

## First Generation College Students

A guide to mentoring: Encouraging Student involvement

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In recent decades, a growing percentage of the population in higher education institutions in the United States is students who are the first in their family to attend college. These students, who are currently referred to as first generation college students (FGCS), often bring into their college experience many unique positive traits, such as a strong sense of determination and awareness of the privilege of acquiring a higher education (Chen, 2005; Choy 2001; Duggan 2002). However, FGCS also encounter a greater number of challenges than do their counterparts whose parents hold college degrees (Kuh, 2005). As higher education professionals have become more aware of the entry of FGCSs, an increasing amount of time has been focused on pinpointing the greatest needs and challenges that these students face.

In comparison to their continuing generation college counterparts, first generation college students may have limited financial resources and less ability to be involved on campus (Lohfink, 2005). In large part, this is due to their greater investment of time off campus as they strive to support themselves and their families. Also, first generation college students may be less involved in extra-curricular campus life because their parents, who did not attend college, were unable to pass down common expectations of higher education culture to their children. A third reason these students may be less interested in spending time on campus outside of class, is because they are more focused on gaining a degree for career purposes rather than obtaining theoretical majors (Lundberg, 2007; Oldfeld, 2007). Within this workshop four common areas of difficulty for FGCS will be targeted: family relationships, financial issues, study skills and time management, and an understanding of the campus environment.

Family and parents are unfamiliar with this culture of higher education. Consequently this places FGCS at a disadvantage. It is important to maintain or establish a healthy relationship with his/her parent(s). Their parent(s) might not fully understand the new lifestyle of the student;

as a result this can affect the student's development during college (Johnson, 2004; Menezes, 2005). Additionally, they have trouble in their first year managing their time between work, family, school and social life (White, 2005). In addition, these students may not have come into college as equipped with effective study habits as students whose parents did attend college. Though noted, college prep work, such as SAT scores and grade point average, was a weak indicator of success in college (Chen, 2005).

First generation college students often have troubles navigating financial territory of higher education: FAFSA, student loan and grant application, work study. This often is a source of great anxiety for the students and a deterrent to continuing on in hopes of achieving the higher goal of a degree. They are unfamiliar with the language and process and often misinformed. Lastly FGCS have difficulty adapting to the culture and environment of the university. Navigating the campus and understanding the resources available to you are both challenges.

Supporting FGCS in this transition becomes pertinent in retention and college success (Knight, 2006). Research has revealed that one effective method to engage FGCSs in the campus life and support retention and success is to place them with staff and faculty mentors. This model of mentoring was implemented at Portland State University and found in the UCLA Model program; together they serve as the framework for this workshop. Based upon Role theory, the researchers recognized we act out of socially defined roles made up of cultural norms, duties, behaviors and expectations. This is often termed role theory. Research has shown that students with a higher mastery of role theory are more likely to succeed (Collier, 2006). Consequently FGCS have a low mastery of role theory. FGCS are unfamiliar with the expectations of their role in college and unfamiliar with the language and culture (Grant, 2004; Knight, 2006). They find it difficult to adjust and learn the many expectations and roles present in higher education.

As mentors we step in and help in the difficult transition providing support, challenge and vision (Daloz, 1999). We create clear learning goals and expectations for our students in the areas of finances, family relations, time management/study skills, and campus environment (Johnson, 2007). The mission as their mentor is to hold them accountable, ask questions, and validate their ability to succeed in a new environment.

These mentors, who are purposefully selected, meet regularly with the FGCSs to offer emotional and academic support and to provide tools and resources that enable FGCSs to succeed in college. The purpose of this particular workshop is to prepare college student affairs professionals who will be establishing mentoring relationships with some FGCSs in a private, faith-based, liberal arts university. The attendees will be educated on issues and struggles particular to the FGCSs college experience, and will be challenged to familiarize their mentees with the services and activities available to them on campus. In addition, the workshop will help the mentors understand how to better inform their mentees in key areas such as maintaining healthy relationships, establishing realistic academic and personal goals, gaining effective study habits, and navigating financial issues.

### Annotated Bibliography

Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, 297-308.

Astin's theory of student involvement not only describes the considerable findings from previous research on student development, but also serves as a tool for educators on designing effective learning environments. Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in college experiences, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. According to this theory, the greater the student's involvement in college, the more they will learn and develop.

Chen, S., & Carroll, C. D. (2005). *First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at Their College Transcripts* (NCES 2005-171). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

This research generates knowledge about first generation college students. In order to examine the majors and course taking patterns of first generation college students and to compare other peers whose parents went to college, this report uses data from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88). The findings contribute to earlier research about first generation college students.

Choy, S. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment*. (NCES Statistical report 2001-126). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Choy summarizes the findings from the recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) about the experience of high school graduates and postsecondary students whose parents did not have college experience. According to this research, first generation college students come to campus with disadvantage in areas such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support in college preparation from parents and schools, and family income. As a result, many of these students find it more challenging to obtain a college degree.

Collier, P. J. and Morgan, D. L. , 2006-08-10 "Students First Mentoring Project: Using Role-theory to Improve Low-income, First Generation Student Retention" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal Convention Center, Montreal, Quebec, Canada Online <PDF>*. 2009-02-04 from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p103189\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p103189_index.html)

This article was a synopsis of a program at Portland State University. This program used role theory as a basis to develop a program for first generation students. In order to establish a language and understand college culture, students needed a role model. Those students coming in who had an understanding of the role as a student were more likely to succeed and complete their degree.

Daloz, L., (1999) *Mentor: guiding the journey of adult learners* San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Laront Daloz examines the role of a mentor and teacher in shaping the learning environments for adults. Daloz recognizes adult learners on a transformative journey; there are barriers to their development and growth. Mentorship is seen as complex therefore mentors must be skilled and intentional in their relationships. Clear guidelines and resources are provided.

Duggan, M. (2002). The effects of social capital on the first to-second-year persistence of first-generation college students. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 63 (03), 188. (UMI No. AAT 3045365)

This research shows the role that social capital plays in first to-second-year persistence of first generation college students. Also, the study examines how race and ethnicity are related to initial levels of capital. Thus, the results address that certain populations, including Hispanics, have lower levels of valued forms of social capital than their peers.

Grant-Vallone, E., Reid, K., Umali, C. & Pohlert, E. (2004). An analysis of the effects of self-esteem, social support, and participation in student support services on students' adjustment and commitment to college. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 5(3), 255-274.

The authors suggest that a key way to ensure first generation college student (FGC) retention, success, and comfort on college campuses is to “increase supportive relationships...through counseling and support services.” They cite specific programs that have been successful in achieving this goal, such as Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Faculty Mentoring Program (FMP). This research is helpful for

student affairs and faculty mentors who are eager to help FGCs transition into college life.

Johnson, H.E. (2004). Educating Parents About College Life. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vol. 50, Iss. 18; p. B.11

This article is about parent programs that are being established by different institutions to help parents understand college life. Johnson also states that parents are important in a student's life and that colleges should be aware of their importance, take into consideration the role they play and affirm the family's relationships.

Johnson, B.W. (2007) *On being a mentor: a guide for higher education faculty*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publisher.

Johnson argues that faculty must be intentional in seeking out mentees in order to encourage development in the student and to continue an ethical standard in higher education. There are guidelines and clear objectives in the relationship that are fostered and the learning environments of the classroom. Johnson also provides assessment and evaluation material, an important element in effective mentoring.

Knight, K. (2006). First-generation College Students: Dealing With the Transition. Retrieved March 2009-from the *Achieve Solution*

<https://www.achievementsolutions.net/achievementsolutions/en/Content.do?contentId=10652>

In this article Knight explains about getting to the issues that first generation college students face along with their parents. Knight also describes what steps both parents and students can take to get through the process of college and getting their diploma.

Kuh, G.D., Pike, G.R. (2005) First-and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development. *The Journal of Higher Education*, (76, 3)

Lohfink, M.M., Paulsen, M.B. (2005) Comparing the Determinants of Persistence for First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, (46, 4)

The authors state their research method and goals in understanding the factors that contribute to the persistence in college. They say that few research as examined the persistence behaviors. They define variables and behaviors that positively enforce retention and perform statistical tests to determine differences between students. The authors conclude that work study, social life, and grant aid had a positive influence on retention.

Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, Miller. (2007). First-generation status and student race/ethnicity as distinct predictors of student involvement and learning. *NASPA Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 57-62; 73-77.

In order to identify unique effects of student race, ethnicity and first generation college attendance on involvement and learning, this research uses a national sample of seven student race/ethnicity distinct groups (n=643 per group). Thus, this study finds that first generation students had a positive effect on student learning, but a negative effect on

involvement. Effective programming implications are suggested for first generation students and those of various races and ethnicities.

McConnell, P. J. (2000). What community colleges should do to assist first-generation students. *Community College Review*, 28(3), 75-87.

McConnell, in this article, defines first generation college students (FGC) and addresses effective ways for community colleges to help these students be successful. He finds that the most common definition of FGCs is that their parents had no college experience. Institutions of higher education, according to the literature, can best help these students through programs and services that provide personal connections and support, and by engaging them in classroom experience that will connect the students with the campus.

Menezes, M. D. (2005). Advisors and parents: Together building stronger advising relationships.

Retrieved -insert today's date- from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* Web site:

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Advisors-Parents.htm>

Menezes discusses the impact academic advising has in the life of first generation college students today. He states goals that the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) requires and believes it is important for advisors to share with parents. He

also informs qualities about the different roles, the role of the academic advisor, the student's role, and the parent's role and how they all are different.

Oldfeld, K. (2007). Humble and hopeful: Welcoming first generation poor and working class students to college. *About Campus*, January- February, 2-12.

This author presents reports of successful first generation college students who come from financially and academically poor and working- class backgrounds. Four reformations are suggested for effective policy or practice in higher education.

Pascarella, E. T., Edison, M., Nora, A., Hagedorn, L. S., & Terenzini, P. T. (1996). Influences on students' openness to diversity and challenge in the first year of college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67, 174-195.

This research discusses the main factors that impact American students' openness to diversity and challenge during their first year student in college. Also, other important factors for first year college students are reported, such as pre-college openness to diversity and challenge, pre-college academic motivation, student social and nonacademic experiences, and environmental emphasis of the institutions attended.

UCLA Model Program - <http://www.ugeducation.ucla.edu/aap/default.html>

The Academic Advancement Program at UCLA is designed to promote the learning, retention and graduation of historically underserved college students, including first generation college students through tutoring, mentoring, summer bridge programs,

scholarships and developmental events. Programs, such as this are an effective tool to engage first generation college students and connect them with resources to help them attain educational success.

White, W.S. (2005). Students, Parents, Colleges: Drawing the Lines. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vol. 52, Iss. 17; pg. B.16

White focuses on ways parents try to get involved with their students life in college and how as professionals we should explain to them what the boundaries are. The article describes helpful ways to connect with these parents for example, how some schools have already come up with different techniques to get parents involved with their own website and newsletters.