

Helping First Generation College Students Succeed:
Review of How to Best Assist First Generation College Students

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Abstract

College students who begin college for the first time all have their share of difficulties, but the hardships for students whose parents do not have 4-year degrees (first-generation students) are more likely to be exacerbated. Not only do first-gen students earn lower grades than their peers who have at least one parent who has a 4-year degree (continuing-generation student), they also have significantly lower retention rates. Moreover, besides the academics, many first-generation students have more difficulty than continuing generation students accessing resources on campus. The lack of accessibility to resources and confusion on how to navigate college campuses is why many first-gen students do not graduate on time and are more likely than continuing generation students to drop out. Based on research conducted at Northwestern University, this paper includes data that support the need for colleges across our nation to implement a year-long mentorship program that will increase the chances of first-gen students succeeding.

Introduction

In the United States, college is perceived by many as a vehicle of social mobility. On the other hand, many others view college as the preservation of inequality because of the widening social-class achievement gap. Many first-generation students at two- and four-year institutions who come from families where the median family income is \$37,565 as opposed to the median family income of \$99,635 of continuing-generation students regard college as a chance to help provide for their families (Factsheet: First-Generation Students, 2016). College obviously seems like one of the most productive ways to increase social class, but the results for first-gen students highlight the reproduction and widening of the social-class achievement gap when compared to their continuing-gen counterparts. First-gen students are more likely to have lower retention rates and lower grades. Moreover, first-gen students are more likely than continuing-gen students to work and borrow more money. Studies reveal that the amount of money borrowed from the federal government by first-gen students increased from "13% in 1997 to approximately 37% in 2013" (Factsheet: First-Generation Students, 2016). According to special correspondent Kavitha Cardoza (2016), "in six years, 40 percent of first-generation students will have earned a bachelor's or associate's degree or a certificate, vs. 55 percent of their peers whose parents attended college." The results for low-income first-gen students are dismal because research shows that "around 90 percent of lower-income first-generation students don't graduate within six years, far below the national average for college completion" (Zinshteyn, 2016).

Even though the information above highlights the discrepancies in college completion rates of first-gen and continuing-gen students, there are other factors present that numbers cannot measure. For example, first-generation students frequently lack knowledge about

how to select a major, find an internship, or build their resumes (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Even worse is the fact that many first-gen students are not aware of the many resources available to them on campus because higher education emphasizes a middle-class culture that many first-gen students have to learn how to navigate. Thirty percent of higher ed students today are the first in their family to attend college, while 24 percent—4.5 million—are both first-generation and low-income (Opidee, 2015). It is imperative to address the needs of first-gen students because they represent a significant portion of the student body that attends higher ed institutions. Traditionally, the majority of assistance offered by universities and colleges for first-generation students focus on mitigating social class disparities by providing financial resources and academic skills.

The approach to address the needs of first-gen students have been to either provide funding and implement bridge programs that allow students to attend the college before the official start of the semester. While both these approaches have proven to have their benefits, neither of them teach first-gen students how to navigate their college experience. Traditional bridge programs at colleges and universities emphasize the importance of academics but fail to acknowledge how a first-gen student should achieve academics based on his or her social class. Moreover, their parents tend to not have the same professional networks as continuing-generation students. Not only are first-gen students more likely to enter college at a disadvantage; they are more likely to finish with fewer connections. By not acknowledging how first-gen students should navigate college based on their social class, a huge disservice is being done to them because if students are knowledgeable about how others in similar situations to them navigated college, they would be more aware as to how they should approach the many challenges that they are bound to encounter.

Background

An interesting study conducted at Northwestern University serves as the primary example of how to help first-gen students transition successfully into college. The study organized two panels (standard-condition and difference-education) made up of college juniors and seniors from a variety of backgrounds. Panelists participated on both the standard and difference-education condition, which meant that participants got the opportunity to hear the same group of individuals. All incoming freshmen, despite their social class, were invited to attend one of the two panels to avoid stigmatizing first-gen students. The standard approach panel emphasized financial skills and study tips. Moreover, in the traditional condition, panelists' stories were not linked to their social-class backgrounds. Therefore, participants did not learn how to best navigate through college based on their social-class backgrounds. Both the standard and the difference-education condition had a moderator who had a series of planned questions prepared. Panelists responses to the questions discussed the importance of academics and how they found success in college. The essential difference between the two interventions was that the panelists in the difference-education intervention acknowledged their social-class backgrounds. Panelists' stories during the difference-education condition explained how their real-life experiences help them to achieve in college. For example, panelists in the difference-education condition were asked:

“Can you provide an example of an obstacle that you faced when you came to [university name] and how you resolved it?” One first-generation panelist responded, “Because my parents didn’t

go to college, they weren't always able to provide me the advice I needed. So it was sometimes hard to figure out which classes to take and what I wanted to do in the future. But there are other people who can provide that advice, and I learned that I needed to rely on my adviser more than other students.”

