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ARTICLE

First Generation College Students: A Courageous Group in Transition

Emily M. Lehning

First-generation college students have distinctive needs for support. Institutions of higher learning can provide the proper support for students through needed services and interventions. This article will review the unique demographics and needs of first-generation college students. A model for practice is described and recommendations will be offered to encourage the persistence of first-generation students and the role of student service functions toward meeting that goal.

First-generation college students are an often-overlooked, but increasing, population of students with unique needs for support in the pursuit of higher education. While it is difficult to define a "typical" first-generation student, we can define challenges encountered by students who are the first in their immediate families to matriculate into the higher education system. As students encounter challenges, institutions of higher learning can intervene to provide the needed services and support for students. Koehler and Burke (1996) offer an intriguing description of the effect of these challenges on students and the potential impact of institutional intervention by using the analogy of "transforming the treadmill into a staircase." The services and support provided by institutions can essentially elevate students by encouraging persistence in degree attainment which will improve their social, economic, and occupational standings. The elevation can be likened to moving from a treadmill that remains relatively constant to a staircase that provides for upward mobility.

Demographics of First Generation Students

The United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (1998) reported that during the 1989-90 school year first-generation students made up 43 percent of post-secondary students. First-generation students are more likely than non-first-generation students to be Hispanic rather than white, non-Hispanic; female rather than male; from families that have incomes in the lowest quartile; older (thirty years or older); and married. They are also more likely to have dependents, receive financial assistance, work full-time (thirty-five hours or more per week), and enroll in public two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). When deciding between institutions, these students are more likely to consider factors such as the availability of financial assistance, the opportunity to complete course work in a short amount of time, the ability to live at home while attending college, and the availability

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of work while enrolled at the institution (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In most cases, the first-generation student can also be identified as non-traditional (over the age of twenty-four), residing in an off-campus residence, attending part-time, or having child(ren) or a combination of these characteristics. Considering these factors, first-generation students bring a unique set of needs to the institutions of higher education. Specifically tailoring recruitment and retention efforts to appeal to the needs of this population is necessary.

Unique Characteristics of First-Generation Students

For some first-generation students, the decision to pursue a degree at an institution of higher learning is in and of itself unique. For many other students, the decision to enroll in post-secondary education is the natural, logical step following high school graduation. Students with parents who have obtained college degrees have prepared for college in such a way that enrollment seems to be expected. For others, enrollment in college is a "deliberate attempt to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing" and "offers both opportunity and risk, since it represents a departure from family tradition" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 1).

Levine (1996) explored the ways in which the economically disadvantaged overcome the odds and matriculate to college. His study found that many parents classified as economically disadvantaged responded to questions about their children attending college as if the prospect was "unimaginable." He likened their responses to someone asking him if he would consider buying a yacht. Levine felt he had "no idea what to do with a yacht" and he was "just not a yacht person" (p. 2). In the same way, economically disadvantaged parents were just not "college people." Additional evidence can be found in the numbers. Levine reported students from families with income in the lowest-income quartile are two and one-half times less likely to enroll in college when compared with those whose families are in the highest-income quartile. Additionally, students in the lowest income quartile are eight times less likely to persist to degree attainment (p. 2).

Students who are first in their families to enroll in college may experience a phenomenon known as "breakaway guilt," a term characterized by London (1989) as the feeling that one or both parents are dependent on the student, and that leaving is essentially abandonment and betrayal. This phenomenon varies by culture, particularly in relation to the style, timing, pace, extent, and acceptance of separation. It may, however, occur in any culture and one must avoid absolute statements about the degree in which cultures experience this phenomenon. Additionally, college-educated parents also contribute to "breakaway guilt" in certain circumstances where one or both parents feel the child's leaving will create an emotional or financial hardship. Generally, according to London (1989), the difficulties that surround separation occur in such families, but are less likely to be centered on the decision of whether to attend college. The focus of the "breakaway guilt" may include the decision of which institution, or the physical proximity of the institution, the child chooses.

Environmental Factors Influencing First-Generation Students

Parental and peer support transcends the decision to attend college. The network of support that can be accessed by first-generation students is essential to the retention of students. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) found that there is a significant difference in the perceived support from families for college attendance between first and second-generation college students. The researchers attribute this difference to the fact that parents who have attended college have the ability to pass along pertinent information to their children. Parents without college experience do not have this ability. The researchers explain that accurate information and positive involvement by parents in the college experience increase the likelihood of success by students.

