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The Influence of Parents on the Persistence Decisions of First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

First-generation college students enter higher education with deficits, any one of which could prompt them to leave college before graduation. Parents of these students may be unable to help their children persist to graduation. This quantitative study analyzes factors affecting first-generation student persistence and the role parents play in their children's college experience. The authors identify barriers students confront and recommend institutional approaches to address a lack of essential parental support

The relationship between college students and their parents has a strong influence on how these students face challenges, cope with adversity, and make critical decisions. London (1989) was "struck by the power students attributed to family voices" (p.166), but Bryan and Simmons (2009) warned that few studies have examined the student/parent relationship, especially among first-generation students. As the number of first-generation students in higher education continues to rise, practitioners need to learn more about these students and the factors that affect their academic success.

Student decisions about persistence in college are influenced by three variables: student self-efficacy; institutional effectiveness; and parental influence. The lack of social and cultural capital relative to the college-going experience among the parents of first-generation students may be considered detrimental to the eventual success of these students. However, there is little evidence that this weakness lessens parents' influence on a student's self-efficacy. While it has been shown that parents of first-generation students are not very involved with their children in

the college selection and admissions process (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006), what is known about the influence they have after enrollment?

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to examine the influence of parents on, and the self-efficacy of, first-generation college students in relation to their decisions to remain in college. This inquiry addresses three issues: the self-efficacy of first-generation college students; the level of parental influence on first-generation college students; and the correlation of parental influence to the self-efficacy of first-generation college students. The resulting information helps fill the gap in the literature about the influence of parents on the persistence decisions made by first-generation students.

First-Generation Students and Their Parents

The literature contains many definitions of the term *first-generation*. The most prevalent characterizes a first-generation student as one whose parents have a high school degree or less and never started college (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). The first-generation student's peer, whose parents did attend college, is referred to as a *continuing-generation* student. (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007).

First-generation students confront disadvantages compared to peers whose parent(s) attended college (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). They are less likely to attend college (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006), with fewer than half (<50%) entering college the year after high school compared to 85% of their continuing-generation peers (Engle et al., 2006). First-generation students who do begin college have difficulty remaining enrolled (Nunez & Carroll, 1998) and are twice as likely as peers to leave college without a degree (Choy, 2001).

First-generation status has been shown to be a significant predictor of dropping out of college before the start of the second year (Horn, 1998). Only 26% of first-generation students graduating from high school will earn a college degree within 8 years as compared to 68% of continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001). These students tend to come from families with lower family income and a minority background, most likely African-American or Hispanic (Chen, 2005). They have more dependents and lower incomes. They are older and more likely to be married than their peers. All of these hurdles must be successfully addressed to increase the likelihood that these students will persist into their second year of college. Once a first-generation student drops out of a 4-year institution, he or she is much less likely to return than a continuing-generation peer (Horn, 1998).

First-generation students often lack some of the key personal traits known to enhance persistence. Some studies have found they have a low sense of self-efficacy, hindering their ability to adjust to college life (Hellman, 1996), and report a lower level of self-esteem compared to their continuing-generation peers (Inman & Mayes, 1999). They express more worry about financial aid than their peers (Bui, 2002) and appear to be less academically prepared for college (Chen, 2005).

Completion of the first year of college is positively correlated with timely degree completion for all students (Nunez & Carroll, 1998). Since the risk of a first-generation student

leaving is greatest in the first year, with that risk diminishing over time (Ishitani, 2003), it becomes critical to persistence that institutions address, as early as possible in their collegiate careers, the obstacles first-generation students encounter. Students tend not to persist if they lack adequate emotional, intellectual, or social preparation when entering college (Tinto, 1993). Collier and Morgan (2007) explained that the role of a college student demands both academic and social efficacy: students must master the college student role in order to navigate the collegiate experience successfully.

The level of parents' education is also a good predictor of students' eventual educational achievement (Hodgkinson, 1993). Children of parents with only a high school degree are less likely to aspire to a postsecondary education (Horn & Bobbitt, 2000). College attendance appears to be less important to the parents of first-generation students than to the parents of their continuing-generation peers (Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). However, first-generation students, whose parents had some college, even if they never graduated, were more likely to persist than those whose parents had never attended college (Ishitani, 2006).

Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that first-generation students express both sadness and anxiousness about losing connection with their parents after beginning postsecondary education. These concerns are attributed to their parents' lack of knowledge of the college-going experience, creating an inability to relate to what the student is feeling. When parents are able to relate to the stresses their child is facing as he or she matriculates, this understanding tends to support higher levels of persistence among this vulnerable category of students. Parents who have not attended college are less able to provide this same type of support and this circumstance may create situations in which first-generation students experience a conflict between their home culture and values and those of their college community (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007).

