First-generation Student Transitions to Seattle University

Hector A. Guzman, M.Ed. (2021)

MAGIS: A Student Development Journal,
Volume 14, June 2020, pp. 17-19

Published by: Seattle University Student Development Association (SUSDA)
First-generation Student Transitions to Seattle University

Hector A. Guzman

This paper examines adult development theory among first-generation college students with a focus on race and ethnic identity. The implications of these two identities in higher education are addressed. This paper also considers learning theories that are relevant to common concerns among first-generation students. The paper concludes with an analysis of current issues that first-generation students face including the importance of orientation practice on the effects of campus culture and the implications it has for first-generation students.

Keywords: First-generation, Orientation, Race and Ethnicity, Humanism, Adult Learning, Campus Culture

First-generation Student Transitions to Seattle University

When it comes to students transitioning from high school and starting their post-secondary education at Seattle University, not one student experiences the same transition. This is especially true for first-generation students who will be attending college for the first time. Seattle University defines first-generation undergraduate and graduate students as those whose parents or guardians have not received a U.S. bachelor’s degree. As such, parents often have little to no knowledge of college admission processes and institutional procedures. This lack of familial connection and generational insight to post-secondary navigational knowledge, often leads to first-generation students needing to fend for themselves, oftentimes hoping that their academic career will be successful by an act of coincidence rather than informed actions and decisions.

To help with this transition in life, many universities have offices that focus on transition through orientation practices for new students to be successful as they embark on this new journey in their life. Some of the responsibilities that fall under an orientation office is helping students familiarize themselves with institutional services that cater to specific populations such as first-generation students among other populations. Through this document, we will explore how adult learning theory can apply to orientation practices, such as a humanistic and social cognitive theory, and how race and ethnic development theory applies to first-generation students in conjunction. We will also discuss the effects campus culture and climate can have on the performance and development of first-generation students as one of the issues that this population faces throughout their enrollment in post-secondary institutions.

Orientation at Seattle University

Orientation sessions can differ from school to school. For instance, orientation at California State University, Chico focuses on policies and procedures, advising sessions, and class registration. Orientation at Seattle University, however, uses an approach that seeks to create a connection among new students, their peers, current student leaders, and student services, thus creating a sense of community. Orientation at Seattle University is a two-day program known as Summer in Seattle, which involves information sessions that introduce students to leadership and success strategies. Student leaders and departments are actively involved as Orientation Programs introduces new students to their new home. Sessions that cater specifically to first-generation students and their families are created in conjunction with The Outreach Center, an office that promotes student excellence and persistence to graduation for first-generation, commuter, transfer students, adult learners, and veterans through campus leadership, peer coaching, and student support programs. Through collaboration, Seattle University aims to create bridges for students to be successful from the start, and until the end of their academic career.

Identity Development of First-generation Students

In the book Learning in Adulthood: A comprehensive Guide, Sharan Merriam (2006) explains how adult development is not an experience that is universal for everyone. Nature and nurture take place not only in childhood, but adulthood as well. Biological aging, psychological change, influences of sociocultural factors, and integrated perspectives all contribute to the development if an individual in
adulthood. (Meriam, 2006). In considering research on adult development theory, the sociocultural perspective of adult learning holds important implications on racial and ethnic identity when it comes to first-generation students, including how race and ethnicity affect their lives, as well as their involvement in post-secondary education.

Sociocultural Factors

Humans are inherently social beings. In identity development, sociocultural factors account for the influence of the social world on personal development (Dannefer, 1996; Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2005; Shaffer, 2005). Examples of sociocultural factors include the socially constructed notions of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Merriam, 2006). These social identities are often associated with certain expectations and or assumptions, which are determined by normative beliefs held by society (Bee & Bjorkland, 2004). On the other hand, every individual has the capacity to redefine their personal definition of the identities they self-identify with. Identities can also have different salience. Krause (1999) and Reitzes (2003) state that people have multiple identities; however, the importance of these identities is determined by the personal value an individual places on them and how detrimental the loss of this identity would be to an individual’s self-concept. For many first-generation students, their racial and/or ethnic identity is particularly salient, as many first-generation students hold marginalized identities.

