

## Identifying Issues Surrounding First Generation Students

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### ABSTRACT

First-generation students compose a subpopulation within the institution of higher education, which exhibits its own set of resources in areas such as academic preparation, support systems, family background, and finances to apply to education. This quantitative study examined gaps and barriers to resources currently available to assist the population. The researchers utilized four pre-developed demographic questions along with a 34-item survey instrument assessing the experiences of first generation students, to gather the data presented in the study. The analysis involved coding and elementary data analysis of demographics and reporting frequencies. The 200 participants in the study identified as first-generation students at four-year universities within the United States. The majority of the participants surveyed were white (69.5%; n= 139),<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 17 and 26 (94.5%; n=189), and from families within the middle-class income bracket of (39.5%; n= 79). The results indicated that most common barrier to participants attending college was tuition-cost (63%; n=126), followed by a lack of information about a college, such as financial aid availability and required documents (34.5%; n=69). Over 64% (n=129) received support or guidance from support networks in the form of parents and/or guardians. The study provided information about the issues encountered by first-generation students, as well as the accessed support networks, and preferred resources.

### KEYWORDS

First-Generation Student; College Retention; Academic Preparation; Financial Assistance; Support Systems

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Identifying Issues Surrounding First-Generation Students*

First-generation students compose a distinct population within the higher education system with their own set of needs. They are “traditionally defined as students whose parents did not attend college and have a high school education or less.”<sup>1</sup> These students are without parents who are knowledgeable of the adjustment process and have very few role models to guide them through the process of achieving higher education.<sup>2</sup> The needs and concerns expressed by first-generation students throughout their educational career reveal the additional barriers of being the first in their family to embark on the path towards higher education compared to generational college students.

The educational experience of first-generation students and the issues encountered are similar to their classmates, however, they “typically lack the traditional support networks available to their peers whose parents earned degrees.”<sup>3</sup> The absence of this support network often leads first-generation students to navigate through the college system on their own and without the guidance needed. Their parents or guardians have limited knowledge about completing a college degree. Several community and academic institutions have developed various programs and services for students to assist in their degree completion. Resources such as college readiness sessions are made available to assist and guide students in overcoming the issues associated with not successfully completing college. However, first-generation students have continuously demonstrated low rates of degree completion compared to their non-first-generation peers.<sup>3</sup>

Appropriate intervention strategies to assist first-generation students with their degree completion can be developed by identifying issues they encounter during their college career. First-generation students are not accessing available resources compared to other students.<sup>2</sup> The rate of resource utilization is influenced by issues they encounter during their college careers, such as having a limited support system, poor academic preparation, and little financial assistance.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Social Capital Theory*

Social support networks and relationships have been identified as common themes in the literature concerning first-generation students and degree completion. Social Capital Theory focuses on social relationships and networking within a social situation and it refers to “the value of a relationship with another person that provides support and assistance in a given social situation.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Several participants identified by more than one race: Hispanic (34.5%; n=69), and African American (15%; n=30).

Furthermore, “the central premise of social capital is that social networks have value.”<sup>5</sup> This theory applies to first-generation students and provides a connection between social support and accessing resources.

First described by Pierre Bourdieu in 1980, Social Capital Theory provides an understanding of the importance of social support and its relationship to higher education. Social capital in the form of social support is a factor first-generation students lack, as they are without the support of parents who have completed higher education, while “non-first-generation college students arrive in college with social capital in the form of college knowledge derived from family members that aids them in navigating the institution and generating additional beneficial social capital.”<sup>4</sup> First-generation students are without social capital in the form available to non-first-generation students and must gather it from alternative social support systems. They have a disadvantage compared to their peers, which leads to greater deficiencies in social capital and culminates in a generational stagnation.<sup>4</sup> They must rely on support from others: alternative family members, peers, faculty, staff, and educators within the system of higher education. By creating these support systems, through social capital, they are provided with the guidance and assistance necessary to aid them in adjusting throughout the process of higher education.

Social support also facilitates social networking, which provides an opportunity for first-generation students to gain awareness of existing services and resources. According to Moschetti & Hudley, through social networks students can attain information and guidance as well as “emotional support that encourages a perception that the social, physical, and academic environments are negotiable and enables students to cognitively manage their new surroundings.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Social Capital Theory highlights that through relationships social capital can provide “encouragement and information about personal or academic decisions.”<sup>4</sup> Assistance with academic decisions and coursework are among the needs of first-generation students during their degree completion.

Social Capital Theory emphasizes the need for social support in aiding first-generation students in higher education. Alternative social support systems are necessary to provide the guidance that first-generation students lack. Social capital increases the ability of students to access resources through social networking. Social networking can create additional awareness and provide the information needed to navigate and locate resources for all students.

