Being First: Overcoming the Unknown

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Research higher education outcomes has found a consistent pattern of positive relationships between diversity, learning and democracy. At the November, 1999 meeting of the National Association for State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), Gurin reported that students who experienced the most racial and ethnic diversity in classroom settings and in informal interactions with peers showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills.

When we take a university-wide snapshot of our students we often look at demographics such as race, gender, socio-economic level, etc. This helps us with understanding the diversity of our students. Although one part of our students’ diversity that is often overlooked is whether the students’ parents attended college. At two year and four year institutions the percentages of first generation students attending college is quite significant. Using Penn State University as an example 40% of the 80,000 undergraduates system-wide are first generation students. According to McConnell (2000), 55% of all first generation students attend community colleges. While college attendance by first generation students may be moving in a positive direction, not having college graduates as parents, appears to increases the likelihood that attrition will occur. According to The Condition of Education 2000, a report by the U. S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) being a first generation student is a risk factor for persistence through to college graduation.

Characteristics of Being First

According to the national data (Iman& Mayes, 1999; NCES,1998) first generation students are more likely to be female and older than the traditional college student. They are more likely have employment off campus and actually work a full-time job. These students are also more likely to be married and have dependents. Students of color particularly African Americans and Hispanics are highly represented among first generation students. Among traditional age first generation college students, the characteristic that is most common is their lack of personal experience with the culture of higher education (Gardner, 1996). For most students being on a college campus is initially anxiety producing. The difference between first generation students and their peers is not having parents or perhaps other senior family members to serve as examples or mentors who can teach them the rules of engagement for a successful assimilation into this new environment. This one factor can make college entry quite unsettling and often very intimidating. For many first generation college students integration into the college culture determines if they will stay enrolled or drop out. Vincent Tinto’s (1993) attrition theory infers that if students are unsuccessful in establishing membership in a college community, they will select to depart from the institution. Tinto emphasizes that some degree of social integration must exist for students to maintain their motivation to persist academically. In many cases academic advisors are the first face to face point of contact.
with a university official that students and their families have. Therefore the initial encounter with advisees should not be underestimated in its impact on a students’ decision to stay or withdraw from the university.

Higher education is not only a point of entry into a new culture, for some students it also feels like a point of departure from their own cultural identity. Terenzini (1994) points out that the decision to attend college for some first generation minority students is considered a break from tradition making persistence an even greater challenge for these students. Rendon and Hope (1996) support the work of Terenzini and Tinto in her research on first generation students in community colleges. Students in Rendon’s study often found that they must deal with changing identities, being perceived as different, leaving old friends behind, breaking family codes of unity and loyalty and living between two worlds. In an earlier study, Rendon (1994) described the importance of validation for first generation college students. Validation is the integration of students into the life of college through supportive, personal, human connections that sends the message you belong here. Rendon claims that a lack of validation is a major contributing factor to first generation students failure to persist.

Most first generation students who decide to pursue a college degree are usually the high achievers in their local schools. Unfortunately some of these students attended K-12 school systems that were not competitive or equipped with the resources necessary to prepare students for college. Consequently the students are unaware that they could be academically under-prepared for the challenges of earning a bachelors degree. Terenzini et.al (1996) reports that many first generation students enter college with lower reading, math and critical thinking skills. Riehl (1994) found that they also have lower high school grade point averages and SAT scores than their non-first generation peers. Adelman (1999) argues that the rigor of the high school curriculum is the single most important variable affecting students’ completion of college. Therefore academic under-preparedness signifies a lack of intellectual stimulation, lower teacher expectations and usually a lack of exposure to educational opportunities designed to prepare students for higher learning, rather than a lack of students’ intellectual ability.

