Support Programs for First-Generation College Students: A Review and a Call to Action

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The recent increase in access to higher education has afforded many more first-generation college (FGC) students the opportunity to attend college. In many cases, these students are not properly served by the colleges they attend, as the support programs that do exist on college campuses typically require FGC students to be either economically or academically disadvantaged. In order to properly serve all FGC students, it is necessary to examine their experiences from a holistic view. By analyzing all components of their college experience, universities can begin to better serve FGC students through a combination of internal support mechanisms and programming initiatives. A review of the literature on FGC students and programs that serve them will be presented and implications for practice will be explored.

By providing additional funding sources and targeted support programs, government incentives and summer bridge programs have recently allowed colleges and universities to open their doors to many more first-generation college (FGC) students. These FGC students come to the college campus with expectations, needs, and goals that are different than their second-generation counterparts. Although colleges and universities welcome these students to their campuses and employ national, state, and institutional support programs that provide them with assistance, many institutions are not fully prepared to support these students academically and socially. Student affairs practitioners must continue to strive to meet the individual needs of these first-generation students.

In order to understand the needs of this population, it is important to first acknowledge who these first-generation students are. For the purposes of this article, FGC students will be defined as those who are the first member of their immediate family to attend college. Additionally, although many FGC students hold both minority and low-income status, it is necessary to realize that not all FGC students enter college from these nontraditional, disadvantaged backgrounds. Some students do enter with cultural capital, having come from a household with a high socio-economic status or a family whose race or ethnic-

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Multiple support programs currently exist on college campuses for FGC students. For example, the federal TRIO program, New York State’s Higher Educational Opportunity Program and Sam Houston State University’s Project CONNECT all provide assistance to FGC students; however, most of them do not meet the needs of these non-minority FGC students.

Student affairs practitioners must also realize that outside influences attributed to their backgrounds may affect non-minority FGC students’ educational experiences. When discussing non-minority FGC students, Orbe (2004) stated “the privilege associated with being male, European American, middle/upper class, and within the traditional age for college students enables FGC student status to remain on the margin of their self concepts” (p. 144). These atypical FGC students may not realize that they are included in this FGC minority group and may be at a disadvantage during college because of their privilege in other aspects of their lives. These students still need assistance and should not be overlooked as part of the FGC student population. Furthermore, student affairs practitioners must make strides to ensure their inclusion in this group.

In order to understand all types of FGC students, student affairs practitioners must do their best to examine these students’ backgrounds from a holistic point of view. What knowledge about college life do they bring with them to campus? What are their academic and non-academic experiences during college and how do they differ from those of their second-generation counterparts? How do these experiences affect their educational outcomes? The answers to these questions will allow us to better understand the college experience of a FGC student and allow us to provide better resources for them on the college campus.

Existing Research on First-Generation College Students

Life Before College

York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) studied the differences in knowledge about college between first and second-generation students. Their research suggests that “second-generation college students perceived more support from their families for attending college than did first-generation students” (p.120). With this support, parents of second-generation students are also able to provide information about college life to their children. Conversely, because first-generation students have not been able to receive this insight, they “may find college more stressful than do second-generation college students” (p. 120) and they may not be able to efficiently plan their educational goals because “they may have less knowledge of or fewer experiences with college-related activities” (p. 120). Consequently, their perception of the college campus and activities associated with the college experience may differ from the perception of second-generation college students.

Life During College

It has been shown that FGC students arrive to college campuses with different
histories and expectations than those of second-generation status. Once on campus, FGC students have been found to value aspects of college life differently and, in turn, require different methods to aid in their college adjustment. For example, Hertel (2002) found that intellectualism was the main factor in keeping FGC students engaged in and connected with the university during the first year of college. However, Brooks-Terry (1988) found that second-generation college students perceive college as more of a social process and MacDermott et al. (1987) found that second-generation college students place great value on extracurricular activities in college (as cited in Hertel, 2002). To clarify, FGC students may utilize and learn more from academic pursuits and the activities associated with them, while second-generation students may benefit more from the social aspects of college.

Continuing with this idea, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) also found that first-generation students academically benefited more from immersion in academic and classroom activities than second-generation students did. After evaluating both FGC students and second-generation college students during their second and third year of college, the researchers found that more strides had been made by FGC students in areas such as critical thinking, writing skills, and openness to diversity. Pascarella et al. believe that this was found to be true “because these [academic] experiences act in a compensatory manner and thus contribute comparatively greater incremental increases in first-generation college students’ stock of cultural capital” (p. 280). Thus, through greater participation in academic activities, FGC students begin to level the academic playing field between themselves and second-generation students.

