

Exploring the Experiences of First-Generation, Multiethnic Undergraduate College Students

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper investigates the experiences of first-generation, multiethnic undergraduate students at two public, four-year universities in the Rocky Mountain region. The existing research paints a negative picture in regard to multiethnic students and first-generation students deciding to go to college, enrolling, and then rarely persisting to earn a degree. This study found that, converse to noted literature, the multiethnic, first-generation students are proud of their multiple heritages and did not encounter exceptional difficulty entering or studying at college. This article presents specific issues faced by multiethnic, first-generation students, discusses emergent themes from individual interviews and focus groups, and provides recommendations for higher education leaders.

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By the year 2010, it is estimated that students of color at institutions of higher education will rise to 24% of total enrollment (Ortiz, 2002). Many of the incoming multiethnic, first-year students will be the first of their family to pursue higher education (Ortiz). Colleges and universities must acknowledge and prepare for the integration and adaptation of these first-generation, multiethnic students to help them adjust to an academic lifestyle and to improve “the retention rates of an increasingly diverse student body” (Gonzales, 1999, p. 5). The purpose of this paper is to discuss exploratory constructivist research on first-generation, multiethnic students enrolled at two public, four-year universities in the Rocky Mountain region.

Origins and Definitions of Multiethnic Individuals

Currently in the United States, there are more than 6 million people of multicultural ancestry (U.S. Census, 2000). Difficulties in the categorization of multiethnic individuals and confusion of identity selection on the U.S. Census cause imprecise numbers (Denmon & Kahn, 1997). Scholars do not agree on a single expression when speaking of people of ethnically mixed heritage (Fernandez, 1996). Common terms include multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic (Ortiz & Rodriguez, 1999).

Multiethnic Identity Development in College Students

Three important influences shape students’ lives before college and continue to influence students while in college: family, community, and peers (Wardle, 1999). If a child is exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences when growing up, then a college atmosphere devoid of these familiar phenomena tends to make the student feel uncomfortable and more at risk for dropping out of college (Rinn, 1995).

When multiethnic adolescents enter college, it is often the first time they explore their multiple heritages (Wardle, 1999). Multiethnic students may take classes to explore the history and accomplishments of one or all of their racial heritages (Renn, 1999). Others join multiethnic student groups to share ideas and support (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Recent research (Kilson, 2001; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000; 2003; Root, 1996; Wallace, 2001) regarding the identity development of mixed-heritage college students has extended the traditional models of racial identity development by Cross (1971), Helms (1992), and Phinney (1989). Utilizing the analogy of *border crossings*, Root (1996) and Renn (2000; 2003), describe the fluid nature of identity development for multiethnic college students, allowing for students to feel “comfortable with self-definition in, across, and/or in between categories” (Renn, 2003, p. 384). This new identity development model is a significant departure from the *Marginal Man* theory created by Park in 1928 or the perspective shared by Stonequist (1935) that biracial people live in a state of duality but do not completely fit into either culture.

Issues for Multiethnic College Students

Multiethnic students on campus may feel isolated from the student body, face racism (Korgen, 1998), and experience cultural isolation. A lack of diversity on campus, non-recognition of multiethnic individuals, and the lack of understanding and acceptance among peers can cause loneliness. In college classes, a multiethnic student may feel marginalized by ethnocentric curricula (Root, 1996). Finally, “most administrators and faculty are not trained in an environment that emphasizes cultural pluralism, and as well intentioned as they may be, they are likely to be ethnocentric” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 87).

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students may share similar marginalizing and isolating experiences as their multiethnic peers on college campuses. Students entering higher education without guidance from a college-educated parent are identified as *first-generation* college students, a term coined by Fuji A. Adachi (Billson & Terry, 1982). First-generation college students are defined based on their parents' level of education. Conflicting definitions exist based on whether the parents have no college education, or some college education, but no degree (Billson & Terry). Some argue that the first-generation college student label should be reserved for those students whose parents have no college experience (Billson & Terry). These definitions are crucial when exploring the impact of the presence or absence of some parental college experience on the first-generation students' collegiate experience.