#### *Literature Review*

Several studies reported an increased amount of first-generation students attending college within the past twenty years. First generation college students represented 20% of first-year college students in 1992 compared to 30% in 2001.<sup>3,6</sup> Furthermore, within the last ten years, an average of one out of two students attending community college and one of every three students attending a four-year college were first-generation students.<sup>7</sup> Despite these growing numbers, first-generation students are “nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year than non-first-generation students.”<sup>8</sup> In comparison to their non-first-generation counterparts in undergraduate studies, they are also more likely to have lower grade point averages and are less inclined to complete their degrees.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Academic Performance and Preparation*

Other studies reported issues for first-generation students in areas such as “educational persistence, precollege academic preparation, and financing their college education.”<sup>1</sup> In the area of academic performance and preparation, first generation students are entering the college atmosphere with a lack of academic preparation or educational resilience as they are realizing “their high school curriculum was less than rigorous and that the academic expectations inherent in baccalaureate programs can be somewhat overwhelming, resulting in self-doubt.”<sup>2</sup> Through the use of regression analyses, systematic reviews, and demographic observations, studies conclude the transition from high school to college is an experience that leads to issues throughout their educational career.

#### *Financing Education*

First generation students also experience difficulties financing their education. Their families are more likely to be in the lowest income quartile and, as a result, are without the option of financial freedom, which contributes to the frequent need of loans to pay for college and other college-related expenses.<sup>10</sup> A study by Coffman determined “low income levels strongly influence factors such as having a support network, college debt, and degree completion.”<sup>10</sup> This study highlights the impact and influence financial difficulties have on degree completion for this group. Financial difficulty is one of the issues first generation students encounter as a “lack of financial support and subsequent loan indebtedness may affect chances of college success.”<sup>11</sup>

#### *Support Systems and Family Background*

Support systems and family background dictate the guidance first generation students receive. Coffman reports one issue encountered in achieving higher education, while being the first to attend college in one's family, is that family background can exert influence over educational decisions related to academic preparation, time management, and performing the student role.<sup>10</sup>

First-generation students do not have family members who have attended college and enter the college atmosphere with little knowledge on how to navigate the higher education system.<sup>1</sup>

The barriers first-generation students encounter must be addressed by higher education institutions. From the reported lack of traditional support from families and school systems,<sup>3</sup> to the lack of ability and motivation to utilize available campus resources, first-generation students enter the college system in an imbalanced state. Studies indicate the current barriers for first-generation students can be observed in a variety of forms such as limited support, resource utilization, role models, academic preparation, and financial knowledge.<sup>2,3,10</sup> Although many schools have implemented programs to address the academic gap between first-generation students and generational college students, increased efforts are beneficial to the well-being of first-generation students during their educational career. The aforementioned studies provide institutions of higher education with additional data to assist in the modification of existing programs or in the development or implementation of further strategies to encourage academic success by first-generation students.

Expanding on previous studies, we sought to obtain additional data describing students' awareness and utilization of available resources and information about resources being utilized by first-generation students. More specifically, we inquired about specific experiences and the impact of support systems on first-generation students. We posed the question, "What are the gaps and barriers in resources currently available to first generation students?" The objectives of the research include

- O<sub>1</sub>: identifying the areas in which first-generation students are exhibiting issues,
- O<sub>2</sub>: identifying whether first-generation students are utilizing available resources, and
- O<sub>3</sub>: identifying the presence or absence of a family, peer, or academic support system.

The following hypotheses were based on the identified barriers from previous studies.

H<sub>1</sub>: First-generation students exhibit deficiencies in the areas of financial assistance, academic preparation, and support networks.

H<sub>2</sub>: First-generation students are not utilizing resources.

H<sub>3</sub>: First-generation students with less support from family, peers, etc. experience more difficulties in the areas of financial assistance, and academic preparation.

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This research study identifies issues experienced by first-generation students and provides an increased understanding of the factors hindering program completion.

### *Study Setting*

We identified participants at a four-year higher educational institution. The individuals surveyed were provided the option of completing the survey in one sitting or completing the survey later and returning it to the designated drop-off area.

### *Participants and Sampling*

Participants were identified using a convenience sampling approach. The methods of recruitment included the locating potential participants across the university in common social areas and various college courses. Participants were 18 years of age or older and were currently enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students.

### *Survey Instrument*

The research method utilized in the study consisted of 4 pre-developed demographic questions with a 34-item survey instrument assessing the experiences of first-generation students. The estimated period for completing the survey was between 15 and 45 minutes. Each individual surveyed met the requirements of the study: being 18 years of age or older, self-identification as a first-generation student, and enrollment at the university in which the study was being conducted. Individuals were provided a thorough explanation of the research topic, the qualifications for taking the survey, and the consent form before being allowed to participate. The research study utilized a quantitative approach with a sample size of 200 students, as is necessary for generalization and reliability. The utilization of a quantitative study minimized bias and maximized objectivity.