Parental influence comes into play in the persistence decisions of first-generation students. Mattanah, Brand, and Hancock (2004) found successful individuation, a key to student satisfaction within the college environment, requires that students enjoy a secure relationship with parents who are supportive of their pursuit of higher education. Should a student lack either a secure relationship with his or her parents, or lack his or her parents' support for pursuing a college education, individuation along with satisfaction are hindered. In the worst case, the student would suffer from the lack of both parental relationship and support, potentially creating a strongly negative influence relative to his or her eventual persistence.

The adjustment to college is stressful for first-generation students (Ishitani, 2003) who may feel isolated because they lack access to persons, including their parents, who can empathize with their feelings (Smyth, Hockemeyer, Heron, Wonderlich, & Pennebaker, 2008). It is important that they have access to a social network that has empathy with what they are experiencing (Bandura, 2004; Dyson & Renk, 2006). When a student is able to discuss anxieties with those who can relate to her situation, her stress level is reduced (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990). Without this outlet for stress, first-generation students can become overwhelmed by the obstacles they face in acclimating to a new college environment, all the while having parents who cannot understand their issues (Phinney & Haas, 2003). This situation may explain why first-generation college students discuss their concerns about their academic lives with their parents less than do their continuing-generation peers (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009).

The literature indicates that first-generation students receive less support from their parents than their continuing-generation peers relative to their desire to attend college (Fallon, 1997). This fact suggests parents lacking a college experience are also unlikely to provide their

children with needed support in college. Continuing-generation students exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and more confidence because their parents are able to provide them with valuable and relevant guidance related to the transitional stress these students face during their first year of college (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991). Parents certainly play a key role in the development of a student's social and cultural identity, and this parental role can be even more important within the ethnic groups that comprise the largest number of first-generation students (Taub, 2008). Piorkpwski (1983) found that first-generation students who attempt to break away from parents who do not support their academic endeavors sometimes face ridicule. Both London (1989) and Piorkpwski found that first-generation students can suffer from a form of survivor-guilt when they observe their families continuing to struggle while their personal situation is improving.

Method

This study examined parental influence on, and the self-efficacy of, first-generation college students. The assessment was accomplished by an examination of the differences in measures of self-efficacy and parental influence within this population. In addition, the study examined the correlation between self-efficacy and parental influence within this population.

Data for this study were collected using three quantitative instruments: Version S3 of Campbell's (2001) Inventory of Parental Influence (IPI); the Sherer (2000) Self-Efficacy Scale (SES); and a locally-designed demographic survey. Subjects were Freshman College students enrolled for less than 12 months at three public 4-year universities in the state of Texas.

From a pool of 6,665 potential subjects, a randomly selected sample of 300 first- and continuing-generation subjects was developed. Researchers invited these 300 to participate in the study, following up with two personal reminders, which yielded 121 subjects for a response rate of 40.3%. A total of 28 initial respondents were excluded as not meeting study criteria, leaving 93 final subjects: 50 continuing-generation and 43 first-generation.

Because the data collected were ordinal, differences were evaluated using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test at an alpha level of .05. Correlations were examined using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, r_s. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the levels of parental influence and self-efficacy and frequency distributions were developed using three class intervals, labeled *Low*, *Moderate*, and *High.*

The differences in measures of self-efficacy were assessed by use of the SES. First-generation subjects' scores on the scale were calculated and measured against the established class interval scores. To gauge parental influence, researchers analyzed the first-generation subjects' responses to the IPI. This instrument provided scores on five family processes; parental help, parental pressure, psychological support, parental press for intellectual development, and monitoring/supervision. The individual scores from these five factors were combined to report the overall level of parental influence perceived by the subjects.

The final research question required an analysis of how the parental influence measures correlated with the measures of self-efficacy. To accomplish this analysis, the correlation between the predictor variable of parental influence and the criterion variable of self-efficacy was examined by computing the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, r_s. The Spearman rank

coefficient indicated a very weak negative correlation between parental influence and self-efficacy among first-generation students.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the study led to several conclusions. First, the majority (65.0%) of first generation subjects reported a high level of self-efficacy. These students are less likely to be influenced by persons lacking the experience to be viewed as a credible source of advice, which may explain why the parents of first-generation students have less influence as the gap widens between their experience and that of their child.