Parent and peer support are key factors in students' decision to attend college, their persistence to graduation, and their meeting of family expectations about college. Riehl (1994) found that the first semester grade point averages (GPAs) of first-generation students were slightly lower than those of other students. These results are plausible, with the understanding that first-generation students come from families in which the knowledge of the demands of the university in terms of academic expectations and the availability of resources, theoretically, would be lower than in families in which at least one parent attended a university. Further, the student might have had little exposure to the new environment, and the pressures of navigating a college campus and adjusting to the academic demands may lead to a phenomenon known as transfer shock. Transfer shock is defined as a dip in GPA experienced by students following transfer to a new institution (Rendon, 1995).

Ting (1998) compared cognitive and psychosocial variables as they relate to first-generation, low-income students. He found high school rank, successful leadership experience, and demonstrated community service to be the strongest indicators of future success. The psychosocial indicators tend to be stronger predictors for GPA in the second semester, while cognitive predictors such as class rank, ACT composite scores, and high school GPA indicate first semester performance. The information from Ting's study supports the philosophy of student involvement as a means of retaining students and contributing to academic success. Opportunities to perform in leadership roles and serve the community may also enhance the chances of retaining students.

A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Center for Educational Statistics (1998) examined two important factors in retention - academic and social integration. They examined how often first-generation students participated in activities that serve as indicators of integration. The result was a composite score for each of the two types of integration. The academic integration scores were based on student responses about how often they attended career-related lectures, met with their advisors concerning academic plans, talked about academic matters with a member of the faculty, or participated in study groups with other students. Social integration was based on how often they went places with friends from school, participated in school clubs, had contact with a member of the faculty outside of class, or participated in student assistance centers/programs. The study found that first-generation students exhibited lower levels of both academic and social integration when compared to other students from families whose parents had at least a minimal amount of college experience.

Model for Practice

Koehler and Burke (1996) offered an example of how one institution was meeting the unique needs of first-generation students. Other institutions have created a model that includes remedial courses and other interventions after the student has been admitted, taken placement exams, and acquired financial assistance. The researchers found that the students were often disillusioned that they did not have the skills necessary to succeed in their new environment. The authors highlighted Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois in its efforts to offer intervention for first-generation students. This initiative was in the form of the Transition Class, an alternative to the traditional sequence of events through which students enter college.

The Transition Class was described as a twelve-week, non-graded course that was offered at no cost to students. The students enrolled before applying for college, completing placement exams, or applying for financial assistance. The purpose of the course was to allow students to gain a better understanding of the college environment, including the expectations and demands of college attendance. The environment was designed to be "safe, supportive, low-risk" (p.2). The curriculum included academic, social, and emotional skill building exercises through collaborative and active learning methods. Instructors hoped to help students identify potential difficulties prior to enrollment. For example, students could learn about options for childcare and secure a provider prior to the first week of class.

The Transition Class allowed first-generation college students to access information about the college environment prior to investing time, money, and effort into their education. For some students, this may be the only source for information of this kind. Targeted follow-up of students who completed the Transition Class showed an increase in student GPA. In 1993, only 37 percent of the students who qualified for funds through the Public Assistance Vocational Program (PAV) completed the Transition Class. The average GPA was 2.5 with 124 credit hours completed. In 1994, 100 percent of PAV qualifying students completed the Transition Class with an average GPA of 3.25 and 355 credit hours completed.

Recommendations

First-generation college students have a wide variety of needs and challenges. In order to provide all students with the best possible education, it is necessary to prepare programs and services that address the needs and concerns of students who are the first in their immediate families to enroll in college. The programs must be designed to help students obtain information about the college experience, learn about the expectation of college students, and balance the changing relationships with family and peers. These interventions are especially meaningful for a population that is facing the greatest of opportunities with a relatively weak foundation of prior knowledge about the college experience.

