

Academic Support for First-Generation Students at Community Colleges:

Does the Literature Support Practitioners?

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Abstract

First-generation students are becoming a larger population in post-secondary education and what are post-secondary institutions doing to be “college” ready for these students? A review of the literature will show that there is not enough action-based research available and what practitioners should do to better serve this underserved population.

Academic Support for First-Generation Students: Does the Literature Support Practitioners?

A Critical Practice Brief

As more and more jobs require some post-secondary training, colleges are seeing an increase of first-generation students. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2017), in the fall of 2015, 36% of students were first-generation students compared to years past. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute stated (2016), first-generation students face different challenges including overcoming academic and social barriers to navigating financial aid processes as compared to non-first generation students. Some first-generation students are non-traditional in age and can have other responsibilities such as families, full time jobs, serving as a caretaker, etc. For this paper, a first generation student is defined as:

“(1) A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree; (2) A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent & whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree; or (3) An individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent” (Regulations of the Offices of the Department of Education, 2016).

The challenges of first-generation students are well-known and well-studied in the literature.

The impact of the latest economic recession has created a need to obtain post-secondary education. This has brought a growing number of first-generation students to college campuses. First-generation students sometimes get stuck navigating post-secondary education on their own which can be scary and confusing. First-generation students, then, need supports in place to help them navigate the post-secondary terrain.

Upon reviewing the available literature, the researcher was surprised to see a lack of outcome-driven material related to academic support for first-generation students. While there was some beneficial literature, the majority focused on why first-generation students are different from non-first-generation students. It is helpful to have this background information to better serve first-generation students; however, the lack of research analyzing the outcomes of support for this demographic is detrimental to first-generation students. In this critique, the researcher will show how limited and narrow the research is in regards to academic support outcomes for first-generation students. Secondly, the researcher will briefly summarize what kind of guidance the slim literature can offer community college practitioners.

Nature and Scope of the Literature on First-Generation Students

Barriers for First-Generation Students

Much of the literature constitutes descriptive information regarding access and opportunities for first-generation students, but it does not offer much information about outcomes of academic supports for first-generation students. For example, DeFreitas & Rinn (2013) studied the role that self-concept plays in the success of first-generation students. There is significant research on the power of positive thinking; however, first-generation students need more assistance than being told they need to have a more positive self-concept. The article provides limited interventions with suggestions primarily focused on faculty, but with little to no research to support if these interventions provide the assistance or help that first-generation students need.

The research on self-concept in the article has value; however, it falls into the trap of stating *here is another obstacle that first-generation students face* without providing concrete evidence of *how* to improve or help first-generation students with this obstacle. It would have

been more beneficial to take the information that the authors learned and put it into practice. After implementation, the researchers could provide outcomes on these supports and if there were benefits in addressing first-generation students' academic self-concept and their success or challenges in the classroom. This article, unfortunately, is one that continues to document the commonly understood challenges that first-generation students face.

Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata (2016), conducted research on first-generation students at different types of post-secondary institutions. This study primarily looks at the different obstacles that first-generation students face. In the research, four major themes emerged: adjusting to a new setting, financial aid, reliable transportation, and college-home life balance. This is one of the few articles that looked at students in different settings to see if there are common themes. While the study specifically examined Two-Year Public Institutions, only one gender was utilized for this portion of the study.

It is important to be knowledgeable about the different obstacles that first-generation students encounter, this information will not provide a comprehensive view to post-secondary professionals needing to guide and assist first-generation students. This article could have taken one of those themes (i.e. reliable transportation) and studied programming related to that theme (such as a car-sharing program) and then researched attendance outcomes to see if the program was truly providing a valuable service to first-generation students.

Stebbleton & Soria (2012) discuss the academic obstacles that first-generation students encounter. The authors found that first-generation students have different obstacles compared to non-first-generation students such as work, family, skills, depression, etc. Also, first-generation students are less likely to take responsibility and place blame on the above obstacles which can create a vicious cycle for these students. The article does discuss a variety of academic support

options that could be implemented, but it does not provide information on the outcomes of these supports for first-generation students. Without outcome-driven data, it is just a guessing game in regards to providing academic support that sets up first-generation students for success.

Programmatic Interventions

Everett (2015), discusses the access and opportunities that community colleges provide for first-generation students but has very little information about supports for first-generation students. Community colleges are an affordable option for all students, and with the majority of first-generation students being low-income, it is often the route with the best financial outcome for first-generation students (as cited in Tucker, 2014). The article discusses the issue of retaining first-generation students due to the many obstacles that these students face and mentions some beneficial supports that could be provided: “These strategies included course-placement testing programs, tutoring programs, freshmen seminars, and comprehensive learning-assistance centers” (as cited in Adams, 2011). Also, the article references “a report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) that provided examples of many retention programs; community college personnel who are struggling with the issue can consult those who are successful for guidance” (Everett, 2015). The article does not discuss how these supports can be implemented to better assist this underserved population. Yet again, this is another article to remind us of these challenges and obstacles that first-generation students face, but the article lacks material to support and provide outcomes of these measures.

Going back to Stebleton & Soria’s (2012) article, it provided a variety of programmatic interventions that could be researched and analyzed to the benefit of first-generation students. Recommendations include, but were not limited to:

“easing the transition to college; encouraging engagement on the college/university campus, and promoting (re)entry for young and working adults. The authors (Engle and Tinto) further recommended that the transition to college can be eased through targeted advising, tutoring, and mentoring by faculty and peers. Peer mentoring programs have demonstrated to be effective with first-generation students and other historically underserved student groups, often pairing upper-class students with entering first-year students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Wilson & Arendale, 2011). Other initiatives have included intensive Summer Bridge programs as well as other targeted outreach program such as TRiO and McNair Scholars initiatives” (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012, p. 15).

There is a lack of discussion on how to ease the transition to college or how to encourage engagement on college campuses, but the article does provide some detailed information involving advising and tutoring. Each college professional should be knowledgeable about the supports on campus, so if there is a TRiO program or other programs that are geared towards first-generation students, advisors should be sharing that information with their students. Some students are more willing to seek out help and/or resources on their own while other students need a trusted individual like an advisor to do a warm hand-off in order for students to find out about said resources.

In regards to additional learning support, the article by Stebbleton & Soria (2012) reminds practitioners that first-generation students may have a gap in their skills. This gap can make first-generation students lack confidence in their academic abilities leading them to need additional assistance to gain that confidence. First-generation students can feel alienated due to this lack of confidence or other issues, and it can be difficult to feel like part of the college. These students

may also need mental or emotional support. Managing the many obstacles that first-generation students have on their plates can be tough, so it is important to have mental health services available to students whether that is available on-campus or off. This article had the most diverse information, but could have researched and reported on the outcomes of utilizing these supports for first-generation students.

Directions for Future Research and Conclusion

There is a lack of outcome-driven information in regards to supporting first-generation students, and this population will continue to remain underserved if these ideas do not turn into action. Practicing and analyzing these theories could provide a more successful experience for first-generation students in post-secondary education. Tutoring, advising, and faculty engagement are all important aspects of retaining students, but where is the documentation proving that these ideas truly help support and retain *first-generation students* as opposed to non-first-generation students?

As the first-generation population continues to grow in post-secondary education, researchers need to examine: what services are being implemented to help these students? What supports have been successful and why have they been successful? What supports have not been successful and why? What can we learn from challenging opportunities to potentially improve upon current or previous services? As demonstrated, the lack of research to support first-generation students is a disservice to our students, fellow educators, and post-secondary education.

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