Racial and ethnic identity development

Research focused on racial and ethnic identity has been part of a discussion on whether race and ethnicity are biologically based (Spickard, 1992), or socially constructed (Waters, 1990). On the biological side, race is accounted from an individual’s physical features, character qualities, or genetic make-up (Spickard, 1992). As a social construct, race and ethnicity “refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1993, p. 3). Several identity models talk about the perception of race and ethnicity from different lenses as well. Research can be conducted on the racial and ethnic perception about the sense of self, or the perception of others (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). However, racial identity seems more often to be correlated with physical attributes such as skin color (O’hearn, 1998).

Ethnic identity on the other hand, tends to be more intrinsic. Ethnic identity stems from mutual correlation, conscious or unconscious, with others that might display a common feeling of bonding, in association with similar traditions, behaviors, values, and or beliefs (Ott, 1989). These commonalities between individuals allows them to not only make sense of the world, but to find pride in their sense of self in a positive ethnic group environment. The development models of ethnic identity are based on what people learn about their culture from family, society, community, and individuals who share a strong loyalty and kinship (Torres, 1996).

Conclusion on Adult Development and First-generation Students

Race and ethnicity are intertwined with first-generation students and their post-secondary education experiences. First-generation students are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education. This holds important implications for Native American students, for example. Garrett and Walking Stick Garrett (1994) provide a model of Native American identity, values, and perspectives, where those who develop a strong identification with their cultural roots are more likely to use elders as resources. This holds important implications for first-generation Native American students, because being the first in their family to attend college, they would not have access to generational knowledge from elders to learn how to navigate post-secondary education. The lack of familial knowledge about higher education also has broader implications as many first-generation students come from a variety of cultures where support from elders is incredibly important. If students lack the access to certain resources because their elders did not continue or partake in post-secondary education themselves, it could limit their resources when it comes to college access.

Given how interwoven race and ethnicity are within learning environments, it is important to consider the socially constructed nature of not just identities but learning environments as well. Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) state that it is critical to understand the culturally constructed nature of educational environments because the racial and ethnic identity and values of the instructor can permeate into their method of providing education. It is important to create inclusive learning environments that are inclusive of multicultural perspectives, which also support and challenge students (Caffarella et al., 2000). One way that instructors and faculty can help first-generation students is by understanding what institutional resources can help students outside the classroom while provide access to information on these resources throughout their classes.
ment, and how the intersection of different identities held by an individual affect how society defines them (Merriam, 2006). Race and ethnicity have played a role in the development of every individual, and for those coming from marginalized communities, transitioning from home to life in post-secondary education could pose a challenge. Higher education institutions and their faculty must consider the different backgrounds of their students to create an inclusive environment that takes into accounts the experiences of students who come from different races and ethnicities. Lack of diversity in teaching techniques and the classroom could impair the learning experience of students who are exposed to an environment that is not welcoming or catered to multicultural perspectives. By recognizing that students hold different and multiple identities, which include race and ethnicity, higher education institutions have the capacity to create a more inclusive space for all students. Professionals can do more than just take diversity into account, they can create opportunities for students whose background did not prepare them to be successful in post-secondary education. This would allow students to thrive while simultaneously developing a positive view of their racial and ethnic identity. This can be achieved by taking adult learning theories and approaches into account that cater to specific student populations.

**Learning Theories**

While orientation tends to focus on the students’ transition to college, it also provides students a learning opportunity to reflect on their personal growth at the start of their college career. This reflection of personal growth can give the illusion that the student’s path is a one-person journey. The fact is, other people are involved in that growth. Among those people are mentors who provide an array of resources to ensure not only retention but also the success of the student. Through advising and peer mentoring, higher education and student affairs professionals can help first-generation students in two areas: the first one is facilitating the students’ discovery of their potential for self-actualization, and the second aspect is the introduction of the role mentoring can play in their lives. Given these two implications, two learning theories are particularly important to address regarding first-generation students’ learning development, the humanistic approach to learning and Social Cognitive Learning.

**Humanism: Maslow’s Needs and Roger’s Humanistic Learning Theory**

At the heart of humanism is the notion that humans have an innate potential for growth and development. This potential is fueled by a desire to find purpose and achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Maslow describes self-actualization as the desire to become everything which one can become. In other words, the desire of people become the best version of themselves. To achieve this level of personal growth, one must first meet certain criteria in what is called Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. At the base lies the basic psychological needs for survival. Examples of this are safety, food, warmth, shelter, and security. The next step addresses psychological needs like the need for belonging, friendship, esteem, and feelings of accomplishment. It is only after these needs are met, that a person can finally move to the last step, the self-fulfillment needs, which accompany self-actualization.

A second contributor to the humanistic approach of learning theories is Carl Rogers. Rogers is credited with creating the student-centered approach to learning, where the teacher is a facilitator of self-directed learning and not a dispenser of knowledge (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Self-directed learning is an approach to learning that is controlled by the learner. Knowles (1975) defines self-directed learning as a process in which an individual takes the initiative to identify their learning needs, create learning goals, identify resources and mentors, and choose appropriate learning strategies.

**Humanism’s relationship to student learning**

When considering first-generation students’ experiences through a humanistic lens, it must be acknowledged that students have the capacity and potential to evolve and become the best version of themselves on their own accord. It should also be noted that this growth does not take place without help. One obstacle first-generation students face is the lack of direction from familial elders since a first-generation student is the first in their family to partake in post-secondary education. Throughout their lives, first-generation students have often faced adversities alone, and this pattern of behavior continues into their college experience. This is the pattern of behavior and mentality orientation professionals hope to dismantle as we initiate the student’s transition into the university life. Orientation professionals taking a humanistic approach when developing programming should remember that growth must come from within, and as mentors to students, orientation advisors are only guides who help create the catalyst to self-actualization. In formal self-directed learning, active involvement on behalf of mentors is required to help students identify goals and strategies to further develop growth (Merriam & Bierema 2014).

**Social Cognitive Learning Theory**

Merriam and Bierema (2014) introduce social learning
as a reminder that there is a social component to learning. As social beings, humans observe and partake in social environments throughout their lives, and humans model their behavior based on what others do. According to social cognitive learning theory, this is how new knowledge, skills, rules, and strategies are acquired. As people notice how others behave, and observation becomes experience, it is expected that people learn to not only apply, but also adapt their previous experiences to new situations. John Dewey (1963) talks about a process called principle of continuity, which is when someone connects their present moment to past experiences. This connection then has a potential for future applications in day-to-day life. Over the course of the lifetime, all the experiences of the past collide and combine, turning past experiences into a single tool for attaining success. Social cognitive learning theory provides a framework for orientation professionals to utilize the tools that first-generation students have already developed that can help them succeed in post-secondary education.

**Conclusion of Learning Theories**

Orientation at Seattle University allows new students to foster a sense of belonging as they transition from their life at home, into the university life, a major transition in life. For first-generation students, this can be especially difficult due to the lack of direction from people in their immediate life, such as parents or elders. As first-generation students are introduced to peers and student services offered at Seattle University, mentors make an introduction to offer insight into how to be successful in post-secondary education. A humanistic approach is taken as mentors allow self-directed learning to take place, where students take their own approach to identify barriers in their life, and seek solutions to overcome such barriers, by reaching out to mentors or resources (Tough 1978). At the same time, these mentors partake in cognitive apprenticeship, where new students learn and imitate the patterns of behavior (Meriam & Bierema 2014) that allowed other first-generation students to be successful in their academic career. By allowing first-generation students to mentor each other, students can find a sense of belonging in a place where familiarity is absent. However, there are additional issues that first-generation students must face that do not pertain to their transition.

**Current Issues for First-generation Students**

The modern iteration of student affairs and its focus on the needs of enrolled and prospective students primarily developed during the era of consumerism in higher education, which took place between 1970 to 1995. Several pieces of legislation and publications documented the roles and responsibilities of student affairs professionals, thus creating the catalyst for the exponential growth of student services (Evans & Reason, 2001). These services focus on catering to the needs of specific populations and creating inclusive campus cultures to positively affect students. Orientation is a critical issue for many first-generation students because one of the primary purposes of orientation work is to create an inclusive campus culture. This is critical, because campus culture can impact first-generation students’ success as they attempt to navigate higher education services, from enrollment through completion.

**Orientation**

When thinking about orientation programs in higher education and the transition students are going through, it is important to remember that not everyone comes with the same background, share the same experiences, and is on the same level of college readiness. When orientation programming is created, it is important to keep in mind two major components. The first one is the universal content that affects all students equally, such as policies and procedures, graduation requirements, and integrity formation amongst many areas. The second component is the college experience that students will go through as individuals, such as sessions catered to specific populations. This is where giving the students choices and options within the orientation session is important. Seattle University provides a section called “Choose Your Own Adventure”, where students can choose three sessions from a list to further learn about student services and connect with students who have similar interests or backgrounds. Two examples of these sessions offered include first-gen and LGBTQIA sessions.

Representation amongst the orientation staff is equally important. It is important to recognize that for students to be able to make a sense of community amongst their peers, they must be able to see themselves represented amongst the school’s population, which includes students and staff. Hurtado, Alvaro, and Guillermo-Wan (2015), talk about the importance of recognizing and understanding how racial identity salience in an institution is important, because the presence or lack of diversity can foster or diminish this salience during the college years. As an office that focuses in the transition of students into post-secondary education, it is the responsibility of orientation staff members to help students from diverse backgrounds, races, and ethnicities, to continue developing their sense of self.

**Humanism and social learning in Orientation practice**

One of the realizations orientation professionals want
first-generation students to acknowledge during an orientation session is that they are not alone in their journey. In successful orientation practices, there is a myriad of mentors who believe in the potential of these students, mentors who also acknowledge that learning is about the development of the person. Meriam and Bierema (2014) mention that humanism’s focus is on the whole person, including body, mind, and spirit. This intent resonates with Seattle University’s mission, which is, in part, to educate the whole person. Student leaders who take the active role of orientation advisors introduce new students to several institutional resources and mentors. They emphasize the fact that every journey is different, involves self-discovery, and is mostly self-directed outside the classroom. While resources catered to first-generation students are available, these resources will only be of use if the students seek help when needed. After all, self-directed learning involves the identification of obstacles hindering learning and the adaptation to overcome them (Tough, 1978).

In tandem with recognizing they are not alone, another key goal for orientation programs at Seattle University is to help students find a sense of community. During orientation, part of the presentations and student panels Seattle University offers to first-generation students involve other first-generation students who are thriving in their academic life. Daloz (2012) and Mullen (2005) talk about how mentoring is a process that allows people to observe, and subsequently replicate behavior and thought patterns. Peer mentoring offers new students evidence that their success is doable, achievable, and replicable. Consequently, the new students have the potential to eventually become the mentors themselves to a future generation of first-generation students.

Seattle University has created social spaces for these students to interact and find a sense of community, such as The Outreach Center and the Collegia Program, a lounge for first-generation students to gather. This has been done based on the assumption that new students attempt to socialize in hopes of identifying peers that share similar backgrounds or characteristics. By introducing social spaces catered to first-generation students during orientation, student affairs professionals can create the beginning stages of cognitive apprenticeship, which involves a mentor creating a thinking pattern for the mentee (Meriam & Bierema 2014). The goal that orientation professionals hope to accomplish by taking this cognitive apprenticeship approach is to help first-generation students not only break out of the pattern of thinking that their success is only dependent of them and them alone but to start the process of opening up to the idea of collaboration. This collaboration expands beyond the mentors who are sharing their experience as fellow first-generation students, and into the wide variety of services the university offers. These services include mental health resources, financial aid services, and leadership opportunities that aid to further develop personal growth and self-actualization. Taking all this information into account, it is clear how the interactions between students, the observation and emulation of behavior, and the environment, come together to help create a social space that allows first-generation students to thrive within the bigger space of the uncharted institution. A new space can suddenly become a new home away from home.

Campus Culture

Despite a rise in numbers in college admission over the past decades, persistence, retention, and graduation rates are still a problem for underrepresented students, which tend to include students of color and low-income students (Pyne & Means, 2013). Several denominations have been created for institutions that serve students who identify as minorities such as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) (Schuh, Jones, & Torres, 2017). However, only because a school serves these populations, it does not mean that the students being served are being cared for in a way that positively impacts their college experience. All the aforementioned denominations can fall under the umbrella category of Minority Serving Institution. Institutions who only focus on enrolling students who pertain to a minority class rather than creating a campus culture that is not only welcoming but also includes services to ensure persistence, retention, and graduation, are considered to be Minority Enrolling Institution rather than Minority Serving Institutions, due to the lack of focused service in student development and efforts to help students achieve their academic goals through programming catered to specific populations.

Campus Culture in the Life of First-generation Students

Culture plays an important role in the growth and development of people, but different cultures have different context, which Meriam and Bierema (2014) describe as social systems that shape the thoughts and actions of people within a specific setting. These settings can include the classroom, community, and nation. In other words, the context of culture can range from something as small as home, to the institution students intend on attending, and there ought to be some culture shock during the transition from home to college. Coming into a world that is not familiar or predominant at home, when first-generation students start their higher education journey, there is a possibility of feeling underrepresented and invisible, especially at Pre-
dominant White Institutions (PWI). Lack of diversity can also translate into the classroom setting. When an institution is categorized as predominantly white, the likelihood that this translates into the faculty and staff population is high. When first generation students start attending classes, the lack of representation within positions of power can be discouraging for some students. The lack of familiarity after being separated from home can have negative effects in the academic performance of students who additionally to first generation, also identify as a race other than white.

Possible solutions to campus culture

Even though Seattle University is a PWI, with only 37.3% of students identifying as ethnically diverse, the university focuses on initiatives to create services for their diverse populations (Seattle University Facts, n.d.). The Office of Multicultural Affairs at Seattle University has evolved over the last 50 years to provide services to an array of different identities ranging from race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity among other categories. The Outreach Center also offers services and social spaces for first-generation students. Aside from first-generation students, veterans, adult learners, continuing students, non-traditional students, and commuter students are also provided with services to ensure their persistence, graduation, and retention. Orientation at Seattle University does a great job introducing these services to new students, but more students could be recruited if this information became part of the recruitment process for admissions. Students are making an investment when they decide to attend post-secondary education and consequently need to make an informed decision when choosing a higher education institution during the discernment process. Students want to know they will be cared for by the institution they are choosing to call home.

The creation of student services is born from the needs of the current student population. A campus wide survey could identify not only issues student populations with diverse identities are facing, but also the severity of these issues. While student services are implemented, there is a possibility that not enough funding is provided to them because the extent of the need is not equivalent to the extent that existed upon the birth of a specific service. Reevaluation of the student population and campus climate could bring forth new opportunities to better serve our current student population.

Conclusion

First-generation students do not have the same experience as other students while navigating higher education, from the admission process, and throughout their academic career. Campus culture has an inherent effect on the student experiences, and first-generation students often lack the proper access to information and guidance to navigate post-secondary institutions. Through mentorship by fellow first-generation students, newly admitted students have an opportunity to discuss the problems and hurdles they are facing to create an opportunity to find solutions collaboratively. Taking a humanistic and social learning approach during Orientation allows first generation students to learn from their fellow peers while keeping in mind that students have the capacity to learn, grow, and reach self-actualization on their own accord. Faculty members can also take an inclusive approach to their teaching techniques by accounting for the different backgrounds and identities that their students might represent. First-generation students may have different salient identities and intersectionality must be considered to ensure all students, regardless of identity, feel welcomed and taken care of as part of their educational community. Lastly, student affairs professionals must constantly evaluate and assess the campus culture of their institution to ensure that inclusion of different identities is considered to create a space for everyone regardless of background. This starts by understanding how college access is different for students based on their background and identities, after all, first generation students lack access to generational knowledge which would easily be available to a continuing generation student. Mentorship and ease of access to information and advisors of diverse backgrounds is essential to bridge a gap between students and the institution of their choice, where this bridge is strengthened by the similarity in identities students find with their fellow peers and advisors.

References


Garrett, J. T., & Garrett, M. W. (1994). The path of good
medicine: Understanding and counseling Native American Indians. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and development, 22*(3), 134-144.


