

First-generation college students: Determining the unique challenges attributing to academic success

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Abstract

For many students, college is an excellent pathway to explore their own interests, to greatly expand their social and cultural experiences, and to build a more promising career. However, recent research has shown that, when compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation college students (FGCS) are more likely to fall short of a college degree due to the arduous challenges they face (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The purpose of this study was to investigate any significant differences in challenges faced between FGCS and non-FGCS at LaGrange College and determine if these challenges have any correlation with factors leading to academic failure. This study utilized a survey-based method and all participants were recruited from the LaGrange College Research and Experiment Participation System operated by Sona System. Results for this study showed many significant differences that suggest FGCS more frequently encounter unique challenges than non-FGCS.

Introduction

- For the purpose of this study, FGCS are defined as students whose parents have not obtained a four-year degree
 - Hirudayaraj (2011) found that a lack of parental education can deprive the FGCS of the crucial cultural capital associated with higher education and the academic institutions.
 - FGCS are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008)
 - These challenges often become worse for FGCS at large universities where classes are more populated and interactions with faculty members can be infrequent (Kim, 2009)
 - Past research also indicates that many FGCS comprise certain, additional characteristics that may serve as a disadvantage as they pursue their college education...
 - They are more likely to be older, come from minority backgrounds, or have a disability (Bui, 2002; Hertel, 1992)
 - They are more likely to be non-native English speakers, immigrants, single parents, or financially independent from their parents (Bui, 2002)
 - They encounter more challenges with respect to being predominantly from a lower socioeconomic class (Bui, 2002)
 - FGCS tend to have lower levels of academic preparation and frequently need to be employed (often full-time) to help pay for educational and cost-of-living expenses (Jehangir, 2010)
- The purpose of this study is to determine the differences between FGCS and non-FGCS, in terms of the unique challenges they face.

Materials & Methods

Participants

- The study concluded with a total sample of 32
 - All participants were undergraduate students at LaGrange College
- 17 students classified as being first-generation; 15 students classified as being non-first-generation
- 16 males, 16 females
- 9 reported African American or Black; 22 reported European American or White; 1 reported Latinx
- Average age = 19.19 (range 18-22)

Methods

- Participants were recruited from the LaGrange College research pool; participants received class credit for participation
- Upon arrival, participants were provided with a writing utensil, an informed consent form, and a survey titled *College Students and Academic Success*
 - All participants were given the same copy of the survey
- Participants were given a brief overview of the study and informed that their participation was optional
- Signed informed consent forms were collected and participants began the surveys
 - The survey consisted of questions and Likert-type scales that aimed to determine a range of topics including...
 - Academic preparedness (e.g. parental guidance)
 - Academic/social challenges (e.g. utilizing advanced courses in high school; extracurricular involvement)
 - Specific demographic characteristics (e.g. average family income; ethnicity; marital status)
- Upon completion of the survey by all participants, they were all debriefed and then dismissed

Results

First generation students reported...

- Marginally significantly less agreement with, "My family is supportive and understanding of my college education.", $t(30) = 1.85, p = .078$
- Marginally significantly less agreement with, "I feel that my parents/guardians successfully prepared me for a college environment.", $t(30) = 1.99, p = .056$
- Marginally significantly less agreement with, "Before coming to college, I was involved in high school extracurricular activities.", $t(30) = 2.08, p = .051$
- Significantly less agreement with, "I am involved with extracurricular activities in college.", $t(30) = 2.07, p = .049$
- Significantly less agreement with, "I believe my institution provides me with the appropriate resources needed to succeed in college.", $t(30) = 2.32, p = .027$
- Significantly less agreement with, "I believe that with a college degree I will make more money.", $t(30) = 2.14, p = .041$

Types of Financial Aid By 1st Gen Status

Financial Aid	1 st Gen Reporting Usage	Non-1 st Gen Reporting Usage
Grants	14	7
Scholarships	17	13
Loans	11	6
No financial aid	0	1
Uncertain	0	0

Note. Participants selected all options that applied

- First-generation students self reported that they receive more financial aid
 - No first-generation student reported 'No financial aid'

Race by 1st Gen Status

Race	1 st Gen	Non-1 st Gen
African American or Black	5	4
European American or White	11	11
Latinx	1	0

- Compared to non-first generation students, first-generation students had more racial diversity

Other Variables of Interest By 1st Gen Status

	1 st Gen	Non-1 st Gen
Remedial classes		
Yes	4	4
No	12	9
Parents pay for college		
Yes	6	8
No	1	5
Have a job to pay for school		
Yes	11	6
No	5	9

- More first-generation students reported they had a job to pay for school as compared to non-first-generation students

Conclusion

- The results of this study successfully supported my hypothesis that first-generation college students are more likely to face various academic and social challenges in which their non-first-generation student peers will not.
- Many of the challenges reported in this study were in correlation with some of the ones found throughout secondary research.

Limitations

- Small sample size (n=32)
- Sample was from a small private college (on the more expensive side; less first-gen students)

Future Research

- A longitudinal study may be conducted to track the academic progress of incoming first-generation freshman, up until their senior year.
- This could potentially give better insight on challenges that may be indicators to an individual's academic success throughout their college years.

References

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