In contrast, after previously mentioning her parents' graduate-level degrees, one continuing-generation panelist responded, “I went to a small private school, and it was great college prep. We got lots of one-on-one attention, so it was a big adjustment going into classes with 300 people. I felt less overwhelmed when I took the time to get to know other students in the class.” (Stephens, et al., 2014).

Both examples highlight how panelists used their social-class background to explain how they navigated through their unique college experience. This approach is beneficial for participants because they can learn ideas on how they should navigate through their college experience based on advice from the panelists. Students who listened to the first speaker understood that due to his upbringing, choosing classes was not easy. The first speaker also emphasized that he depended on advisers more than other students because his parents could not provide him the help that he required. On the contrary, advice from panelists in the standard condition explained that students should utilize tutors and professors' office hours, but lacked background specific advice.

Results

After the panels concluded, researchers collected data to assess if the difference-education intervention was as effective as they expected it to be. The assessment consisted of

participants' official first-year cumulative GPA's and surveys that assessed their understanding of what they learned from the panelists. The key outcomes that the surveys measured focused on how "difference matters (i.e., appreciation of difference) and willingness to consider different perspectives," the tendency to take advantage "(i.e., how often they e-mailed or met with professors, or sought extra help)," and psychosocial measures "(i.e., stress and anxiety, psychological adjustment, academic engagement, and social engagement)" (Stephens, et al., 2014). The results of the research conducted on both the standard and difference-education conditions revealed surprising results. The most notable outcomes were that students that participated in the difference-education intervention had higher grade-point averages and a significant increase in the odds of using various campus resources that help students with a range of issues (Jaschik, 2014). Specifically, first-gen students in the difference-education intervention had significantly higher cumulative GPA's than first-gen students in the standard tradition approach, but for continuing-generation students, the numbers are only slightly higher for those students who participated in the difference-education intervention. The results are similar for students who sought out campus resources. First-gen students who were a part of the difference-education intervention took advantage of the college resources more than first-gen students who participated in the standard condition, and that had a direct correlation on their academic performance. Most notably is that the difference-education intervention closed the social-class achievement gap by 63% when compared to the standard condition. By acknowledging how they could overcome hardships in college based on their backgrounds, first-gen students learned that they could achieve despite their circumstances and upbringing. Even though the study was intended to assist first-gen students, the numbers show that it has the potential to help all students when they are transitioning to college.

My Big Idea

Stemming from the research done at Northwestern University my big idea is to develop a year-long mentorship program. The mentorship process will begin with a panel modeled after the difference-education intervention. College seniors from a variety of backgrounds will serve as panelists that all incoming freshmen are encouraged to attend so that first-gen students are not stigmatized. Each panelist will emphasize on how they navigated college based on the background of their social class. This approach is intended to have two benefits: one is to address the achievement gap, and the other is to educate participants on the benefits of diversity. Students from all social-class backgrounds will learn that each student, despite his or her upbringing, can achieve. After panelists and students have an hour discussion about transitioning to college, all freshmen are encouraged to continue meeting with panelists for a year. Students who are interested in being mentored by one of the panelists for the remainder of the school year will be asked to complete a survey. The survey will ask questions that will help school officials pair panelists with mentees. For example, what's the #1 thing you would like to get out of your mentorship, and how would you prefer to communicate with your mentor? Before the official start date of the semester, students will know who their mentor is and what day and time they should meet them on a biweekly basis for the remainder of the year.

From the sophomore year of college, all students would be required to complete mentorship courses. The primary reason for the mentorship courses is to help prepare students for their mentorship roles when they become seniors. Each senior at the colleges that implement the mentorship program will be required to mentor a cohort of students for an entire year. The mentors and mentees will have various choices on to how they decide to meet, whether it be in

person or electronically, but it has to be on a biweekly basis for an entire academic school year. During the meetings, mentors will facilitate conversations that he or she feels is pertinent to their respective mentees. For examples, discussions might include but are not limited to, course selections, internships, scholarships, financial aid, navigating resources on the campus, academics, tutoring, introduction to foundation programs, information about career offices, resume writing, and connection to professors. While all of these topics are crucial to a student's success in transitioning to college, the mentors are to emphasize the importance of social-class backgrounds when transitioning to college. The expected outcome of the mentorship program I am advocating for is higher retention rates amongst first-gen students, significantly increase the rate of first-gen students that graduate on time, and most importantly, fostering a sense of belonging for all students. The well-known educational reformer, Horace Mann, once stated that "Doing nothing for others is the undoing of ourselves." As educators and beings of society where all the children of America depend on us despite race and socioeconomic status, it is our duty to them that we continue the fight and commitment to providing equity in education for all students.

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