### *Procedure*

The study received formal IRB permission prior to beginning the research.

We easily located first-generation students based on first-hand knowledge of programs and college courses they are associated with and involved in as students. This availability contributed to the convenience of sampling. The researchers were also able to modify and combine two surveys to meet the needs of the research study.

*Ethical Considerations*

The ethical considerations involved in the research study included anonymity, voluntary participation, and informed consent. The study referred to the ethical considerations outlined in the core values of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. We utilized three values: integrity, competence, and dignity and worth of a person.

We upheld the value of integrity as they acted according to the ethics surrounding procedures of research. Integrity requires social workers to be “continually aware of the profession’s mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, it requires social workers to act “honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.”<sup>12</sup>

The social work value of competence requires social workers to “continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice.”<sup>12</sup> Social workers are expected to contribute to the knowledge base by participating in activities that will enhance their skill set. We engaged in efforts contributing to the knowledge base surrounding the target population.

Valuing the dignity and worth of a person requires “social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.”<sup>12</sup> The researchers were deliberate and ethical in the way they treated the participants of the study, and they were respectful and mindful of the individuality of the participants.

We followed the ethical guidelines of informed consent by providing a consent form to the participants and verbally explaining the purpose of the research and the commitment entailed in participation. The ethical guideline of voluntary participation was followed by allowing the participants the option to withdraw from the study at any time. During the study, anonymity was observed because participants self-identified.

We took into consideration the concept of fairness in the distribution of surveys. Some participants questioned the reasoning for the researchers approaching him/her, which required an explanation of the importance of equal distribution when conducting research. We took efforts to ensure every potential participant received respect regardless of their participation in the research study. All participants were informed of minimal risks associated with the study: time and answering questions about the educational status of family members.

**RESULTS***Demographics*

A total of 200 total participants were surveyed. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 17 and 26 (94.5%; n=189). The identified races of participants were White (69.5%; n= 139); followed by Hispanic (34.5%; n=69) and African American (15%; n=30). The most commonly indicated college class was freshman (29%; n=59), followed by senior (23%; n=46), junior (23%; n=46), sophomore (22.5%; n=45), and graduate level (2%; n=4). Participants reported their perception of their family’s economic status as middle class (39.5%; n= 79), lower middle class (22.5%; n=45), working class (15.5%; n=31), upper-middle class (11.5%; n=23), and long term poverty (6%; n=12). Parents' highest education level was most often reported as high school (9th through 12th grade) (51.5%; n= 103) followed by some college attendance (31%; n= 62), middle school (5th through 8th grade) (13.5%; n= 27), and elementary school (kindergarten through 4th grade) (4%; n=8).

*Analysis and Results*

The data supported two of the hypotheses.

H<sub>1</sub> was supported and indicated that first-generation students experience difficulties in the areas of financial assistance, academic preparation, and support networks. Close to 70% (n=137) of participants reported financial barriers, and 40% (n=81) reported limited academic preparation. More specifically, participants reported obstacles of tuition cost (63%; n=126), and a lack of information about financial aid availability and required documents (34.5%; n=69).

The first hypothesis also stated that first-generation students would have difficulty with support networks. Although the calculation of the results revealed that participants received encouragement and support, it primarily came from parents (64.5%; n=129), friends (22.5%; n= 45), other relatives (19%; n=38), and siblings (16.5%; n=33), with limited support from those with access to higher education resources such as high school teachers/counselors (25%; n=50). Some participants reported that their college did not provide support to them as first-generation students (44.5%; n=89), with the remaining participants reporting yes (28%; n=56), or unsure (27.5%; n=55).

H<sub>2</sub> stated that first generation students were not utilizing resources and this was confirmed in the results. They reported their school was not providing support to first generation students (44.5%; n=89), despite the availability of resources on campus. To close the gaps, participants could identify services that would have been most helpful to them during their freshman year. All of those mentioned were available at the institution. They were not aware of the resources, explaining the lack of resource utilization on college campuses.

H<sub>3</sub> was inconclusive: first-generation students with less support from family, peers, etc. experience more difficulties in the areas of financial assistance, and academic preparation compared to first-generation students who indicated more support from family. The data revealed that despite the amount of support from a support system, participants were still experiencing issues with financial assistance and academic preparation. Participants have received support or guidance from support networks in the forms of parents/guardians (64.5%; n=129) followed by high school teachers/counselor (25%; n=50), friends (22.5%; n= 45), other relatives (19%; n=38), siblings (16.5%; n=33), while only 5.5% (n=11) reported receiving support from no one. Due to the limited amount of participants who indicated not having support (n=11), researchers could not support, nor reject the hypothesis.

