

Chapter Fourteen

First-Generation College Students: First-Year Challenges

Ruth A. Darling and Melissa Scandlyn Smith

As educators we do these students no great favor should they become—out of our own awareness—confused, frightened, and alienated, only to drift away and drop out. If we...mean for them to stay and not become attrition statistics, we need a keener understanding of the sensibilities and concerns they bring with them and of the difficulties they encounter along the way (London, 1989, p. 118).

First-generation students are a growing and diverse campus population. In the fall of 2003, 14.9 million undergraduate students enrolled in postsecondary institutions nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). The exact percentage of these students who fit the first-generation student profile is unclear, but existing research places the figure at anywhere between 31% (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004) and 45% (McConnell, 2000) of the higher education population. Regardless, this percentage translates into a formidable segment of the student population, a population that has more difficulty being successful in the postsecondary environment. These students bring with them unique characteristics, needs, and expectations that impact their daily campus life and their successful progress toward degree attainment. This chapter will examine the student characteristics and issues first-generation students face as they attempt to navigate our institutional cultures and offer appropriate academic advising strategies and learning outcomes for them. In addition, we will review resources available for those who advise first-generation students.

Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

The term “first-generation college student” has taken on more than one meaning in current research, depending on the parameters of researchers’ projects. In simplest terms, a first-generation college student is an undergraduate whose parents have no college experience (McConnell, 2000). There have always been first-generation students, but, in the last few decades, this student population has become a topic drawing the serious attention of faculty, administrators, and staff within postsecondary education. First-generation college students tend to share certain

characteristics, falling into two categories: (a) those attributable to the group as they finish high school and (b) those that develop during their enrollment in institutions of higher education. Research on first-generation students as they graduate and enroll in higher education institutions (Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Ting, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001) indicates the following similarities:

- ◇ They tend to be from low-income families.
- ◇ They tend to be members of racial or ethnic minority groups, particularly Hispanic or African American.
- ◇ They are more likely to be female than male.
- ◇ They tend to have lower college entrance examination scores.
- ◇ They tend to be less well prepared academically for college.
- ◇ They perceive that they are lacking support from those at home, including family and friends.

These factors, alone or in combination with each other, put first-generation students at a disadvantage before they ever step onto campus.

Once their education is underway, these students take on an additional set of characteristics. Research (Chen, 2005; London, 1989, 1992; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Somers et al., 2004) suggests these students develop the following traits:

- ◇ They have lower first-semester and first-year grade point averages (GPA) than their classmates.
- ◇ They are more likely to drop out during the first year.
- ◇ They are more likely to attend classes part-time and work full-time.
- ◇ They tend to experience cultural difficulties in the transition; they often feel marginalized by both the culture they are leaving behind and the one that they are joining.
- ◇ They encounter lower faculty expectations and have lower self-esteem.
- ◇ They are more likely to enroll in a two-year institution or community college.
- ◇ They are more likely to leave without a degree.

Coupling these characteristics with those the students might bring with them from high school and home puts these students at a distinct disadvantage as they attempt to navigate our campuses and engage in postsecondary learning.

First-Year Challenges

Family values, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning skills, the ability to navigate the culture, and finding connections within that culture are issues that bring daily challenges to first-generation students. Each of these issues influence how these students approach life in the institution and in their academic programs and have a direct relationship to their persistence and graduation rates.

First-generation students come from families with parents who have no experience with higher education. This is a disadvantage in three ways. First, family members of first-generation students have no knowledge of the higher education system; therefore, they cannot guide their students in the same way as parents with college experience can (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004). Second, the students have issues with challenging the role assignments that have been a part of their family values, which leads to guilt, shame, and confusion when they begin to change because of their college experiences (Lara, 1992; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; London,

1989, 1992; Orbe, 2004; Somers et al., 2004). Third, because of their background they tend to view college as something they have to do to get a better job or prepare for a specific career; they do not view a college education in relation to any kind of personal development (Hahs-Vaughan, 2004; Lee, Sax, & Kim, 2005; Longwell-Grice, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Nuñez, 1998; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Most students do seek out higher education to further their careers, but first-generation students are more likely to report this as the sole reason they enroll. They do not identify higher education as providing anything other than the path to a better lifestyle than what their parents have.

