. 57). Dr. Lehmuller discussed the financial profile of these students and noted that they are

“individuals that need to work outside the classroom, and have families who depend on them working” (Personal Communication, October 1, 2010). Barry et al., (2009) again agreed with Lehmuller noting, “these students are more likely to work longer hours and have greater family responsibilities” (p. 57). With this added pressure to not only concentrate on their studies, but also provide addition financial support to their families, it is no wonder that first generation students have more additional stressors than that of their non first generation counterparts.

Strayhorn (2006) described first generation college students as students that “are less likely to be academically prepared for college” (p. 99). McMurray and Sorrells (n.d) described these students as “largely unprepared for the drastic transition from high schools regimented school day to the perceived freedoms and responsibilities that accompany college life” (p. 211). Therefore, first generation college students are also “more apt to judge their own abilities and potential as inferior to others, making it more difficult for them to be successful” (Hellman 1996, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols 2007, as cited in McMurray and Sorrells, n.d., p. 211). These challenges “may inhibit students’ ability to integrate into the academic and social realms of college (Tinto 1993, as cited in Strayhorn 2006, p. 84). Furthermore, Terry Ishitani (2003) noted, “once enrolled, these students are less successful in their courses and are less likely to complete college” (as cited in Barry et al., 2009, p. 56).

Early College Transition for First Generation College Students: As we finish looking at the list of *pre-college* barriers that contribute to first generation college students successfully completing a college degree, McMurray and Sorrells (n.d.) remind us to “be aware of the unique needs of the population of students” (p. 213). Barry et al. (2009) noted, “such differences in the college experience of first generation students suggest that college may be especially stressful for them” (p.56). Strayhorn (2006) mentioned that academic and social integration are critical

factors that shape a student's college experience and influence student departure decisions. Strayhorn also noted in this 2006 study that academic integration was positively related to academic achievement and social integration was negatively related to college grades. Strayhorn's findings suggested that students who were satisfied with the intellectual life of college achieved higher GPAs. Vohra-Gupta and Prospero (2007) noted that a student's integration into college can have a significant bearing on their academic achievement, and that an unclear purpose for being in college, problems adjusting, and feelings of isolation are reasons for first generation college students to abandon their pursuit of a college education (p. 965). Jean (2010) cited Tinto (1988) who asserted, "The first year, particularly the first semester, is critical in the academic and social success of college students.... many first generation students will face issues regarding adjusting to a new environment with research showing a high risk for departure in the first year of college" (p. 14). Tinto (1987) cited in Jean (2010), proposed that, "in order to retain students, college personnel must assist students with their social and academic adjustment" (p. 11). To aid in this adjustment, the use of academic and social programs such as living-learning programs, summer bridging programs, and first year seminars may be utilized.

A living-learning program is defined as carefully calculated "residential communities [sic] with a shared academic or thematic focus" (Shairo & Levine, 1999, as cited in Daver et al., 2007, p. 405). Daver et al. cited research on several campuses conducted by Inkelas and Weisman (2003), Pike (1999), Pike, Schroeder, and Berry (1997), and Stassen (2003) concluding:

"Taken as a whole, these single institution studies suggest the potential of living-learning programs to consistently support all students in their college transition, regardless of their background characteristics. Although not usually designed with first generation

population as the target audience, most living-learning programs are committed to academic and social integration of their residents and may consequently be particularly beneficial to first generation college students” (Daver, 2007, p. 405).

One such notable living learning program was highlighted in the March 30, 2010, issue of the *USA Today* written by Krista Ramsey and Cliff Peale titled: First to go to college, they stay the course. The article described a University of Cincinnati special housing project aimed at helping first generation college students (Peale & Ramsey, 2010, n.p.). In this housing unit, 24 freshman first generation college students are all housed together off campus where they are supervised by a program coordinator who does everything from “wake-up calls to checking in with professors to make sure Gen-1 students keep their grades up and fit into campus life” (Peale & Ramsey, 2010, n.p.). The facility, called the Gen-1 House, has shown to be successful thus far. According to Ramsey and Peale, 35 of the 38 students that have resided in the house over the course of the last two academic years are still in school (Peale & Ramsey, 2010, n.p.). This is not by chance; students who live in this house are given “more support and attention than typical freshman, and a lot more structure” (Peale & Ramsey, 2010, n.p.). The structure comes in the form of a contract that includes curfew hours, quiet hours, and GPA standards. The students are also prohibited from returning home in the first five weeks, and cannot work more than 20 hours a week (Peale & Ramsey, 2010, n.p.).

Easing academic adjustment also lies in the hands of teachers. Research conducted in a recent study by Robert J. Walker (2008) may be utilized to determine what makes an effective teacher. This study concluded that “there are 12 identifiable personal and professional characteristics of an Effective Teacher: (1) Prepared, (2) Positive, (3) High Expectations, (4) Creative, (5) Fair, (6) Personal Touch, (7) Develops a Sense of Belonging, (8) Admits Mistakes,

(9) Sense of Humor, (10) Gives Respect to Students, (11) Forgiving, and (12) Compassionate” (p. 3-4).

