

A difficult time: a transition period from high school to college

[Education](#), [School](#)



Abstract

The transition period from high school to college can be a difficult time especially for those who are first generation students. These students often encounter many challenges when transitioning into college. A great majority of first generation students come from underrepresented backgrounds, which vary by race, ethnicity and/or religion. The issue at hand is that these students are coming into college unprepared and unsure on how to navigate their college experience, which is a cause for red alert to college/university administrators to enhance their support services. The journey to college begins in high school, which is a target period to introduce and educate on the idea of pursuing higher education to more first generation students so that they can become the effective leaders of tomorrow.

Transitional Issues with First Generation College Students

Within recent years, there are more first generation students who are considering college as a option to further advance in their preferred career choice. This desire to pursue higher education is a new experience for these students, which can come at a disadvantage when it comes time to apply. The idea of being the first in the family to go to college can create stress upon the student, which can make the transition to college a lot harder for them going into their senior year in high school. The most difficult aspect for a first generation student is the lack of knowledge of the college enrollment process and not being to able to consult with family members because they are just as lost as the student is in this instance. This leaves the student without any sense of direction and having to rely on their high school

guidance counselor, who wouldn't be as concentrated on one student due to the high volume of student cases they may receive on a daily basis. For first generation students, they view going to college as a way out in order to explore the vast opportunities that await them on campus.

For the most part, the majority of first generation students originate from various racial, cultural and/or religious backgrounds. Some families may have migrated to the United States in order to build financial reform within their household and provide educational opportunities to their children. For immigrants coming into the U. S. during the baby boomer generation, their only way of life was to work in the factory or any other form of manual labor that would help pay the bills and put food on the table. The idea of pursuing a college education was the last thing on their mind as they did not value education as much because to some families, going to work to help out the family is more important than higher education. Within certain cultures, the value of a hard day's work is taught to children at an early age to influence the idea of working when they become of age. While working manual labor is considered as a way of producing income in some cultures, first generation students have an opportunity to break the poverty cycle if given the necessary resources for college accessibility.

Statement of the Problem

First generation college students often face a number of transition issues that originate from high school, which is an important time period to identify a student's career aspirations. The first issue that plagues first generation students at the high school level is not being aware of any deadlines,

application and course prerequisite requirements and other details that is essential to their enrollment into college. Depending on the neighborhood of which the high school is located, there may be limitations to the number of resources available to first generation students seeking guidance in the college enrollment process. Petty (2014) stated that this can be due to the fact that the parents of these students are “ not college graduates and their earning potential is minimal” (p. 258). A student’s socioeconomic status plays a vital role in the accessibility of resources that is available. With the lack of resources and guidance counselors within most high schools, it forces first generation students to have to learn how to navigate the college application process on their own, which can present certain difficulties for them since they would not know how to begin the search in terms of the variables that best fits their needs for college.

Along with lack of knowledge, there is also a lack of test prep programs for students taking the SAT or ACT exam as part of the college application requirements. For first generation students, the SAT could present itself as a challenging aspect of the transition from high school to college. While these standardized tests are used as a form of assessment in correlation to a student’s college application, college administrators must take into the consideration that there are students who are not good at test taking. This is especially the case for first generation students who also originate from low-income families, which means that the amount of test prep services available to them is very limited due to their low socioeconomic status. It leaves these students at a disadvantage when preparing for the SAT and end

up producing low test scores that will end up discouraging the student from applying to college. Test prep for the SAT is very critical to the college application process and yet, for first generation students, it is the most difficult period of transition from high school to college.

Parents play a vital role in a student's college application process by assisting them with the paperwork that needs to be submitted along with the college applications. The problem with first generation college students is that their parents would not be able to provide guidance because they are not aware of the college process themselves. While parents may not be knowledgeable of the college process, they can still be able to "instill in their children the expectation of attending college and can provide encouragement and emotional support" (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). One of the main concerns that parents often bring up is the cost of tuition as well as books and other fees. For Hispanic students, they would be more likely to "be concerned with financial issues while in college" (Reyes & Nora, 2012). This is important to indicate because of the decline of first generation Latino students due to lack of funding and knowledge for college from their parents, who should be informed more about the college application process.

There are also transition issues for first generation college students when they actually make it into the college. The first thing that students will notice is the high academic expectations that they must achieve in order to excel in college. In regards to the academic and social adjustment of first generation students, these students "perceive themselves to be less successful adjusting to the academic demands of college than non-first-generation first-

year residents of the same subgroup". (Jean, 2010) Students will often feel very intimidated by the coursework and feel overwhelmed by their classes. First generation students entering their first year in college often face bigger challenges in terms of adjusting to the social and academic components of the college experience.

In addition to the high academic expectations of college, there is also the aspect of the student and professor interactions within the classroom, which is also a transitional issue that can arise for first generation college students. When a new student enters a college classroom for the first time, they begin to notice that the classrooms are much larger with the professor in the front of the classroom. For a professor to manage a classroom size of over 50 students at a time, it would leave the student to feel intimidated to approach the professor for any course-related questions. Wang (2014) states that facilitating academic and social integration among their students can be "particularly challenging when university personnel work with student populations who are less likely to stay in college and persist to graduation" (p. 65). It is important for college instructors to play more of an active role in the student's academic development as well as provide guidance to support services on campus, which would be beneficial to first generation college students. The student's first interaction with their professor is very vital in their academic success as well as their professional development if a great rapport is established.

The first year of college for first generation students can be a challenging period especially when attempting to integrate them into the college

experience. When it comes to getting more students involved on campus, it would be difficult to integrate first generation students into the campus community within their first year because they are just beginning to adjust to college. Woosley & Shepler (2011) stated that in addition to focusing on involvement, research indicates the benefits of “ collaborative partnerships to address students’ needs” (p. 711). For most first generation students, their only goal is to focus on their academics as well as adjusting to the social environment of college within their first year. Due to the lack of direction in the college journey for first generation students, it is necessary for college administrators to implement intentional programming designed to integrate this student population into the campus-wide community.

Implications

The transitional issues that first generation students face upon entering college create an impact for college administrators in various ways. The first thing that these administrators take into consideration is the student retention rates of their first generation population. If colleges are losing students, this would mean that there is a lack of academic, financial and/or support services geared to service first generation students. According to Banks-Santilli (2014), the state of first generation college students in today’s American colleges and universities has “ worsened due to the skyrocketing costs of higher education” (p. 2). It is essential for colleges/universities to create innovate strategies that will assist in the retention of first generation students.

Along with student retention, there is also the concern of professional development for first generation students. Prior to coming to college, most first generation students have never been exposed to professionalism and navigating it at the college level will present its difficulties when it comes time to apply for internships. This is especially the case when dealing with first generation student that come from different ethnic backgrounds. For first-generation African American male college students, it would be essential for career counselors working with these students to understand the “ experiences of African American men in society may contribute to an improvement in their career preparation and development during their college years” (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, Holbert-Quince, 2010). The professional development of first generation students is vital to their success upon graduation and moving onto their desired career field.

Aside from academics and professional development, we also must take into consideration the student’s leadership development. Coming into college, all first generation students have an idea of their career path but are not aware of certain leadership opportunities that are available to them on campus. There is not enough leadership programs provided on colleges/universities that cater to providing first generation students with opportunities to develop on key leadership skills that can be transferable into the job market. The goal of college is to convert students into leaders no matter the ethnic, cultural or religious background. To address this issue, it is recommended for administrators to create more leadership programs that cater to developing first generation students in the future leaders of tomorrow.

First generation students will constantly rely on support services to help navigate through their college experience. It is suggested that college institutions should “ support FGCS by providing faculty training and augmenting student support services” (Garrison & Gardner , 2012). Students should be made aware of the resources that are available to them at all times in order to ensure that they are taking full advantage of their time and resources on campus. Jenkins et al. (2013) states that “ social support might be more important for distress reduction than for specific academic behaviors” (p. 132). It is because of these health concerns that more colleges/universities should be advocating for first generation students to utilize their support services in order to create a healthy well-being both mentally and emotionally. The support services that are provided to the first generation student population are essential to the success of the students in terms of college completion and career readiness.

Conclusion

While first generation college students will continue to endure transitional issues, there are a variety of ways of which both high schools and colleges can help to reduce the stress of transition for both students and parents. Since the transition to college starts in high school, this is the important time period to address certain issues that first generation students may have about applying to college. The first suggestion is to create a college readiness course or seminar and make it part of the curriculum. Whether a student is a first generation or not, all students will benefit from learning about the college process and by making it a part of the curriculum, it forces them to engage into conversations about college and their career

aspirations. By making the curriculum more intentional to discussing college goals, the students will look to explore their options after high school graduation more in depth.

Along with educating the students on the college process, it would be important to include the parents into the conversation. Parents of first generation students should be informed of their role in the college application process. It would be essential to create a special workshop designed for parents of first generation students to help discuss the college application in great detail. By informing parents of the college application process, they are able to assist their student in completing the necessary paperwork for their application. The goal is to educate the entire family on the college process so that the next generations of students are ready to tackle college head on.

Test prep services for students are hard to come by for first generation students who have low socioeconomic status. This is why it would help to include the local community into the discussion of college preparation for its students. By collaborating with the local community to provide little to no cost test prep services, it helps to bring the community more together in the efforts to provide the graduating high school seniors with SAT prep courses and/or books. This initiative would also help to create a culture of academic excellence with the community and will also inspire other first generation students within the neighborhood to pursue a college education.

Once the students have entered college, there is still essentially a need for social support to help navigate first generation students into their first year of college. For this purpose, it is suggested to possibly create a mentoring program geared to all first generation students. The idea of the mentoring program would be to pair a first-year first-generation student with a sophomore or upperclassmen first-generation student. The objective of the mentoring program would be to create mentoring relationships with students who can relate to one another. The upperclassmen would be able to share with the first-year student on how they navigated their first year in college. This mentoring program should be implemented on college/universities in order for first generation students to feel right at home.