Race and ethnicity, in combination with first-generation status, are related to how well students succeed in the institutional structure. We have already established that students from racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to be first-generation college students; they are also more likely to attend community college, attend in nontraditional ways (i.e., part-time attendance or breaks in attendance), encounter low faculty expectations, have lower self-concepts and feelings of support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Socioeconomic status also plays a role in the attendance and success of this population. Being from lower-income families affects their behaviors: They work more hours, often off campus, to fund their education and their family expenses. They are more likely to receive financial aid than other students but are wary of incurring debt, so they often work off-campus instead of borrowing money. The type of financial aid they receive, therefore, affects how connected they become to the campus. They are much more likely to be involved in campus life when their financial aid package consists primarily of grants, work-study funds, and any other funds besides student loans. They also seek specific academic programs that are located close to their homes and are low in cost so that they can maintain their financial responsibilities and their family connections (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Longwell-Grice, 2003; Nuñez, 1998; Orbe, 2004).

Individual learning skills affect all college students, but first-generation students are less likely to have mastery in these areas. Self-regulation skills, such as good time management and study skills, empower students and engage them in the process of learning. Williams and Hellman (1998) show that the link between these skills and academic success is strong and that there is a need to teach these skills to the first-generation students who feel they are lacking in these areas. Naumann, Debora, and Gutkin (2003) raise the importance by suggesting that self-regulated learning is the most significant factor that relates to GPA for first-generation students, i.e., the greater the skills, the higher the GPA.

First-generation students are often less prepared academically for college. Some first-generation students lack learning skills or foundational knowledge because of their course selection, both in secondary school and in college. Horn and Nuñez (2000) report that the path to academic success begins in middle school. They show that students who take high school level algebra in the eighth grade and take advanced math classes in high school are significantly more likely to enroll in college, particularly in a four-year institution. First-generation students are far less likely to do either. Horn and Nuñez attribute this, in part, to the difference in parent involvement in secondary school curriculum programs. Parents who attended college are more involved in their students' class choices than parents who did not attend college.

Research shows that parents' educational level also relates to the college coursework and their students' choice of major. First-generation students complete fewer courses during their first year, including fewer courses in humanities, fine arts, math, science, computer science, history, and foreign languages (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004;). Warburton et al. (2001) and Chen also show that first-generation students are more likely to major in either a vocational or technical field, a social science, or in business or management than to choose a major in a

“high-skill” field (Chen, p. v) or in a field that might be perceived to be low-earning. These factors, coupled with lack of academic preparedness and self-regulation skills, are strongly related to long-term educational outcomes and persistence to a bachelor’s degree.

The ability to navigate the college culture is another skill that is necessary for success, but first-generation students are often poorly prepared to do this. Before entering college, these students have little information about application procedures and financial aid opportunities, and their parents are not in a position to be of assistance (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004). Richardson and Skinner (1992) demonstrate that first-generation students need someone to explain the bureaucracy of the college administration, as they find it both intimidating and confusing. Once they arrive at college, they often perceive faculty and administrators as relatively indifferent to them and sometimes even hostile (Longwell-Grice, 2003).

The final challenge for first-generation students is connection to the college culture. Not only are many first-generation students unable to navigate the college structure and culture, they are also not attempting to become a part of it. As these students tend to be older, have family responsibilities, and work and live off-campus, they are more likely to come to campus only to attend classes. Richardson and Skinner (1992) indicate that immersion in the student role is critical for student success. Several other researchers (e.g., Lee et al., 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Longwell-Grice, 2003; Olenchak & Hebert, 2002) report that students who are intentionally drawn into the college environment, both inside and outside of the classroom, get more out of their college experience, face fewer challenges, and are more likely to succeed than those who are not integrated. Pascarella et. al (2004) found that although first-generation students are less likely to be involved in campus activities, they reap much greater rewards from this kind of involvement than other students do. At the same time, it is necessary to remember the “dual socialization” process referred to by Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) “that is both the connection to their native cultures, family life, and family support as well as to those aspects of college life that serve to benefit them” (p. 420).

Academic Advising Models, Strategies, and Approaches

First-generation college students have challenges in their first college year because of past experiences and perspectives. It is critical for academic advisors to consider the broader issues when working with these students (e.g., family values, low socioeconomic status, limited preparation). Academic advisors and administrators can be instrumental at all levels in addressing the needs of first-generation students and developing academic advising strategies and approaches that serve as frameworks for discussion, program implementation, and assessment. The literature on first-generation college students clearly presents issues that reach across four-year and two-year institutions, academic affairs and student affairs, to institutional research and community/high school relations. The following campus advising strategies and approaches take the form of a plan or an approach to implement at the individual, departmental, or institutional level and involve campus-wide collaborations and partnerships.

