

## Impact of Parent Educational Achievement on First-Generation Student Success

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### Abstract

Studies indicate that college enrollment, student achievement, and retention are directly related to the educational achievement levels of students' parents. First-generation college students, those whose parents have not attended post-secondary education, are at a unique disadvantage in terms of academic preparedness and college success. Characteristics of first-generation students are often similar to those of non-traditional students and others of minority status. These students usually are older, have dependents, commute to university, and possess unique learning needs. Studies demonstrating the correlation between parent educational attainment and first-generation college student success were assessed to create recommendations for student affairs practitioners in higher education to expand their knowledge base and address the educational concerns of this particular group.

## Impact of Parent Educational Achievement on First-Generation Student Success

First-generation students, for the purpose of this article, are defined as students who are the first in their immediate families to be enrolled in higher education (Hsiao, 1992). According to Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), typically these students are more apt to enroll in post secondary education at part-time status, do not persist until their third semester, and have lower grade point averages (GPA) than their peers. First-generation students are more likely to fit the description of a non-traditional student in age, level of committed relationship, support of dependents. Additionally, they are likely enrolling for the first time or returning to school after an extended absence. Their specific needs include accessing financial aid, living at home, completing coursework in a timely manner, and holding jobs while attending school (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin). Hsiao indicates the number of first-generation students is continuing to increase, which makes this a relevant and important topic on college campuses today.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate past studies demonstrating links between parents' educational attainment levels and success of their first-generation students for concepts that can be used to support this unique population of students today. The needs of incoming students are changing; through studying past research, ideas can be developed to support students. The closing of this article offers recommendations based on the analysis of these students and how parents and campus support systems can team together to increase persistence and retention rates of first-generation students.

### Background

Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) utilized the data completed from the 1989-1990 Beginning Post-secondary Students Longitudinal Study, supplemented with data from the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study to establish a foundational knowledge base on

first-generation students. Nuñez was the first to study these students in-depth, and this researcher's work is often used as a guide for newer research. Nuñez later collaborated with Horn (2000) to recreate the 1998 study which assessed the success rates of first-generation students compared to their peers. Their results indicated that first-generation students were typically of minority status, predominately Hispanic or Black. These students were also less likely to participate in academic preparatory programs for enrollment into college. The study also found a connection between those who enrolled in 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra, advanced math classes in high school, and a 4-year college within two years of graduation from high school. Of first-generation students, 31% were encouraged by their parents to take algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade as compared to the 53% of students who were encouraged by their degree-bearing parents.

Choy (2001), who built upon Nuñez's work, found that students' choice to enroll in college is a reflection of the educational achievement levels of their parents. The study supported earlier findings that college educated parents are more likely to encourage and support their children to pursue post-secondary education. These same students are also more encouraged to take advanced math classes in middle school and high school, and thus later choose to enroll in college within two years of graduation (Choy; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez, 2001). Choy's studies indicated that regardless of parent educational levels, students were more likely to enroll in college if they had taken advanced math.

Nuñez again followed up on the earlier work with Horn by collaborating with Warburton and Bugarin in 2001. This group compared academic preparation and persistence rates of first-generation students with peers whose parents attended college. Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez (2001) found a negative association between first-generation status and student persistence and attainment. Students scored lower on college entrance exams, and they received more

encouragement to attend 2-year public institutions rather than public, research-based universities. In their first year of college they had lower GPA scores and were more likely to have taken at least one remedial course.

Choy's (2001) research used data from the same research banks as many previous researchers similar to that of Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) with the addition of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. The duplication is relevant due to the focus on first-generation students of minority status. The study found that among 1992 high school graduates whose parents attained a high school diploma or less, 65% were White, 16% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% was American Indian/Alaskan Native. In comparison, the 1992 high school graduates whose parents attained a bachelor's degree or higher were 83% White, 6% Black, 4% Hispanic, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and none were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Compared to earlier findings that students whose parents had attained post-secondary education encourage their children to attend college, this puts students of minority parents at a greater disadvantage. The research by Choy (2001) showed parents with bachelors degrees or higher were more likely (61% compared to 42%) to discuss college enrollment exams and post-secondary plans, and be involved in other college planning activities.

Tinkler's (2002) research shows that parents minority status are intimidated by teachers and schools and choose not to be involved in matters regarding the school. There is a societal perception that once students leave for college they must become independent of their families, which according to Tinkler is a "White" concept. Trumbull (as cited in Tinkler), found that Latino families hold a value referred to as *collectivism*. This concept focuses on the importance of the group and the family structure over individual choice and success. These two concepts

conflict, forcing minority students who attend higher education to exist in two very different cultures (Hsiao, 1992). One culture is of home and the values expressed in that environment; the second culture is of the academic realm, where the knowledge base increases and the values of other college students, in regard to dress, music, and vocabulary, are explored. Hsiao (1992) found the issue of existing in two cultures is particularly stressful for traditional age students who reside at home with their parents.

Somers (2000) also completed research on first-generation students and explored areas regarding background, aspirations, achievement, college experiences, and price of persistence. Her study utilized the work of St. John and Associates as a model (Andrieu & St. John, 1993; Hippensteel, St. John & Starkey, 1996; St. John & Andrieu, 1995; St. John, 1994a, 1994b; St. John & Starkey, 1995 as cited in Somers). The data source was the National Post-secondary Student Aid Survey of 1995-1996. Somers' study supported previous research that first-generation students begin college at more of a disadvantage than their peers. She also provided insight into the concept that this group of students exists within two cultures, which builds on the work of Hsiao (1992).

For students' background, Somers (2000) found "multi-ethnic" students, those who are of more than one ethnicity, were more likely to persist than first-generation White students. Students over the age of thirty were less likely to persist than others of the early twenty age range. Financially independent students are more likely to persist than those who are financially dependent. There was also evidence that if students have plans to achieve the four year degree or higher, aspiration and retention rates increased. The study also found that those students who live on campus, take a full time course load, and possess higher GPAs are more likely to persist than those who live and work off campus and attend classes part time.

## Students Today

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), the current group of traditional age, undergraduate students are referred to as the Millennials. These students are children of the Baby Boomers who, during their time, attended college at higher rates and rebelled against *in loco parentis*. The purpose of *in loco parentis* was to provide a relationship between students and colleges so institutions of higher education could take on disciplinary and governing roles similar to that of parents and families. As a result of the changes created by the Baby Boomers, universities today have the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), which was enacted by the U.S. government to protect the rights of students over the age of eighteen. FERPA protects against the unnecessary release of student records.

The irony existing today is that many of these Baby Boomer parents, who fought against *in loco parentis*, are today trying to find their way around FERPA (Bickel & Lake, 1999). Parents want to know about their students' experiences and what the institution is doing to protect and educate them. These parents want to be involved in their students' lives and will often contact schools, faculty, and staff to act on behalf of their student, especially on the topics of room location, roommate, and class schedule changes (Giegerich, 2002). There is a lighter side to the issue; schools who involve parents proactively and carefully often demonstrate examples of high academic achievement and involvement on the part of students (Mercado, 2000). This process allows schools to work collaboratively with parents without violating FERPA.

In their study of Millennial students, Howe and Strauss (2000) reflect that these young people enjoy the involvement of their parents in their lives, as it has been an ongoing trend since they were first enrolled in school. Haworth and Sandfort's (2002) exploratory study investigated

attitudes and beliefs of the millennial generation and produced findings that parental pressures on the success of college students are continuing to increase, especially in light of the alternate ways parents are becoming involved. These involvement barriers are exhibited by parents who have attended post-secondary education. Those parents who have not attended higher education may ultimately become more hindered in the assistance they can provide for their students.

### Impact on Higher Education

Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) asked students to assess institution cost, location, and reputation as *important*, *somewhat important*, or *very important*. Each category was rated very important for students in considering choice of school enrollment. First-generation students were especially concerned about general cost and access to financial aid. Many of these students also voiced they would like to commute to school and continue to work. The factors in reputation that mattered most were whether the school had a program that would provide the skills necessary to find a job after graduation. Studies mentioned previously demonstrate higher persistence rates of those who live on campus, which could potentially put the persistence rates of these students at a disadvantage.

Colorado State University (CSU) features an organization that has seen positive results in its work with first-generation students. The Academic Advancement Center (AAC) staff provides tutoring, peer mentoring, individualized assessment and prescription, basic skills instruction, and information about financial aid. Students are also referred to advocacy offices and other campus resources in order to provide the best support possible. Students at CSU have an 82% third-semester persistence rate and a 28% 5-year graduation rate. Comparatively, students who use the resources at the AAC have an 80% third-semester persistence rate and a 54% 5-year graduation rate (AAC, n.d.). As the data shows, students who utilize the AAC and

other student support resources on campus have a better chance at success, persistence, and retention. These resources can provide a great asset to those students who live and work off campus.