First-generation students are challenged by their families and friends to continue participating in the familial traditions and daily activities; they may experience conflicts as they may find themselves not fully accepted in either culture (London, 1989; 1992). York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) documented that first-generation students receive less familial support for attending college than their non-first-generation peers.

Characteristics and Issues of First-Generation Students

Three major studies document the postsecondary experiences of first-generation students compared with their non first-generation peers through graduation, and beyond: the 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, and the 2000 National Education Longitudinal Study. These studies discuss demographics, aspirations, motivations, and enrollment patterns of first-generation and non first-generation students.

Financing postsecondary education for first-generation students is significant, as they tend to come from lower income households, work a greater number of hours both on and off campus, and give more priority to jobs than classes when conflicts arise (Billson & Terry, 1982; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; McConnell, 2000). First-generation students may lack information about topics often passed within college-educated families such as financial aid, scholarships, and money management (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

London (1992) and Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) report responsibilities at work and home may cause first-generation students to leave school before earning a degree. First-generation college students' motivations are often related to financial security, finding a steady job, and being able to provide their own children with better opportunities (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; McConnell, 2000).

Methodology

Though various articles and studies detail the experiences of first-generation or multiethnic postsecondary students, limited research is found on the experiences of multiethnic, first-generation students. This study explores the collegiate experiences of multiethnic, first-generation students and makes suggestions for helping these students persist in earning their degree.

Participants

The researchers located first-generation, multiethnic students through purposive sampling, utilizing participant rosters from federally funded TRIO programs, advocacy offices, and other student support services at two Rocky Mountain region universities. The researchers then contacted these participants and conducted in-depth individual interviews, two focus group interviews and a follow-up individual interview with fifteen multiethnic, first-generation,

undergraduate college students. There were two freshmen, two sophomores, seven juniors, and four seniors who participated in this research study.

Design and Procedure

Researchers tape-recorded the interviews and focus group sessions and transcribed the tapes. The researchers read, analyzed, and coded the transcribed data. Constant comparative analysis was used to identify themes and patterns emerging from the interviews and focus groups. Triangulation occurred by using member and peer review. Researchers sent participants a copy of their transcribed interviews for verification of accuracy.

Themes

Recognition and Pride in Multiple Identities

All of the participants of this study report having their ethnicity questioned by peers, faculty, and staff on campus. As multiethnic students, they want their peers to be aware of their particular ethnicity, but are annoyed when repeatedly asked, “What are you?” For example, Amy, a student with a Bermudan and British Black father and a Mexican mother, shares her frustration:

People usually ask me what I am, and I always ask back, “What do you think?” I’m really interested in what people think I am. I’ve gotten everything; it depends on how my hair is combed, what I’m wearing, everything. I get Puerto Rican, I get Indian, like red dot Indian... Usually people will say, “Are you mixed with something? I don’t know what you are.”

Multiethnic students expressed during interviews despite the persistent, insensitive inquiries from strangers and acquaintances, their blend of cultures is a source of pride, and they believe that multiethnic students are more open-minded about the traditions and customs of

others. Andrew, raised by an African American father and a Caucasian mother, expressed his appreciation for his mixed background, “You have two different races that are like totally different, so you get the best of both worlds.” Other respondents echoed his sentiments, stating that they feel their multiple ethnic backgrounds make them more open to new people and situations. T.Q., an African American, Irish, and Hispanic student, explained:

I love who I am. I love both sides of my family. I know good things about both cultures. I think people should just be open-minded and happy about who they are and what they like and who they like.

