Experiences of First-Generation College Students Attending Universities

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Abstract

Each year, institutions all around are working together to enhance the college student experience. Administrators work with campus departments to try to figure out the best ways to serve their students. As time has passed, college campuses have become more diverse and the needs of the students are decreasing. Colleges are now dealing with special populations and must find the best way to serve and support these students. One of the most increasing student categories colleges are seeing today are first generation college students. These are students who are the first in their family to go to college (Atherton, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of first-generation college students that attend four-year institutions with little to no resources available for their community. This paper will also share information as to how higher education professionals can better help first generation students adapt to the college lifestyle and succeed during their time there.
Introduction

First generation college students are unique in many ways. These students are not your traditional college student. These students are the first in their family to attend college. Some of these students have parents who did not even get to complete high school. Many of these students come from low-income households (Wildhagen, 2015). Many of them have also attended high schools that have low educational rankings (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). One thing many of these students take pride in is paving the way for future generations within their family. These students believe that they will be able to be the positive change that their family has been needing for many years (Stieha, 2010). These students unlike others are taking large leaps into unfamiliar territory to make a difference in their lives.

Challenges

There are so many challenges that first generation students face. One challenge that has been highlighted lately is their transition into college. Many of these students do not receive the proper guidance and support when applying for college. Students are often misguided and possibly even told that they will not make it in college (Stieha, 2010). These students struggle with finding someone who will believe in them enough to help them. Unfortunately, their parents cannot help them because they are unaware with what the applying process let alone the college experience looks like (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Some students even have parents who do not want them to go to college because they do not believe in their child.

Another major challenge these students face is their finances. Many first-generation college students cannot afford to attend college. These students depend on grants and student loans to pay for their education. While this may help many students, others have to take on two
to three jobs to pay for college as well as provide for their family all while trying to focus on their academics (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Some students have given up on their dream of going to college because their families could not afford to pay for it (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Others have given up attending their dream institution and end up settling for the most affordable one they can find. Unfortunately, these schools may not even have their desired major.

More than anything these students have to learn how to navigate their college experience with little to no support from their families due to their lack of knowledge. This definitely takes a toll on these students and can cause some of these students to want to drop out early and go home (Terenzini et al., 1996). These students have to deal with these challenges and work their hardest to make good grades. Without the proper guidance and support from their family, peers, and higher education professionals, first-generation college students will continue to feel lost and out of place on college campuses (Stieha, 2010).

**Experiences**

After struggling to finally get into college, first-generation college students often lack the motivation to stay in college (Gibbons, Rinehart, & Hardin, 2016). These students have dealt with what some may consider impossible odds and may find it hard to see themselves making it through all four years. They have to learn about a whole new environment, take on new roles, and make sure they are performing well academically. Many of these students struggle connecting to campus because they are not really sure what the institution has to offer them. Others struggle making connections due to the amount of time they now spend at working trying to pay tuition and fees. Having to deal with so much inside and outside of the classroom takes a
negative toll on these students, and without the proper support, these students are bound to eventually drop out (Winkle-Wagner, 2011).

Resources

As educators and administrators work towards better serving this community, they have taken great strides to improve their transition process, academic resources, and on campus living experiences. Colleges have begun creating parent orientation programs that help them gain a better understanding of the college experience and what their children may be going through (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). During parent orientation, parents learn about all of the campus resources offered to students, degree plans their students may have, how their parents can support their students emotionally and financially, and depending on the institution some parents will have the opportunity to meet their child’s academic advisor. While this may not matter to some, students have shared that having their parents and peers support has made a huge difference when it comes to their academics (Wang, 2012).

In conjunction with college campuses, high schools have created summer bridge programs, after school tutoring programs, and trio programs to better help prepare students for college. During the summer bridge programs, students visit college campuses early and learn about all the college has to offer these students. The goal with this program is to help students build a sense of community early on. Studies have shown that this helps decrease some of the fear students have about their transition to campus (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Often times, during these programs students make friends that they end up taking classes with later on during their college career.
Another great resource for students that has been expanding is the Advancement Via Individual (AVID) program. This is a program many middle schools and high schools now have that’s goal is to get students into college. Through this program, students are taken on field trips to visit colleges all over. These students are also required to take notes that will help them study and pass their other classes while in school. Towards graduation, students are guided when applying for colleges and writing their personal statements. This program has helped many students prepare and get into college. AVID allows students to learn more about their dream schools, the requirements to get into the school, and whether or not the students are on track to getting into that college.

While much preparation has been done for the transition process, one of the greatest and latest inventions that have benefited first-generation students during college is living-learning communities. Living-learning communities are communities where students are grouped together based off of similarities of some sort (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). For example, some institutions have STEM major living-learning communities where everyone who lives in that area is a science major. Now many campuses are creating first-generation living learning communities. Within these communities there are faculty and staff dedicated to helping these students adjust to living on campus. These communities plan and execute programs tailored to these students’ specific needs and interest. The staff living in this area is required to be there for these students at all times, answer their questions, and help them with whatever they need.

Students have shared that by living in these communities and being able to interact with individuals who are just like them has helped them feel more welcome and more at home (Engle et al., 2006). These living learning communities help with the transition and retention of first-generation college students. By building that sense of community, students are more likely
to get involved and be extremely active in student life on campus. Some of these students eventually continue on to be student leaders within other departments on campus (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017).

Conclusion

First generation college students face unique challenges and often need support in ways that other students do not. While educators work towards making these students feel more at home on their campus, there is still much work that needs to be done. While there has been much research on what educators and administrators believe these students need in order to succeed and perform better in the classroom, there is one thing that is often missing in the research and that is the student’s voice. Allowing students to share their personal experiences and what they desire to see on their campus will bring forth a more fruitful change. When making decisions for first-generation college students, their voices should be heard and their opinions should be prioritized. Doing this can possibly bring forth an increase in first generation student retention, higher test scores, better grades, more college applications, more degrees earned, and more students prepared to transition into their careers after college.
References


