The First Generation Experience

Challenges for First-Generation Students

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What is a First-Generation student?

◇ Parents or guardians of the student do not have a college degree, usually the Bachelor's degree

◇ Opposite of "continuing generation," where parents graduated college

First Generation Students at UCF

- 24% of the UCF undergraduate population is first generation

- No idea about graduate students, but advanced degree attainment for first generation status is:

  - Master's: 3% (parents no college), 5% (parents some college)

  - Doctoral: 1% (parents no college), 3% (parents some college)

First Generation Challenges: Academic Preparation and Persistence

- Less support in:
  - Academic preparation
  - Planning for college
  - Expectation of college attendance
- Less likely to:
  - Attend selective schools
  - Perform well academically
  - Have confidence in abilities
  - Take humanities and fine arts degrees
  - Perform well in STEM and communication
  - Finish in four years
  - Graduate

Challenges: Social Capital

◈ Unfamiliar with the norms and expectations of college life

◈ Feel they must work harder then peers

◈ Continuing generation students more likely to:

  ◇ Have supportive parents

  ◇ Have access to professionals in different fields

  ◇ Have a mastery of the student role

  ◇ Meet faculty expectations of a student

Challenges: Internal

- ◈ Impostor syndrome

- ◈ Living in two worlds, being a stranger in both

- ◈ Separation from home world

- ◈ Code-switching

- ◈ More depression and anxiety but less usage of counseling facilities

Challenges: External

- ◈ More likely to have to work

- ◈ More likely to graduate with debt

- ◈ Less likely to:

  - ◇ live on campus

  - ◇ have time for extracurricular activities

  - ◇ apply for a graduate degree

Challenges for first-generation students with low socioeconomic status

◈ Those from working class backgrounds face additional challenges

◈ Can be up to 2/3 of the first-generation population in a particular year

◈ There is a "leaky pipeline" of low-income students at all levels of education

◈ Intersections with ethnicity and gender

Challenges: Social Capital

◈ Greater discrepancy between social capital and the norms and expectations of college

◈ Middle class households have higher levels of:

  ◇ parental participation

  ◇ college preparation through taking particular courses in high school, preparing for specific colleges, and believing they will attend college

  ◇ high intensity high schools, which lead to higher college persistence

Challenges: Internal

◈ Class conformity and "passing"

◈ Straddling the line between two cultures

◈ Low-income culture could include fear of debt, awareness of making a living for the family, and a strong work ethic (and a perception this is not shared by peers)

◈ Feelings of:

    ◇ anger

    ◇ frustration

    ◇ isolation

    ◇ marginalization

Challenges: External

◈ Financial insecurity:

    ◇ Most have to work at least part time

    ◇ Higher levels of debt

    ◇ More likely to drop out (cost #1 reason)

◈ Heavier family responsibilities

◈ Lack temporal capital (on-campus or faculty time)

◈ Less geographical mobility

Challenges: Systemic

- ◈ Universities reinforce the cultural norms of the middle and upper class and these students lack "cultural literacy"

- ◈ Some fear a separation from their culture of origin

- ◈ Microaggressions may be a norm (poor people are stupid, "welfare moms," "white trash," etc.)

- ◈ Institutions may not recognize the status or have programming related to it

- ◈ More likely to personally experience discrimination

- ◈ Lack of group identity, political mobilization, or formal academic programs on class

First Generation in Academia

- Additional hurdles for those who attend graduate school

- "Accumulated disadvantage"

- No ability to gather information from family and friends on graduate school norms or connections to future careers

Challenges: Internal

⬦ Assumption that class status no longer matters if a college graduate

⬦ Feelings of being an outsider, harder to fit into institutional culture

⬦ Graduate school culture is *less* familiar and already includes "systemic isolation"

⬦ Less likely to have an identity based on intellectual ability and accomplishment; may lack confidence and see themselves as phonies

⬦ Values of graduate school (pure research, heavy theory) may be antithesis of values

  ⬦ First-generation graduates tend to choose real-world topics, applied degrees

  ⬦ Doctorates: underrepresented in humanities, overrepresented in education and social work

Challenges: Identity

◈ Though it may be difficult for undergraduate students, higher education is temporary; in academia, higher education may be perceived as "life's work"

◈ Status incongruity and dissonance

   ◇ Worries at work: fitting in with language, culture, attire

   ◇ Worries at home: family may not trust academy, may see person as different, stuck up, too good for us, out of reach; "you can never really go home again"

   ◇ Status *is* likely to change – class status may raise in a single generation

Challenges: External

◈ Financial stress, often not funded because may have to work full time and attend part time

◈ Continuing lack of temporal capital and community building with graduate cohort

◈ Continued sense that one's experience is different from peers

Best Practices

- Faculty awareness of this population's characteristics

- Faculty mentoring and encouragement

- Writing assignments that examine values

- Learning communities including those with multicultural agendas

- Integration into life of the institution, social networks

- Academic services: make contact with students, don't only advertise services

- Don't work on deficit model but recognize strengths, use nuanced definition of academic success

Oldfield (2007)

1. Develop support systems for poor and working-class first-generation students

2. Address classism in the Academy

3. Diversify the social class origins of faculty

4. Expand the social class origins of students

What exists at UCF now

◈ Undergraduates:

⬥ First Generation program, Multicultural Academic and Support Services (MASS); First

Generation Awareness Week

⬥ SDES Student Support Services (SSS) TRiO Center, housing federal grants that serve

first-generation, low-income students

◈ Undergraduates who want to attend graduate school:

⬥ Academic Advancement Programs (AAP) including federal McNair Scholars, advising

⬥ Research and Mentoring Program (RAMP) for undergraduate research

◈ Graduate students, faculty, and staff: nothing formal

Questions?

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