First generation college students come from families of varying income levels. However some studies suggest that more often, first generation college students have family incomes that tend to cluster at the lower end of the income strata compared to non-first generation students. Undoubtedly, educational attainment is directly linked to social and economic status and vice versa. A students’ family income appears to directly influence if they will enter and complete college, even when controlling for academic ability (Thayer, 2000) therefore the income levels of first generation students cannot be omitted from this discussion. In the Nuez and Cuccaro (1998) report for the NCES they outlined their findings regarding the income of first generation students. They claim that 23% of our nations first generation students had family incomes in the lowest quartile, compared with 5% of the non-first generation students. While 59% of the students whose parents pursued higher levels of education earned incomes in the highest quartile, only 18% of the first-generation family incomes were in this category. In a 1996 study of first generation college students, Terenzini and associates also found that a significant percentage of first generation students come from families with low incomes. Twenty
two percent of the first generation students had an average family income of $8,840, which was at the bottom of the distribution compared to 8.7% of the non-first generation students at this income level. Even the latest 2001 census bureau information, confirms that the median annual income for U.S. citizens with a bachelors degree is almost double that of those with only a high school diploma.

![Annual Income](image)

Based on the research findings there are a few general assumptions that appear to surface. 1) In higher education a significant percentage of the undergraduate population are first generation student; 2) Adjusting to the social and academic culture of the academy is a major obstacle for these students; 3) Many of the non-traditional students are female with dependents. Some of them are married and work fulltime jobs; 4) First generation students may be high achievers that come from low performing high schools and 5) A significant percentage come from families with middle to low incomes. Keeping this in mind as a backdrop, the question that arises is what can colleges and universities do to facilitate the academic and social integration of first generation students? More specifically, what general practices can student support service providers utilize to increase the likelihood of retention for these at risk students.

**Guides for Practice**

Just as higher education has made provisions to address the needs of students based on other demographics, i.e., race, gender, athletic ability, SAT scores etc. research suggest that there are strategies that colleges can employ to address the needs of first generation students. The following list is a culmination of suggested strategies based on the findings of several educational researchers such as, Astins(1993), Gardner (1996), Kharem &
Love (2002), McConnell (2000), Terenzini (1996), Tinto (1993, 1996). By no means is this list intended to be exhaustive. It merely highlights those strategies that are reoccurring in the research for institutions as well as for individual practitioners who serve first generation college students.

1. **Provide a road map.** First generation students and their families need clear and consistent information about institutional requirements.

2. **Provide pre-college and summer bridge programs.** Early exposure to the college culture helps to remove some of the mystery and intimidation. Summer bridge programs can also assist students with preparing for higher academic expectations.

3. **Encourage faculty to create learning communities.** Learning communities provide an opportunity for students to connect to other students around a common goal.

4. **Support mentoring programs.** Students’ talents and leadership skills can be nurtured by a caring mentor. Students are also exposed to positive role models through a well structured mentoring program.

5. **Instruct students to review academic goals and assess progress regularly.** Help students establish an academic goal for each course. They should also report on their progress and their challenges.

6. **Early warning systems.** Since it may take first generation students at least one full semester to learn how to fully appropriate their study skills, the students will need help recognizing when they are off track.

7. **Encourage students to be proactive.** Utilizing services is their right as a consumer, not a sign of weakness. Share with them how the cost of their education includes the use of learning centers and other university support centers.

8. **Reinforce student’s sense of value, culture, and self-affirmation.** Provide a safe environment for students to share cultural nuances and family traditions.

9. **Constant review of our own practices/biases.** Engage in professional development activities that are designed to help us recognize our own value conflicts and provided information that can help guide our practice based on contemporary research findings.
Many parents have used the old adage “to get a good job you must get a good education“ to keep their children motivated to perform well in school. In this new millennium a “good education“ appears to equate to a bachelors degree and beyond. That being said, we can safely assume that there will be an increasing presence of first generation students on college campuses nationwide. As colleges and universities readily respond to the needs of these students, being first generation will be another part of diversity that adds to the value of an education.
References:


Gurin, P. (1999). *Expert testimony in the cases Gratz et al., v Bollinger et al., and Grutter et al., v Bollinger et al.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan


