Assessment and Identification of Services for First Generation College Students

By Desiree Strange
Tarleton State University

Abstract

First generation students are a population within higher education who exhibit their own unique set of needs. The purpose of this research was to identify the barriers in resources available to first generation college students. This mixed methodological study used both quantitative and qualitative questions from a modified survey of first generation students consisting of 38 questions. The sample size was 200 students attending a four-year university. A majority of the participants were 17 to 26 (94% (n=189)) and White (69% (n=139)). The researchers observed the financial difficulties of this population. The researchers found the majority of first generation students (69% (n=138)) reported having financial difficulties. Research also found evidence of the need for increased awareness of resources, such as on campus programs; since 44% (n=89) of participants stated they did not receive any support. The implications focus on the population having increased access to resources on college campuses. First generation students need to have increased knowledge of what resources are offered on college campuses. To help first generation students become better prepared academically, emotionally, and psychologically, they should be offered services such as advising, mentoring and tutoring. Familial factors often negatively impact first generation students and their academic success. Offering support services could increase the retention rate and provide them with the help they may be too uncomfortable to request. The study findings allow heightened consideration of the first generation population by providing awareness of ways to access academic and financial resources.

Introduction

Obtaining a college degree provides advanced academic and economic opportunities within society. Sixty-five percent of jobs in the country will require higher education in the year 2020. Currently about 90% of the US population holds a high school diploma, but only 33% have a college education. Although this rate is steadily increasing, it becomes imperative for more of the population to be intentional about the pursuit of higher education. This intentional pursuit creates a new dynamic for higher educational institutions as they receive an influx of students who are first in their families to attend college. First generation students are defined as those whose parents never attended college or whose parents who have less than a high school education. They make up a third of college enrollment nationally, with only 33% having a college education. More first generation students attend two year colleges compared to four year colleges and are more likely to be students of color; these students tend to be disproportionately Hispanic and African-American. Immigrant students are ten percent of the overall first generation population, with the Asian population (55%) and the Hispanic population (21%) having the largest numbers.

The experiences of first generation students are different from students whose parents attended college. Parents who did not attend college are potentially unprepared to transition the student(s), due to the absence of experiencing college themselves. This limited assistance places first generation students at a disadvantage compared to students whose parents have knowledge about navigating the higher educational system. Additionally, the family differences negatively affect the academic performance of first generation students through their entire college education. These students experience a large gap from the first day of college entry compared to students whose parents attended college. Colleges can assist by providing services to positively influence students’ success in obtaining a college degree.

This study delves into the exploration of identifying additional barriers that impact the retention of first generation college students. The student researchers survey first generation students and gather data to assists colleges in identifying gaps students have experienced when trying to obtain services. Researchers utilized the term “gaps” as the point at which students are likely to have hardships in obtaining services on campus. The identification of gaps allows colleges to formulate a plan to provide services that can improve the college experience for first generation students.

Conceptual/Theoretical Frameworks

The current study utilized the Ecological Systems Theory as the conceptual basis for understanding and a resource to investigate relationships within social systems. The focus of the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) is the way in which a person interacts with their environment. Using EST, researchers were able to understand how an individual can be affected within their system from the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. When observing an individual it was taken into consideration that they are in continual transaction with their environment. EST highlights each aspect of how a particular person’s life is composed of interrelated parts or subsystems constituting an ordered whole. Each subsystem impacts other sections of the whole system. For example, when a student is struggling in mathematics and does not find outside support, their grades start to decrease, and they are suspended from their collegiate sports team in due to their poor grades. EST emphasizes how a person’s environment can either negatively or positively affect a person’s ability to attend college. When a student experiences financial difficulties such as the ability to pay for college or textbooks, they may require information and education pertaining to the available resources necessary to succeed.

Another theory the researchers used to
assist in understanding the influences family has on a first generation student was the Family Systems Theory, developed by Murray Bowen in the 1950s. The Family Systems Theory (FST) is described as, “a [theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit.” More specifically, family functioning is influenced by the family structure, such as boundaries, roles, expectations, and communication. Family functioning and family systems are shaped by individual functioning, which can create pathology within the individual. Family functioning and family systems are shaped by individual functioning, which can create pathology within the individual. Family Impact

Both theories provided researchers with an enhanced lens on how to incorporate both the quantitative and qualitative methods. Researchers were able to purposely include additional demographic questions that assessed the availability of academic and financial resources for first generation students. Researchers also asked more specific questions related to the extent of family assistance, education, and knowledge prior and during the college experience.

Barriers for First Generation Students

First generation college students are primarily different than other students in that they do not enter into college with a familial forehand knowledge. Several studies discuss the barriers encountered by first generation students during their college experience.

These barriers include family impact, family expectations, financial aid, and communication.

Family Impact

When students decide to attend college, family plays a primary role in their experiences and the impact families have on first generation students are not always positive. Students have less than adequate skills when it comes to coping with stress and have a lower level of optimism. The family impact on FGS is not always positive. A student's culture and the way he or she was brought up influences the type of family expectations.

Due to first generation students being the first to attend college or university, they struggle with managing feelings of guilt and confusion related to surpassing the educational attainment of family members and friends. Parents who did not attend college may not set goals for their student, which could prevent students from achieving the maximum potential. The family could inadvertently influence the student's success simply by not having the experience to guide them in a positive direction.

Another hardship encountered, when focusing on family expectations, is the transition from high school to college. In some families and communities, interdependence offers a key role in influencing the first generation population. First generation students could experience a cultural mismatch when confronted with the norms of independence which are prevalent in college environments and might struggle with college curriculums, institutional policies, and teaching practices.

In some of the situations occurring in the home of first generation students’ parents, they often are more dependent on their student or vice versa; the student might rely heavily on the support of his or her parents. Students who come from parents who did not obtain a college degree may deal with two separate cultures: the culture of their home and the culture of college educated people and their children. According to Belanger, Boals, Connally, Duron, and Jenkins (2013), these students may experience stress reactions to the acculturation process they are experiencing going between the two separate cultures. In some instances, “even when families wish to be supportive, parents without a college education have less factual information to give and may be seen as less supportive by their children.”

Financial Aid

For students to begin considering higher education, they require the knowledge to know how they can gain access to the funds to pay for the cost of tuition and living. One of the many outlets to receiving funds is through financial aid. Financial aid is administered in multiple forms, such as grants, scholarships, and work study, which do not require repayment. However, loans which are considered self-help will start collecting interest after graduation and need to be paid back over time. Each financial aid option has a set of requirements, such as deadlines and paperwork. A student who is first generation and has never navigated the process of financial aid may become overwhelmed and may require the support from experienced individuals. Stress can be alleviated by providing financial aid resources and support to first generation students who have never navigated through the process of financial aid. These students need assistance navigating the financial aid process as well as tools to assist them in completing documentation for grants, loans, scholarships, etc. Financial aid navigation could come from high school teachers, counselors, social workers, advisors, or even college students and graduates who have been through the process of financial aid. By providing resources and counseling for those students who have little to no experience with financial aid, first generation students will could have a greater chance at succeeding in life after college because their finances and education are in order before entering the career field.

Communication

Limited research is available about the first generation student population; the available research implies a gap in communication pertaining to first generation students on multiple levels. Soria & Stebleton (2012) surveyed close to 2000 first year students to compare the degree of engagement and retention between first generation students and their counterparts. Findings show first generation students have a significant disadvantage in comparison to students whose parents have attended college. First generation students have a lower retention rate and limited academic engagement. Academic engagement derives from the ability to communicate one's needs. Many first generation students have limited social capital to develop adequate communication skills needed for building quality relationships at the col-
Students are also less likely to attempt to form these relationships due to low confidence and lack of preparation for a college level academic workload. They might not initiate themselves into school activities and “internal factors such as students’ habits, attitudes, and interactions with teachers and other students may influence their success.”

Based on the past studies and integrating the bases of the Ecological Systems Theory and the Family Systems Theory, researchers sought to clarify and identify additional barriers for first generation students within a college institution. The main researcher objectives included 1) identifying which factors contributed to the student’s decision to attend college; 2) determining the obstacles encountered during the application process; 3) observing the presence and prevalence of support; and 4) assessing the student’s comfort level in communication with staff and peers during the process of receiving services or additional help.

The literature implications informed the hypotheses for this study. The first hypothesis was that a majority (51% or more) of first generation students will state financial difficulties as the greatest barrier to a successful college experience. Researchers identified participants based on inclusion criteria of being enrolled at a four-year higher educational institution. All participants were retrieved from college institutions in the southwest region of the United States. The researchers compiled a 38 question survey to be administered to participants who identify themselves as a first generation college student. The survey consists of quantitative questions on a four-point Likert scale, such as pre-determined demographics of age, race, and ethnicity. It also consists of qualitative questions which asked what kinds of information would the participants find helpful online for first generation college students and if they had any family that has attended college and the highest degree that family member attained. Overall, the qualitative questions assessed the experiences of first generation students. All surveys were distributed to participants by the researchers, there were no electronic or mailed surveys involved in this study. Through the use of nonprobability sampling, researchers were able to identify the gaps in services and unavailability of services first generation students have experienced along their higher education journey.

Participants

The researchers gathered responses from a sample size of 200 participants. Of those 200 responses, 94% (n=189) were ages 17 to 26. Three and a half percent, (n=7), of the participants were 27 to 36, 1% (n=3) were between the ages of 37 and 46 and less than 1% (n=1) of the participants surveyed were in the age range of 47 to 56. The racial makeup of the participants were White (69%; n=139), Black/African American (15%; n=30), American Indian/Alaska Native (3%; n=6), Asian (2%; n=4), and Hawaiian Native and Pacific Islander (1%; n=2). Researchers also analyzed responses from participants who were bi-racial, meaning they identify with more than one race. The results were White/Black/African American (1%; n=2), White/ American Indian/Alaska Native (Less than 1%; n=1), and 8% (n=16) of the participants surveyed did not select a race.

Parental and Student Education Level.

Figure 1 shows the current college grade level of the first generation students who participated in the survey.

Methods

The purpose of surveying first generation students and gathering research data was to accurately identify the barriers first generation students have experienced when trying to obtain services. Researchers identified participants based on inclusion criteria of being enrolled at a four-year higher educational institution. All participants were retrieved from college institutions in the southwest region of the United States. The researchers compiled a 38 question survey to be administered to participants who identify themselves as a first generation college student. The survey consists of quantitative questions on a four-point Likert scale, such as pre-determined demographics of age, race, and ethnicity. It also consists of qualitative questions which asked what kinds of information would the participants find helpful online for first generation college students and if they had any family that has attended college and the highest degree that family member attained. Overall, the qualitative questions assessed the experiences of first generation students. All surveys were distributed to participants by the researchers, there were no electronic or mailed surveys involved in this study. Through the use of nonprobability sampling, researchers were able to identify the gaps in services and unavailability of services first generation students have experienced along their higher education journey.

Participants

The researchers gathered responses from a sample size of 200 participants. Of those 200 responses, 94% (n=189) were ages 17 to 26. Three and a half percent, (n=7), of the participants were 27 to 36, 1% (n=3) were between the ages of 37 and 46 and less than 1% (n=1) of the participants surveyed were in the age range of 47 to 56. The racial makeup of the participants were White (69%; n=139), Black/African American (15%; n=30), American Indian/Alaska Native (3%; n=6), Asian (2%; n=4), and Hawaiian Native and Pacific Islander (1%; n=2). Researchers also analyzed responses from participants who were bi-racial, meaning they identify with more than one race. The results were White/Black/African American (1%; n=2), White/ American Indian/Alaska Native (Less than 1%; n=1), and 8% (n=16) of the participants surveyed did not select a race.

Parental and Student Education Level.

Figure 1 shows the current college grade level of the first generation students who participated in the survey.
surveyed consisted of 29% (n=59) college freshmen, 22% (n=45) college sophomores, 23% (n=46) college juniors, 23% (n=46) college seniors, and 2% (n=4) of the first generation student population were college graduates who were first generation students and are now enrolled in a master’s program. The students were asked to identify his/her parent’s highest level of education (see Figure 2). Over 50% of the participants, 51% (n=103), responded in the affirmative to his/her parent’s highest level of education being high school. Also, 31% (n=62) of students responded in the affirmative to one or both of his/her parents having had attended college but did not complete a degree. Adding to those responses, 4% (n=8) of students responded in the affirmative to his/her parent having only attended elementary school and 13% (n=27) only attended middle school.

**Economic Status** (see Figure 3).

The economic status of those surveyed was determined based upon seven categories selected by participants. The categories included long term poverty, working class, lower-middle, middle class, upper middle, and the wealthy. Six percent (n=12) of students reported experiencing long-term poverty, 15% (n=31) were identified as working class, 22% (n=45) were lower-middle class, 39% (n=79) identified as middle class, 11% (n=23) upper-middle class, 1% (n=3) described themselves as wealthy, and 3% (n=7) were unsure of what category he/she identified.

**Data Analysis**

Based upon the hypotheses, the responses analyzed validated the hypotheses which stated:

\[ H_0: \text{A majority (51% or more) of first generation students on the TSU campus will state financial difficulties as the greatest barrier to a successful college experience.} \]

One of the questions offered the participants the option to identify any significant barriers he/she faced during the application process. Of the 200 responses received, 69% (n=138) of the participants selected tuition/cost as the greatest barrier in their application process. The second most prevalent response was programs pertaining to social activities with informal parties which offered free food, attending on-campus events like plays, sporting events, performances and cultural attractions. The reasoning for this common response might be due to these activities being free of cost for the participants. The researchers analyzed the responses a question which asked the participants the type of support programs they would attend if offered at their school.