According to the AAC report (n.d.), the office receives its funding in part from a grant provided by the United States Department of Education under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The design of the program is to provide help to low-income, first-generation, American students to attend college, persist, and become a contributing member of society. Funding from the US Department of Education lends recognition and importance to support of this student group. The AAC is recognized as a part of the *TRIO* program which also includes Upward Bound, McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement, Talent Search, and Educational Opportunity Center at CSU. The term *TRIO* (“Federal TRIO Programs,” n.d.), as created by the Office of Post-secondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education, originally referred to the compilation of the following three programs: Upward Bound, as an offshoot of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964; Talent Search, formed by the Higher Education Act of 1965; and Student Support Services by the 1968 Higher Education Amendments. The program expanded to include other government-funded programs to benefit at-risk students. This office is one example of the resources and skill-building opportunities provided to first-generation students without adequate preparation for college.

Choy (2001) shares that between 1971 and 1998 there was increase of people ages 25 to 29 attaining bachelor’s degrees. A stronger relationship between higher education and K-12 education could greatly benefit first-generation students who do not receive the same college preparation assistance as their peers would from their parents. As a side note, many first-generation students have dependents who one day may attend college. If current first-generation

students receive a quality education and beneficial learning experience, perhaps their children could be better prepared for their academic future.

### Recommendations

Hsiao (1992) recommends creating and maintaining programs geared to recruiting and retaining minority students; this is important as data has shown this group most at risk due to the low number of parents who have attended institutions of higher education. The TRIO programs presently at CSU reflect the types of most effective programs. Hsiao also suggests an orientation course that guides students through resources and support options on campus. Otherwise many of these students who possess a limited understanding of college may miss these resources. Hsiao additionally credits progress reports, social interactions, academic support, and communication with faculty as alternate routes of support. This can allow first-generation students to have adult role models to provide academic guidance and support.

There may also be an opportunity for parents not involved in their students' K-12 education to become involved with them at the college level. Students whose parents are involved with college planning have higher enrollment and persistence rates (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) caution that post-secondary institutions must find a comfortable and consistent way to work with families of varying financial security, education, and knowledge of higher education. This approach will improve the incorporation of diverse families on campus.

Some schools have established programs to involve parents who have college experience and those who do not. According to Mercado (2000), several programs have seen success for many groups of students. North Carolina State University (NCSU), Washington University (WUSTL), Colorado College (CC), and Northeastern University (NU) have seen an increased

level of support from campus and families due to their programs. NCSU offers a parent hotline and a two-day parent orientation session covering housing, financial aid, and student independence. WUSTL distributes an email newsletter to parents. CC organizes a parent directory and offers brief courses for parents who want to gain a taste of their children's educational experience. NU offers a parent office, handbook, and parent advisory board. These resources are in line with what Savage (2003) found as successful college and university parent programs. Parent and Family Weekends were offered at a rate of 74.4%, followed by a type of communication, usually a newsletter, at a rate of 54.9%. This in turn allows all families to be involved and educated about the institution and its resources for students.

At CSU, the College of Natural Sciences provides the Ingersoll Residential College (IRC), which has tutors and mentoring opportunities. Professors in the college are involved and supportive of students. Edwards and McKelfresh (2002) completed a study focusing on students' academic success and persistence in relation to living in the residential learning center. Their study found that minority students have a persistence level that is 7% higher than their White peers. The IRC provides many resources that could help first-generation students succeed including available faculty, tutors, mentorships, and an academic-related living-learning environment.

### Conclusion

First-generation students possess profound needs when compared to their peers whose parents attended college and received a bachelor's degree or higher. Often first-generation students are unprepared academically and financially, score lower on entrance exams, and possess low GPAs. Reports indicate these students have lower retention rates and often do not persist past their third semester. There is a link between students' college enrollment and parent

educational attainment levels; students with parents who possess college degrees see higher levels of academic preparedness as opposed to first-generation students.

First-generation students are also most often non-traditional aged students and of minority status. Minority students are ultimately put at a unique disadvantage because parents are often uncomfortable being involved in their K-12 education and are more likely to not have degrees nor have experience with preparing for college. These students usually exist in a paradox of two cultures and often opt to live and work off campus which in turn decreases their chances of persisting until graduation.

Higher education could benefit from strengthening relationships with K-12 education and helping to educate parents about the post-secondary enrollment process. For example, students who are often encouraged to take advanced math classes typically have parents with college degrees. Such involvement in advanced math classes can help first-generation students to succeed and persist in college. Institutions can demonstrate their support of diversity by allowing more attention and resources to be provided to first-generation students and their success.

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