Rendon (1995) suggested that high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions coordinate efforts to encourage higher educational opportunities for students

in an effort to ease the transition from one level of institution to another. Providing for seamless articulation through increased communication will help students understand each level in the education system, and increased knowledge about the college experience will help reduce the risk of attrition. Visits to campus, mentoring relationships between college students and potential at-risk students, and adequate academic preparation will all contribute to more successful experiences. Institutions can begin to foster relationships with potential students early in their educational development. These efforts can help bridge the college experience to other educational settings.

Bridge programs can serve a twofold purpose. First, a program in the form of a course can give students a chance to essentially "test drive" the university setting before investing time, energy, and financial resources. The "test drive" can help students (a) understand the expectations of the college; (b) receive information on academic programs, campus services and cultural, social, and professional offerings; and (c) develop skills for future success. Secondly bridge programs can informally assess student ability and progress with the hope of identifying special needs. Institutions often can project a more personal, caring environment through a bridge program that allows students to interact with university personnel and peers in a low-risk environment.

There are many preventive measures that institutions may embrace. For example, simply informing faculty, administrators, and staff of the unique needs and risks for first-generation students can encourage a more accepting environment. The faculty should have methods and tools at their disposal that allow them to support the efforts of first-generation students without compromising their academic standards. Through this type of intervention, students benefit from quality interaction and instruction in the classroom.

Institutions may find that, by front-loading resources, students are supported and encouraged early to provide for a total quality experience. Front-loading resources is an effort by institutions to place the services, people, and programs which are most student-centered into the first year experience (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Initial successes may help students achieve the critical integration in both the academic and social arenas. First-year orientation programs, quality academic advising, and strong academic programs will serve students who may need the extra support early in their academic careers. Additionally, social and educational programs in residence halls, on campuses that have them, may help students establish a peer support group.

In order to better serve the needs of first generation students, student affairs professionals should expand the focus on parental support to include significant others, children, and other family members. A special orientation program for the support group of first-generation students would be an effective way to explain the new demands and opportunities the student will be facing. Continual contact such as newsletters for parents or families and occasional programs that bring the students' supporters to campus would be a beneficial way to help connect the "two worlds" of the students.

First-generation students are a group of students that is obviously experiencing a strong transitions challenge, and student affairs professionals must provide the needed support. This support may come in the form of services, programs, and other interventions that help students feel integrated into the academic and social environment

of a college campus. One cannot fully assist students in their development without a concerted effort to help them understand and meet the expectations and demands of an undergraduate education. Without the needed support, students may find themselves on the "treadmill" with little hope of reaching the "staircase" to upward mobility.

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ARTICLE

Orientation Programs: A Synopsis of Their Significance

Heather L. Hadlock

In order to make adjustments that will help better meet the needs of new students, orientation directors must constantly evaluate their programs. The decisions that are made should be individualized to each individual college or university and the type of students it enrolls. Student populations are changing, and orientation staffs need to be aware of these changes and adjust their programs accordingly. This article explores the history, trends, purpose, participants, and goals of orientation programs.

Leaving for college brings about many anxieties for students and their families. Orientation programs provide opportunities for students to become acquainted with and adjusted to the campus, to meet faculty and staff, and to interact with other new and returning students. Orientation seems to make the college transition a bit easier for everyone involved.

There are many aspects of orientation. In order to provide these opportunities in a successful way, the orientation program must be well thought out and planned. There are several things to consider when planning and organizing orientation including when to conduct orientation, how to fund orientation, who to recruit to help (faculty, staff, administration, upper classmen, etc.), and what programmatic aspects to include.

History and Trends

Orientation programs date back to the beginning of higher education. Harvard was the first to implement a system in which experienced students assisted new students in their transition to the institution (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). As late as three decades ago, orientation often reflected the racist and sexist assumptions of the times. There were generally separate orientation sessions for men and women and very little for the few minority students. Orientation programs were almost completely social with little academic content. In the past, according to Gardner and Hansen (1993), college officials would sometimes tell students to "look to the left and look to the right and the two students you just looked at will not be there four years later when you graduate" (p.185). They tried to "weed-out" the students who wouldn't succeed instead of helping them achieve their goals. Fortunately, orientation programs no longer make negative predictions about the impending failure of students; rather, they are used as a tool to promote successful student learning. Orientation is now a highly sophisticated component of enrollment management which links admissions to orientation and advising to registration and matriculation to actually starting and continuing the first year of college (Gardner & Hansen, 1993).

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