Establish a group on campus that has a shared interest in the academic success of first-generation college students. This group could range from only advising colleagues to a campus-wide enrollment management committee. Broader participation (e.g., faculty, academic advisors, first-year seminar instructors, student affairs staff, institutional research staff, and first-generation students) might result in a more informed and strategic use of campus programs and resources as well as a shared knowledge base that focuses on first-generation students and their needs. The purpose of such a group might be to assess the campus culture relative to the first-generation student population and to recommend advising and programmatic implications and initiatives.

Use institutional data concerning first-generation students. Most institutions have offices of institutional research that might already collect data on who the first-generation students are, or the admissions office might collect similar data on the admission application. It is important to identify the population and basic demographics, perhaps unique to your institution, before designing and initiating new efforts. Because the first-generation population is so diverse, efforts need to focus on the unique characteristics of the students and of the institution itself. It is important to consider if the national demographics and the literature on first-generation students provide information that might be useful in local, institutional initiatives and methods of gathering data.

Explore opportunities for pre-college enrollment academic advising. The literature reviewed at the beginning of this chapter clearly indicates that high academic aspirations begin with middle and high school curriculum selection and early major/career information. Partnering with admissions counselors and recruiters might provide opportunities for advisors to meet with prospective first-generation students and parents as well as high school guidance counselors who work with the families and students. Information concerning majors and careers, high school pre-requisite requirements for successful college learning, and academic advising and support services available on the campus will help better prepare both parents and students for the transition to college. Such efforts also begin the "relationship" building with academic advisors that is viewed as critical by first-generation students.

As noted by Richardson and Skinner (1992), collaborative efforts among an area's secondary schools, community colleges, and universities to develop summer bridge programs, academic support services, and networking groups for first-generation students entering postsecondary institutions is found to contribute to academic success and persistence. Academic advisors and administrators could partner with surrounding secondary and postsecondary institutions to design and implement bridge programs that emphasize academic success strategies for both pre-college coursework as well as for future academic work in college.

Provide comprehensive academic advising during summer orientation programs. Academic advisors need to create learning outcomes for orientation advising that are realistic and address the immediate needs of students—especially first-generation students who might possess little knowledge of college learning, curricula, and academic daily life. What the students should learn and accomplish during that first orientation advising session varies by campus and within departments but should be thoughtfully addressed by advisors and administrators.

Of main concern should be an assessment of the students' academic preparedness and appropriate placement in first-year courses based on that assessment. As previously discussed, first-generation students are academically at risk due to a lack of academic preparedness and lack of the academic skills (i.e., time management, study skills, reading college texts) needed to be successful at the college level. As a result, these students typically have a lower first-term GPA than other students. A thoughtfully crafted first-year schedule based on an accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses is critical to the success of this particular group of students. Students also need to know and understand the basic "survival" skills of the first several weeks on campus—how to contact academic advisors, where to get textbooks, and where classrooms are located.

The transition model and the novice-to-expert model discussed in the first chapter are helpful frameworks to review when designing this first orientation advising experience. These models emphasize the importance of developing an academic plan with the students as they enter and move through their first year. In addition, the models focus on the relationship between the student and advisor as one that continues over time. Again, this approach emphasizes the first-generation students' need to establish a strong academic contact that provides validation, "that

they can do college-level work, that their ideas and opinions have value, that they are worthy of the attention and respect of faculty, staff and peers alike" (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 70).

Adopt appropriate advising models. Within the institutional structure, academic advisors have a special role in the academic and social lives of their first-generation students. First-generation students sometimes rely on their academic advisors for non-academic guidance when they feel that they are missing this kind of support from their families. They want to build a trusting relationship with their advisor based on the advisor's understanding of their past experiences and background. They rely on their advisor to have a comprehensive knowledge of campus programs and to help them access those resources (Sickles, 2004).

Somers et al. (2004) propose that academic advisors work in combination with personal and career counselors to address first-generation issues in a comprehensive manner. The complicated issues brought to campus by the students require a network of support from various units across campuses. Academic advisors can offer students strategies to help them adjust to the educational environment. Such strategies include helping students find a focus for their studies within diverse curriculum options, recommending that students find peer support groups, and suggesting that students minimize the size of the campus by finding certain physical areas on campus to which they can retreat (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Reducing the size of the larger community could involve referring the students to an academic club within a certain major, seeking membership in a living/learning community, joining an organization that matches the student's interests, or simply utilizing a study lounge designated for commuter students.