How Life Before and During College Affects Life After College

Hahs-Vaughn (2004) found that the college experiences of FGC students, both in and out of the classroom have an influence on their educational outcomes greater than their preconceived notions. In this case, preconceived notions about college held more influence on the educational outcomes of second-generation college students. Because FGC students may not enter college with as many expectations for educational outcomes, they must rely on their actual college experiences to push them toward success after college. “Likewise, for [second]-generation students, the influence of a family that is familiar with postsecondary study has a more substantial impact on their college outcomes than what happens within the college environment” (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004, p. 494). It is important to note these differences between the two groups of students because although experiences in and out of the classroom during college are important to both groups, FGC students’ success in college is significantly more dependent on these types of class experiences.

To further substantiate this argument, Pascarella et al. (2004) found that, though they were less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities than second-generation students, FGC students greatly benefited from their college involvement. For FGC students, academic and cognitive development are influenced by nonacademic experiences to an extent similar to the influence of academic and
course-related experiences. The research also revealed that through their extracurricular involvement, FGC students achieved greater academic success and higher order cognitive thinking as compared to second-generation students. Pascarella et al. found that “the social capital gained through extracurricular and peer involvement during college may be a particularly useful way for first-generation students to acquire the additional cultural capital that helps them succeed and benefit cognitively” (p. 278). Pascarella et al. were quick to point out that not all extracurricular activities will create this effect for first-generation students. Activities that take students off-campus, such as volunteer work, employment, and intercollegiate athletics, negatively influenced the adjustment of FGC students.

Many FGC students come to the college campus with little familial support and understanding of the college experience. Once on campus, FGC students tend to focus on, and benefit more from, their involvement in academic pursuits. However, these students also benefit from the social aspects of college life. When taking all of this into consideration, student affairs practitioners must remember that the college experience has a greater effect on FGC students’ educational outcomes and success after college than on second-generation students. Colleges and universities must begin to closely examine their campuses to ensure these students have a meaningful college experience that enables them to be successful beyond their collegiate years. To begin, let us look at established academic and financial support programs on university campuses.

Existing Support for First-Generation College Students

A number of formal programs exist at the national, state, and institutional levels to support FGC students at colleges and universities. However, to utilize the services of these programs, FGC students must typically fulfill several demographic requirements. By including these specifications for participation, these support programs omit a crucial part of the first-generation population, particularly those who do not have a low socioeconomic status or are not academically low-achieving students. Although many different programs exist, for the purposes of this paper, one program at each the national, state, and institutional level, will be reviewed.

National Level - TRIO Program

The United States Department of Education created the TRIO program to increase access to higher education for disadvantaged students. This plan includes “six outreach and support programs targeted to serve and assist low-income, FGC students, and students with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs” (United States Department of Education, Federal TRIO Program, n.d.). Specifically, the two programs in place for higher education programs are the Student Support Services Program and the TRIO Dissemination Partnership Program. While the Student Support Services Program focuses on the individual student, the Dissemination Partnership Program provides support to “enable TRIO projects
to work with other institutions and agencies, that are serving low-income, first-generation college students but that do not have TRIO grants” (United States Department of Education, TRIO dissemination partnership, n.d.). Instead of focusing on the individual student, the Dissemination Partnership Program provides support to “enable TRIO projects to work with other institutions and agencies, that are serving low-income, first-generation college students but that do not have TRIO grants” (United States Department of Education, TRIO dissemination partnership, n.d.). While both of these programs provide opportunities for a subpopulation of FGC students, those who are not low-income or low-achieving are not served by these programs.

*State Level - HEOP Program*

New York State created the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) to meet the needs of disadvantaged students studying in New York. The HEOP program targets students who typically fall in the lower half of their class’s academic rankings and score well below average on college entrance exams. Initiatives used to assist these students in their transition to college include “testing, pre-freshman summer programs, counseling, tutoring, coursework and financial assistance” (New York State Education Department, 2004). In order to participate in this program, a student must be a New York State resident, be educationally and economically disadvantaged, and be a high school graduate. Again, although this program provides great services for those who qualify, FGC students who are not academic low-achievers or economically disadvantaged are not able to participate in this program and, in turn, may not receive adequate support in their transition to college.

*Institutional Level - Project CONNECT*

Project CONNECT (Creating Opportunities for Navigating and Easing through College Transitions) is a program executed by Sam Houston State University, a doctoral intensive university located in Huntsville, Texas. This program allows low income, first-generation students to “realize the possibilities and opportunities of higher education” (Edmonson, Fisher & Christensen, 2003, p. 8). The objectives of the program focus on persistence, academic performance, and graduation. Research has shown that Project CONNECT “facilitate[s] a more supportive climate of institutions for students and assist[s] students who would like to pursue a career in education” (Edmonson, et al., 2003, p. 8). Those invited to participate in the program are targeted at the beginning of their enrollment at Sam Houston State and are encouraged to partake in different services established throughout campus, including tutoring and mentoring services and discounted tickets to cultural events. Similar to the national- and state-level programs, this institutional-level program does not support non-minority FGC students who are neither low-income nor low-achieving.