Numerous respondents in the study also displayed an eagerness to discover new aspects of their multiple heritages. Nala, an African American and Caucasian student, believes that university courses give her an enhanced look at both sides of her parentage:

I think classes [at the university] have been helpful. African American history was my first class as a freshman. And it was good to have an amazing professor and a topic that filled in the blanks. That got me to take classes like contemporary ethnic relations and classes like that.

Other students agree with Nala, in that they seek opportunities to learn about cultures different from their own, and extend their peer group to include other multiethnic students. Overall, pride in their multiethnic identity shone throughout the students’ interviews.

Pride in the First-Generation Label

As first-generation students, nearly all of the respondents expressed enthusiasm about being the first person in their family to attend college. When asked about what it meant to be a first-generation college student, Irwin exclaimed, “Wow! It’s a good privilege to be one, to be the first person in my family to go to college.” Most of the respondents agreed that they feel

special being the first of their family to pursue higher education. Andrew shares, “It means a lot because I am the first one out of everybody in my family...whoever comes along behind me, they’ll know I was the first one to actually even go to college, and get the diploma...”

Flex received one of four awards for being an outstanding first-generation student at the university he attends. Flex believes that being a first-generation, multiethnic student means being a role model to other first-generation, multiethnic people, both college students and potential college students.

Whether it is pride in being the first college student or pride in their academic success, students acknowledge their family’s satisfaction as a primary motivator to remain in school, even in times of frustration, depression, or homesickness. Elma’s fear of disappointing her family, as well as her mother’s constant encouragement and support, keeps Elma from dropping out of school. This connects with the next finding, the importance of family support and encouragement.

Familial Encouragement

Although these parents did not have experience with higher education, they convinced their first-generation students to attend college. These parents emphasized that graduating from college would provide their children opportunities for a better future. Most of the respondents articulated that they received strong encouragement from their families to succeed in college. For example, when Sarah was asked how she decided to go to college, she shared:

My parents actually decided for me...honestly, I was going to the Army because my parents were in the Army. And they were like, “Oh no, you’re not,” because they hated being in the Army...

All participants reported that their parents played an integral role in their postsecondary education decision. Nala acknowledges that her parents were an inspiration for her to go to college:

They go every day to jobs they hate. They could both do so much better. The huge thing they're missing is a degree. They're perfectly able to do the different jobs out there, but it's like if you don't have that piece of paper...

Keeping the familial lines of communication open while at school is crucial to the success for these students. Many students, like Roger, talk with their families on a daily basis due to the easy access of cell phones. Similarly, most students report going home on a regular basis to visit and be surrounded by familiar cultural traditions. Flex's mother helps him with the financial aid forms and applications, and she sends messages of support and pride for his achievements, keeping the lines of communication open. However, he too feels the pressure to succeed and to be a role model.

Michelle thinks her familial stress is a result of her parents' inability to understand how college works. They continually ask her questions such as, "Why don't you go to school all day?"

Kim described the stress felt by many of the respondents, "I feel pressured. If I don't finish school, I've just failed everybody. I failed my family, my mother and my father. And then, I've failed their families. I just feel pressured, like school is real big." T.Q. agreed, "I had a lot of pressure on my shoulders, [but] now I see the happiness in my parents' eyes when they look at me. They're just so proud of how far I've made it..."

Susie's venture into higher education carries more personal significance, "...if I don't succeed I am going to end up like my parents. And that is something that I really don't want to

do. I want to be different, you know. Break the cycle...” All the participants talked about the familial pressure and desire to persist and graduate.

Integration of Multiethnic and First-generation Identities

Several participants agreed that their first-generation and multiethnic status intersect and serve them well. Amy believes that although there are disadvantages to being both multiethnic and first-generation, the mixture of the two allows her and other students to identify more closely with each other than with the majority students. T.Q. believes his parents’ mixed backgrounds, plus his first-generation status, *gets him in the door*, thus allowing access to more opportunities.

Overall, the students view their multiethnic background and first-generation status as advantages rather than disadvantages. They celebrate all of the dimensions of their background, including the elements that have been challenging. The students who participated in this research strive to earn a degree and pave a path for those coming behind them.