The most prevalent responses were programs pertaining to financial health and financial aid – information regarding managing student loan debt, managing finances generally, finding scholarships, and funding study abroad or other summer programs. Also prevalent from the first generation population was their response to programs pertaining to career development with information on how to find internships, networking events, resume and cover letter review, and career panels. Based on the results of the data collected, researchers were able to identify the financial aspect as a significant barrier for first generation students.

Researchers inquired if the university had provided any support for first generation students. Over 44% (n=89) stated they were not provided any type of support as first generation students; 28% (n=56) responded the university did provide him/her with support; and 27% (n=55) were uncertain if the university provided any support for first generation students. Due to the majority of students stating how they were not provided with any support as first generation students, the researchers view the low levels of support as a result of resources not being promoted effectively. Therefore, the second hypotheses related to awareness of resources was not able to be substantiated due to the lack of knowledge about resources or access to resources.

The researchers have identified barriers related to the finances serving as the greatest barrier for this population. Additionally, with the implementation of programs related to financial health, financial aid, social activities, and career development; first generation students will have increased knowledge of offered resources on the university campus.

**Strengths and Limitations**

With approximately half of the students on college campuses being first generation, the researchers were able to administer surveys with ease in heavily populated areas across campus, such as the library and the student center. The willingness and cooperation of professors who allowed surveys to be distributed in classes assisted the researchers in capturing large groups of student participants and in distributing multiple surveys at one time. The researchers invested over a year’s worth of time in studying this population and have completed literature reviews, policy analysis papers, and worked directly with this population.

Researchers also experienced and identified limitations of the research. Respondents to the survey became confused by use of the term first generation, because they assumed that first generation meant children of immigrants and not the first person in a family to obtain a degree. After identifying this constraint, researchers explained this limitation to respondents before they distributed the survey. The survey was six pages in length which may have contributed to participants not completing the survey. Participants did not answer every question on the survey or did not write “n/a” when necessary on the survey and those survey responses were unable to be utilized, or included in the data analysis. Another limitation is researchers only assessed the barriers of first generation students from one institution hindering the generalizability of the results. Also, the
The study provides important implications for social work practice with the first generation population. The implications for social work at the micro level include identifying the cause of the hardships first generation students encounter and trying to eliminate those issues to increase the retention rate for future students in higher education. By identifying gaps, such as financial aid, leaving family, and working full time, professional social workers can identify the necessary resources to increase the retention rate of the first generation population. To help first generation students become prepared academically, emotionally, and psychologically, services such as advising, mentoring, and tutoring could be beneficial. Giving first generation students these tools could counteract their struggles in family and work responsibilities, weak academic skills, inadequate study skills, and feelings of depression or stress which can negatively impact first generation students and their academic success.13 Offering these services could increase the retention rate and provide first generation students with the assistance they are too uncomfortable to request.

Implications for social work on the macro level consist of the university implementing an orientation program or a webpage for first generation students. The website could include a question and answer tab to read about any questions or concerns that other students or alumni have experienced previously without the need to wait for emails or phone calls. The orientation could target the largest barrier identified. Implementing such programs would require further research and could prepare first generation students for college in an effective manner.

Finally, macro level implications would focus on advocating for policy at the state level to enact programs that are specifically tailored to benefit first generation students. In previous projects conducted by the researchers, no policies directly relating to first generation students were identified in the state of Texas. A potential policy implemented could be academic advising beginning at the high school level to prepare students for the requirements of college such as test score requirements, completing applications, and cost included in higher education. Implementing such policies would assist first generation students before they graduate high school. In regard to ethical considerations, professional social workers abide by a National Association of Social Work (NASW) code of ethics. The code of ethics provides the social work profession with a compass to guide the organization in enhancing the wellbeing of individuals and communities. In order for the social work profession to further assist the first generation population, it is important to maintain competence and enhance their expertise on their particular set of needs. According to the NASW, increasing professional knowledge and skills and applying them to practice is a goal social workers strive to achieve. It is important for social workers to continuously learn and apply the knowledge obtained to practice in an effective way so they can provide the most effective service to clients.

As it relates to the ethics of the social work profession, workers’ focus is to help individuals or populations who are underrepresented. Utilizing the knowledge, values, and skills and elevating service above self-interest is important in addressing social problems and assisting those in need when working in the field of social work.14 When workers are assisting others it is necessary for the worker to provide service to individuals, groups, communities, and families by ensuring they are invested in providing beneficial resources for the client. By maintaining competence and serving, social workers are able to illustrate the importance of human relationships and the significance relationships have in the process of helping students continue their education, which are core values of social work. To strengthen relationships among people within the social work field, it is important for the worker to promote, maintain, restore, and enhance the well-being of individuals, social groups, families, communities, and organizations.14

References
Wang, T. (2012). “Understanding the memorable messages first-generation college students receive from on-campus mentors.” Communication Education. 61.4. Pg 335-357.