**Implications for Practice**

Currently, there are several types of support programs in place for which FGC
students may qualify. Most of these programs are constructed to help only a subset of FGC students who are also disadvantaged in other aspects of their lives. Such programs mandate that a recipient of support must also be from a low socioeconomic status or be a low academic achiever. As a result, services such as TRIO, HEOP and Project CONNECT do not assist the FGC students from an otherwise non-disadvantaged background (i.e., those from the ethnic majority or high socioeconomic status) who may need assistance and support learning more about what college will be like and what experiences they should expect to have during their time in college. Therefore, in order to reach all FGC students, student affairs professionals must learn from the research findings previously discussed. To address the needs of all FGC students beyond those with minority status, students must first be supported in their transition to college in order to effectively engage them in the life of the college.

On Campus Support for First-Generation College Students

The transition into college can be difficult for any student, but first-generation students have less knowledge about the college experience than their second-generation peers (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991) and therefore require even more support and guidance throughout their adjustment period. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) acknowledged this need for support in their transition theory which claimed that social support, consisting of intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities, was among the four major factors that affect a person’s transition. Each of these factors helps to create a network of social support for those in transition. The greater the stability of the support, the easier the transition is for the individual.

The research previously discussed has shown differences between first and second-generation students in social support relationships of family units and networks of friends (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Hertel (2002) notes that second-generation college students have more on-campus social support and off-campus familial support during their transition into college than first-generation students. It is important to remember that these supportive relationships differ greatly among first and second-generation college students and, in turn, affect the transition for these groups differently. When addressing FGC students, it may be necessary for student affairs practitioners to take on a greater supportive role.

Although these social support networks are important for FGC students, they also need support from faculty, advisors, and peers to help them navigate college co-curricular activities. The one-on-one support that they can receive during college will substantiate their college experiences and lead to greater success for them after college. Whether in residence life, student activities, or academic advising, it is important for student affairs professionals to remember the positive effect they can have on students. A simple, casual conversation can provide the necessary support a first-generation student needs on any given day.
Programming

Although previous researchers have demonstrated that college adjustment differs between first and second-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004), Hertel’s (2002) research details specific reasons for this differentiation. He found that FGC students focused on intellectual life during their first year in college, while second-generation college students focused on socialization to aid in their transition. Therefore, student affairs practitioners should consider both first and second-generation college students’ needs and organize different programs, events, and support systems to most effectively foster their transition to college.

Though FGC students value intellectualism in their college experience, it has also been shown that their engagement in academic and social activities outside of the classroom contributes to their college adjustment (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). In order to create beneficial and successful programs for first-generation students, student affairs practitioners must provide students with a broad array of experiences so that all FGC students may have the opportunity to transition successfully to college. Pascarella et al. (2004) called on the collaboration of academic and student affairs offices to address this issue. The researchers believed “the implication [of their research] is for greater programmatic and structural integration and for broader thinking and greater collaboration across structural boundaries when ‘learning experiences’ and policies are being developed” (Pascarella et al., p. 279). By incorporating both academic and social ideas into student programming, student affairs professionals will be able to address both the wants (intellectualism) and the needs (social activities) of FGC students.

Based on suggestions from Pascarella et al. (2004), it would be beneficial for FGC students to attend social activities focused on academic ideas or events. In addition to becoming involved in academic honor or professional organizations, FGC students could participate in unique and creative extracurricular activities. For example, bringing academic speakers to campus, hosting department “social hours” and creating major-specific intramural sports teams will encourage the intermingling of first-generation students with others who have similar academic interests. Such events may encourage first-generation students to speak candidly about academic plans and educational outcomes in a relaxed social setting and will also establish a greater connection between students with similar academic interests. Programs such as these can be used to engage FGC students by focusing on intellectualism while also creating a social outlet for them to grow.

In addition, because the educational outcomes of first-generation students are so strongly dependent on their academic and non-academic college experiences, it is important to take a holistic approach to student affairs when working with these students. It is necessary for student affairs practitioners to use their knowledge of all of the variables that these first-generation college students value in order to most effectively create specific outlets for their involvement and integration into college life.
Conclusion

In summary, it is important for student affairs practitioners to address the needs of all types of FGC students and to recognize that all FGC students do not necessarily come from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds. Support programs have been put into place on college and university campuses that afford many FGC students the opportunity to excel academically. However, many of these programs require a student to be either low-achieving or come from a low income household, leaving out a portion of the FGC population. It is necessary for informal support systems, such as those suggested earlier, to be in place on college campuses in order to fully address the needs of this student sub-population. Additionally, within these support programs, efforts must be made to provide programming that combines academic and social activities, as research has shown activities that include both are the most effective for FGC students. By providing unique and creative programs, student affairs practitioners can successfully assist FGC students in their transition to college.

References