Second, data showed that first-generation students must navigate through college-related decision-making with, at best, moderate support from their parents. On the first parental influence factor analyzed, Support, the majority (55%) of first-generation students reported a moderate level of parental support. For the second factor, Pressure, a substantial majority (82.5%) perceived parental pressure as moderate. For the third factor, Help, the majority (55.0%) reported a low level of parental help. On Monitoring/Supervision, a majority (72.5%) of first-generation subjects reported perceiving a low level of parental involvement. With respect to the fifth factor, Press for Intellectual Development, first-generation subjects did not report a clear majority at any class interval. Half of the subjects (50.0%) reported a low level of parental press for intellectual development, while 42.5 % of the subjects reported a moderate level. First-generation students appear to have grown up with a lack of substantive parental monitoring and supervision, which might foreshadow academic difficulties during the critical first year.

Finally, parental influence seems to have no causal relationship to the self-efficacy perceived by first-generation students. There is no significant correlation between these two variables. Since the perceived level of self-efficacy among the majority of students is already high, and a high level of self-efficacy is an effective predictor of persistence (Zimmerman, 2000), institutional efforts to influence the way in which parents interact with students relative to persistence decisions becomes less important.

Implications for Practice

The percentage of students persisting in higher education has become increasingly important both politically and economically. Both federal and state governments are devoting significant levels of funding (OPE, 2010) to programs designed to attract and keep first-generation students in higher education. Retention and degree attainment have emerged as major indicators in systems of higher education accountability (Astin, 1997; Summers, 2003). In addition, the loss of enrollment has a negative financial impact on public higher education (Penn, 1999). However, the most important implication may be one that affects the student personally. Day and Newberger (2002) found that persons with a bachelor's degree earned 1.8 times more over a lifetime than did persons with only a high school education. That spread in earnings increased to 2.6 times for those with an advanced degree. These findings make it clear that the persistence of first-generation college students is not only critical to the success of the institution, but to the individual and the economy as well.

The present study supports several recommendations for practice. This investigation affirmed that first-generation students receive less help and support from their parents than do their continuing-generation peers. This deficit arises from the parents' lack of experience in the collegiate setting including understanding the trials and tribulations of college life and its inevitable variety of academic and social pressures. To assist first-generation students, practitioners should develop programs designed to replace the lack of parental support. Such programs should include opportunities for first-year first-generation students to be mentored by successful first-generation upperclassmen. This arrangement could lead to the establishment of a trained group of first-generation peer counselors, enhancing the first-year student's experience while providing valuable leadership training for the student-mentor.

Since the parents of first-generation students lack the experiential basis for assisting their children, institutions should develop specialized parental collaboration programs to assist willing first-generation parents to understand and use accurate and useful information relative to their child's transition into college and the student support services available. The ability of these parents to speak with authority about college life can imbue them with a sense of participation in their child's academic journey that their lack of experience otherwise denies. In addition, their ability to pass along accurate and timely information can lend credibility to the advice they provide to their child.

The relatively low level of "press for intellectual development (PID)" that first-generation students reported about their parents probably means that parents communicate with them little about studying, reading, writing, and seeking academic assistance when needed. Practitioners should be mindful of this deficit and seek to develop alternate means of communicating these PID messages to first-generation students in ways that can assist them in maintaining a level of academic determination that will support a positive persistence decision.

This study found that first-generation students experienced a low level of parental monitoring and supervision which could indicate a general lack of discipline, with the potential to prove costly when academic progress is considered. To address this issue, institutions should have early alert programs in place that provide monitoring and supervision for students who demonstrate through their action, or inaction, a lack of discipline and focus. While a program of this type can be available for all students it will most likely have the greatest effect on first-year students during their initial term of enrollment, when discipline and focus issues first arise. This process could be structured so faculty members, and appropriate staff, can report students with either attendance, academic, and/or behavioral issues to a common unit for a type of "academic triage", connecting the student with the appropriate support services before it is too late to make a difference. Students receiving support early enough to have a positive outcome should be more inclined to make a positive persistence decision at the end of the term.

This inquiry found that first-generation students perceive themselves to have a high level of self-efficacy, with a corresponding finding that no correlation exists between the influence of their parents and their self-efficacy. Thus, programs designed to increase the involvement of parents in developing student self-efficacy are not an effective use of resources. Scaling back, or eliminating, programs of this type can free up resources for use in ways that more efficiently affect student persistence.

Conclusion

This study sought to develop useful information on the role parents play in the decisions first-generation college students make by examining the level of parental influence perceived by students, then correlating that influence to the level of self-efficacy these same students reported. Taken together, these results can better equip higher education practitioners to make informed decisions regarding retention support programs for all students.

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