Utilizing these characteristics could aid in the successful transition for first generation and non first generation college students alike. Terenzini et al. (1996), cited in Pascarella et al. (2004), believed first generation college students were less likely to perceive that faculty were concerned about students and teaching. Pascarella et al. (2004) also showed that first generation college students derive significantly greater educational benefits from engagement in academic or classroom activities, and that the number of hours studied, number of term papers or written reports completed, the number of unassigned books read, and scores on an overall measure of academic effort/involvement all had a more positive effect on a range of outcomes for first generation students. Those specific outcomes included: critical thinking, writing skills, and openness to diversity, learning for self-understanding, and internal locus. Furthermore Pascarella et al. (2004) noted that first generation students perhaps benefit more from their academic experiences than other students because these experiences act in a compensatory manner and thus contribute comparatively greater incremental increases in the first generation college students stock of cultural capital.

In their 2007 article, *Bridging the Gap: Reaching First-Generation Students in the Classroom*, for the *Journal of Instruction Psychology*, McMurray and Sorrels (n.d.) suggested that for an instructor to be successful teaching first generation college students one could employ the following tactics: Be conscious of demography, use illustrative examples, laugh, provided redemptive opportunities, always provide an “open door” and try to create a sense of community, and finally, go fish.

Expanding on the tactics:

Be Conscious of Demography. Teachers have to get to know their students. Ask a “few cursory questions . . . , don’t be intrusive, but be inquisitive of the background of the students” (p.211).

Use Illustrative Examples. McMurray and Sorrels (2007) cited Speirs-Neumeister and Rinker (2006) as identifying first generation college students as students “whom enter the classroom with a lower self-efficacy than other students . . . they are more likely to succeed in college if they begin to develop their own professional identity at an early stage in their undergraduate careers” (p.211). They suggested that we utilize “specific examples related to practical application of course material in the workplace . . . to help students conceptualize themselves as on a path toward professionalization” (p.212). Ellen Lagemann (1996) noted that John Dewey thought that teachers should “link the experiences children brought to school with the activities, relationships and materials that could be marshaled in the school to help them grow” (p.172). To elaborate further, one of Johann Pestalozzi’s key educational principles was being child centered; he stated that it is imperative to their education.

Laugh. Berk (1998) and Glen (2002) cited by McMurray and Sorrels (2007), believed that there is a pedagogical imperative for the use of humor, and that learning itself is actually enhanced when teachers are mindful of appropriate use of humor.

Provide Redemptive Opportunities. Be mindful that we are all prone to error from time to time. Since first generation college students have low self-efficacy, allow students the opportunity to rebound from their shortcomings. If not dealt with by the instructor early, “shortcomings and failures will cause irreparable harm to first generation college students” (McMurray and Sorrels, n.d., p. 212).

Always provide an "Open Door". Show the students that you're a "living breathing human, who was once, themselves, [sic] lowly undergraduate students" (p.213). Be present at on-campus and off-campus events involving your students. Show your first generation college students that "the life of a college professor may not be as dramatically different from that of 'regular folks'" (McMurray and Sorrels, n.d., p. 213).

And finally, *Go Fish*. Be aware of your students; understand the "unique needs" of this population of students. This may lead to a positive impact in their lives. Lagemann (1996) reminded us that Ella Young wrote, "what was crucial for good teaching were opportunities to think and experiment within a context of frank exchange and full respect" (McMurray and Sorrels, n.d., p. 177). This respect can be a two-way street. If time is taken to get to know the student, then the student will take the time to show you respect.

Historical Roots

As we look back at the suggestions listed above aimed at reaching first generation college students, our educational forefathers laid the foundation for what was necessary for a professional educator. In *Emile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1722) reminded us that we must be prepared and ourselves be educated. He wrote, "remember, you must be a man yourself before you can train a man; you yourself must set the pattern he shall copy" (p. 67). Johann Herbart (1806) reiterated this in his writings where he stated, "pedagogy is the science, which the teacher needs for himself, but he must also be master of the science of imparting his knowledge" (p. 84). Herbart wrote, "the aim of all those who educate and demand education is determined by the range of thought they bring to the subject" (p. 78).

Looking back at some of the historical roots of education, we can try to connect the philosophies of the past towards teaching the present, more specifically, first generation college

students. It is easy to see how a first generation student knows when it is time for them to break the mold and head to school. Rousseau (1972) reminded us that the calling for all students, both young and old, could only be heard for themselves. Rousseau (1972) wrote in *Emile*, “Will it not be too late to learn what he ought to know when the time comes to use it? I cannot tell; but this I do know, it is impossible to teach it sooner” (p. 152). Dewey wrote in *The School and Society* (2001), that “the world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation, something to do. Some are managers and others are subordinates” (p. 17). For first generation college students, the opportunity that is afforded to them through education is an opportunity to break the mold, to move from subordinate, to management. This can be done, but is more easily obtained through education.

Discussion

First generation college students are different than the average college student. They are psychologically handcuffed to believe that their college career will not end successfully. In general, they are less prepared, have lower incomes, a low self worth, and a family that cannot relate to the struggles they face daily in our classrooms. We, as instructors and administrators of this growing population of students, need to be aware of their differences, as well as the differences in our student population as a whole. We need to design effective programs and curriculum aimed towards first generation students as well as their non first generation counterparts alike. We need to stay up-to-date on research aimed at our disciplines, as well as research that highlights effective teaching and learning. Finally, we must continually re-design our classes so that all students will find rigor in their studies and success in their hard work.

Future Research

With programs like Gen-1 House in mind, future research is necessary to determine the level of effectiveness this type of academic and social program can have on first generation college students.

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