Discussion of Themes

Numerous themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups. As multiethnic students, they want others to be aware of their particular ethnicity but are generally discomforted when repeatedly asked, “What are you?” The respondents also possess an eagerness to discover new aspects of their various heritages. During interviews, multiethnic students expressed that their blend of cultures allows them to be more open-minded about friendships, cultures, and religions.

As first-generation students, the respondents are proud of their status as the first person in their family to enroll in higher education; however, some students expressed skepticism regarding the meaning of the label *first-generation college student*. Many of the students were encouraged by their parents to attend college as a means to a brighter future. Most first-

generation respondents reflected on the pressure as well as the support from their families to succeed in college.

Although other themes were identified, this paper focuses on four primary themes of recognition: pride of multiple identities, pride in first-generation label, familial encouragement, and integration of multiethnic and first-generation identities to illustrate the overall positive focus of the interviewed students. These attitudes are significantly different from past assumptions that being first-generation and/or multiethnic might be perceived as an obstacle to be overcome or a status of which to be ashamed.

Limitations

The researchers acknowledge some limitations to the study. First, locating participants meeting the criteria for the research study was complicated by a lack of university identification of multiethnic students at the study institutions. In addition, the researchers hypothesize that because all of the participants were involved in campus organizations outside of the classroom in some way, this positively impacted their sense of connection to their university and to higher education, in general. The researchers acknowledge that the findings may be skewed due to the lack of participants who were disconnected with the university, which is a difficult population to reach.

Implications and Recommendations

The transition to a collegiate setting can be daunting for many students, but perhaps even more overwhelming for multiethnic, first-generation individuals. However, universities should become well positioned to support and retain multiethnic, first-generation students.

At the institutional level, departments can collect, distribute, examine, and fully utilize the demographic statistics collected by the university's institutional research office. Such

information can assist faculty, staff, and administrators in curriculum decisions, policy reviews, and program development. Faculty and staff development sessions focusing on current multiethnic identity development models, as well as current research regarding the significant motivation and familial support of first-generation, multiethnic students, could improve the classroom and campus environment for these students.

Richardson and Skinner (1992) suggest, “early intervention to strengthen preparation and improve educational planning, summer bridge programs, assessment and remediation, tutoring, learning laboratories, mentoring, proactive academic advising and career development” (p. 41), to help first-generation and students of color succeed. The creation of peer support groups, peer counseling (Harris, Blue, & Griffith, 1995), and support networks “where older students can guide first year students through the college maze” (Rinn, 1995, p. 13) would be equally helpful. Knowing that there are support networks on campus, in addition to the support from home, can assist students in the academic and personal transition to college. Multiethnic student organizations are beginning to form throughout the nation, as students connect with one other and to their colleges and universities for support to end cultural isolation and to cope with racism.

Institutions of higher education must reach out to family members to bridge the knowledge gap and demystify the higher education experience. Parents and family members of first-generation, multiethnic students have the influence to keep their children enrolled, and thus, they must be seen and treated as partners in this endeavor. This process is a significant retention area that goes beyond supporting students to supporting students’ families. Orientation sessions focused on first-generation students’ families, additional written communication sent to families, and personalized outreach to these families can make a difference.

As more first-generation, multiethnic students are courageously entering the doors of the academy, higher education leaders must make sure the welcome mat is in place and a consistent message is heard: *mi casa es su casa*. The previous literature paints an extremely negative picture of first-generation and multiethnic students' experiences; however, the students in this study have pride, receive terrific familial support, and are excelling in college. It is crucial to hear the voices of first-generation, multiethnic undergraduate students succeeding in higher education to encourage more first-generation, multiethnic students to seek a degree. Campus community members must also shift their misperceptions and assumptions to provide a supportive environment, celebrating all the aspects of students' lives.

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