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 than 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
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