Participants reported that they would have found support, information, or other services most helpful during their freshman year. The preferred form of this support would be financial guidance (47.5%; n=95), peer mentors (40.5%; n=81), faculty/staff mentors (39.5%; n=79), and tutoring (36.5%; n=73). The data also revealed that most participants somewhat agreed (41.5%, n=83) that they were satisfied with their performance in their course work; followed by agreed (40.5%; n=81), neutral (9.5%; n=19), somewhat disagree (7%; n=14), and disagree (1.5%; n=3).

The overall results identify resources, programs, and intervention strategies necessary to link first-generation students with the appropriate services. The findings support the researcher's predictions that first-generation students exhibiting issues in the areas of financial assistance, academic preparation, and support networks are not utilizing available resources.

## DISCUSSION

The results indicated that most participants encountered various barriers during their college experience. This study provides valuable information about the issues encountered by first-generation students, as well as the importance of accessing support networks and resources. Overall, first-generation students exhibiting issues in the areas of financial assistance, academic preparation, and support networks are not utilizing available resources. They continue to experience difficulties in the areas of financial assistance, academic preparation, and academic support systems. These findings support previous studies and lend additional information specifically related to types of resources that would be helpful for students entering college. They also provide information to higher education institutions about the importance of transitioning first-generation students.

### *Novelty of work*

The work provided novel information about the group as it highlighted the relationship between the issues experienced and access to available resources. The information collected also provided further insight into the issues encountered and the support utilized by first-generation students during their academic endeavors. In addition, the work in this study is directly related to the profession of social work and offers implications on the three levels of practice to assist professionals when working with first-generation students.

## CONCLUSION

Social workers can provide resources, education, and guidance needed to incoming or current first-generation students, as well as the individuals, or institutions affiliated with them. The profession of social work has an obligation and responsibility to assist marginalized populations, such as first-generation students. Social workers can use this data to inform the common levels of social work practice (micro, mezzo, and macro).

On the micro level, social workers can directly assist first-generation students prior to their enrollment in higher education or while they are working towards their degree. The micro area of practice can be directed by the data analysis as the results indicate an unawareness of the available resources and services provided. The unawareness of on-campus services can also translate into an unawareness of similar resources possibly provided within the student's community or high school. By obtaining competence in common problem areas, social workers can be informed and prepared to identify areas requiring assistance. Social workers can interact with first-generation students to identify the areas they are exhibiting issues in and provide information about the resources and services available to assist them.

Social workers can provide assistance at the mezzo level by working with first-generation students and their families. The study identified common issues experienced by first-generation students. This information can aid social workers in assisting families to develop a plan of action. The social worker can work with students and their families by assessing and planning various

strategies to overcome issues that may affect graduation. They can also help involve the student's family, especially parents, in enhancing and building a supportive network for the student throughout their educational career. In addition, they can provide education to family members about the process of achieving higher education and the role parents can have in supporting, encouraging or empowering to the student.

Social workers can help at the macro level by becoming involved with programs, policies, or legislation surrounding first-generation students and the issues they encounter. They can advocate for or help develop new programs and policies within universities, high schools, or communities that aim to provide resources or services that may not be currently available. Social workers can advocate on behalf of the first-generation student population on a legislative level to provide additional funding to public institutions or communities for the creation of new programs, resources, or services. Furthermore, social workers can engage in further research to contribute to the expansion of the knowledge base and to provide the evidence needed to help develop and implement interventions within the system of higher education for first-generation students.

### POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study was the participants' self-identification as first-generation students. Several participants were confused by the definition of "the first-generation student" and self-identified despite having college graduates as parents. This confusion was not calculated in the study as it led to the dismissal of several completed surveys and the need to locate additional participants that fit the correct definition of a first-generation student. The study did not contain a control group of generational college students making comparisons impossible. Although the sample size was 200 participants, the researchers did utilize a convenience sampling technique which affected the type of students who could participate based on time frames and areas in which researchers recruited.

Additional limitations of the study pertained to the length of the survey and the completion of surveys in a timely manner. First-generation students are not required to self-identify as such while enrolling in college, which created a limitation in that we had to locate the participants by verbally asking a student to self-identify. The continuous recruitment of participants provided a limitation to timely data collection. The length of the survey provided another limitation to the study as many participants were reluctant or refused to complete the survey due to a number of pages and the corresponding time commitment. This contributed to the participant's unwillingness to complete the surveys in the time allotted by the researchers and the preference toward taking and completing the surveys later. The researchers were unable to find and gather the completed surveys from the participants who chose to leave and had to engage in recruitment efforts of additional participants through snowball sampling techniques.

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