Again, in the first chapter of this monograph, the author introduces two models that provide practical ways the academic advisor can teach first-year students about the transition into college life. These models clearly address the issues encountered by first-generation college students by focusing on the experiences the students bring to college, how the students interpret their first year based on those experiences, and the need for academic advisors to teach students how to make new meanings of their experiences that connect with the collegiate culture. At various points during the first year, it is important that the students begin to understand the following:

- ◇ The nature of college learning
- ◇ The meaning and purpose underlying the curriculum (i.e., general education requirements, potential majors, and electives)
- ◇ The resources available to explore majors and careers
- ◇ The academic support programs available (i.e., "early alert" academic warning program, study skills, and time-management seminars)
- ◇ The various ways to connect to the academic community through discipline-oriented clubs and organizations
- ◇ The academic criteria that might be attached to financial aid packages
- ◇ The social opportunities that connect the curricular to the cocurricular such as activities that focus on diversity, cultural programs, lecture series, and recreational clubs

Connect through first-year seminars. The transition from orientation to advising during the first year is often when first-generation students experience a disconnect from our campus communities. First-year seminars that emphasize advisors' early and continued contact with first-generation students help bridge the gaps in experience and knowledge that many of these students experience. Continued emphasis on connecting with instructors and academic skill-building opportunities is critical during the first year, as is a continued assessment of the student's academic progress or lack thereof.

The first-year seminar instructor can serve as a guide in the process of helping the student find programs, additional campus resources, and peer groups that provide the connections necessary for academic success and a sense of belonging to the campus community. As noted earlier, there is a rich representation of racial and ethnic diversity among first-generation students. Helping these students integrate into the larger community and create meaningful connections and relationships with peers, faculty, and staff is critical to how well these students adjust to campus life and achieve academic success.

First-year seminars can serve as a vehicle for connecting first-generation students to the campus and college learning by:

- ◇ Providing opportunities for students to engage in campus-based activities with their peers
- ◇ Connecting the academic and cocurricular with the home and family experiences of the students
- ◇ Using peer mentors who serve as role models and provide a consistent source of support throughout the first year
- ◇ Incorporating a strong emphasis on academic success skills (i.e., time management, study skills, college reading, test taking skills, wellness) into the seminars
- ◇ Familiarizing students with the mission and purpose of the institution and using academic advisors to teach students how the curriculum connects to the larger context as well as to the individual students' academic goals and experiences

Serve as the first-generation students' advocate and as a campus educator. Academic advisors and administrators are in a unique position to provide information about first-generation students to various campus constituencies. First-generation students first come to the attention of academic advisors and administrators because of their lower rate of academic progress and the various academic challenges they face. Often, low retention rates appear on our reports, representing students already lost from our institutions.

As cited in the literature review, professors, instructors, and other academic contacts are critical to first-generation students and how they connect with our campus cultures. Academic advisors and administrators could develop and teach seminars that bring faculty, graduate teaching assistants, academic advisors, and first-year seminar instructors together to focus on the demographics, the diversity, and the academic concerns of this student group. The understanding and knowledge gained by the participants would enrich the campus learning environment for the first-generation student population and provide a clearer picture of a particular campus' first-generation population and their specific needs. The same information would benefit student affairs and student services colleagues as they consider services and programming initiatives that are more non-traditional in nature.

Serving as an advocate and educator can reach beyond the campus boundaries to the homes and families of first-generation students. Many institutions are supporting parent's associations with staff who keep in touch with parents and provide a network for communication. Reaching out to parents and family members through such organizations helps families better understand the nature of home-to-college transitions. Academic advisors and administrators can write articles for family/parent newsletters or for web sites that focus on first-generation transition issues, and they can serve as speakers for parent groups.

Conclusion

The final phrase of London's (1989) quote on page one of this chapter summarizes how we, as academic advisors and administrators, must move to critically address the needs of the first-generation college students on our campuses. This chapter presents national data and research that describe first-generation students and the characteristics they bring to our campuses, characteristics that often result in concerns that make it difficult for these students to be academically successful. Models, strategies, and approaches are proposed that assist the academic advisor and advising administrator in the design and implementation of programs focusing on first-generation students. Campus-wide collaborations with colleagues in student affairs, student services, and institutional research are also suggested. In the research study conducted by Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), they indicate that first-generation students are more likely to persist if they are engaged in academic activities. As academic advisors and administrators, we are uniquely positioned within our institutions to connect first-generation students with our educational communities in ways that provide opportunities for them to be academically successful and to earn their degrees.

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