

Student Population/Overview/Who are they?: First-Generation College Students (FGCS)

- The first-generation label experiences broad application, often appearing within discussions of disadvantaged, at-risk, and nontraditional students (Ilett, 2019).
- TRiO programs determine that first-generation indicates that the student's biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree, often regarded as a baccalaureate (RTI International, 2019) while the Higher Education Act of 1965 contends that in addition, first-generation students are the first in the family to attend college (Ilett, 2019).

Relevant Terms/Definitions

- Nuclear household: The characterization of first-generation students' parents as lacking a four-year degree strictly defines a standard family as two parents and their children and neglects other possibilities and implications of other upbringings (Ilett, 2019).
- Deficit model: Cultural, social, and economic capital deficits have long been associated with FGCS which fails to identify the capital linked to FGCS and their supporters (Sussman, 2020).
- Cultural and social capital: The Community Cultural Wealth Model considers the cultural capital that FGCS possess and the strength and wealth of students at the margin (Yosso, 2005).
- Culture shock: first-generation students may experience dissonance and disorientation because of an unfamiliar culture and set of attitudes presented on the college campus. (Ballard, 2021).
- Organizational identity: In Bettencourt's (2020) study, first-generation students noted that they were only aware of their first-generation identity due to their environment and institutional efforts to amplify this level of identity (Bettencourt et al, 2020).

Historical Background

- Congress passed the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 on January 10, 1944, and signed the GI Bill of Rights on June 22nd, 1944. The GI Bill created opportunities for FGCS to participate in higher education, a space historically designed for wealthy, white men (Servicemen's Readjustment Act, 1944).
- Open Admissions made it possible for any New York City high school graduate to enroll in a City University of New York institution (Lavin, 1969).
- The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 contributed to increases in the diversity of student populations on US college campuses including the parental level of education (Ilett, 2019).

Trends, statistics

- Compared to continuing-education students, first-generation students are 71% more likely to drop out of college in their first year (Pratt et al., 2019 as cited by Glass, L. E., 2022).
- According to NASPA, 24% of FGCS had parents with no postsecondary education, 56% had parents who did not have a bachelor's degree and 59% of the 56% were the first sibling in their family to go to college (RTI International, 2019).
- First-generation students accessed financial assistance services at a greater rate (65%) than students from continuing generations (49%) (RTI International, 2019).

Current issues, concerns, and challenges

- In contrast to some FGCS's personal value systems of interdependence and community, universities frequently promote and value an independence culture.(Sussman, 2020).
- The 2006 Spellings Commission's report described added barriers to access, affordability, and standards of instruction (Ilett, 2019).
- Because of more employment and family responsibilities, first-generation students report lower academic expectations and less faculty involvement (Bettencourt et al, 2020).

Their collegiate experience (social and academic realm, curricular and co-curricular)

- College counselors are essential in FGCS' resource acquisition (Glass, 2022).
- The first-generation identity can be felt more strongly based on the environment the student is present in which can create social distance for FGCS (Bettencourt et al, 2020).
- FGCS experience feelings of culture shock, and inadequacy and struggle with enrollment, financial aid, and the extracurricular process (Ballard, 2021).

- FGCS frequently receive poorer marks, finish fewer credits, and are less likely to complete a program that is intellectually rigorous (Bettencourt et al, 2020).

Issues of Development

- Pre-College Experiences
 - First-generation students tend to have lower socioeconomic statuses, lower degree aspirations, and were less involved in co- and extracurricular activities in high school (Terenzini et al., 1996)
 - Many first-generation students have parents who did not attend college. This can negatively impact students as they feel excluded and invalidated when their peers and professors make assumptions about their parents' educational background and college experience (Ellis et al., 2018).
- Engagement & Sense of Belonging
 - First-generation students tend to be less involved, and therefore, are less likely to integrate diverse experiences that contribute to their learning and intellectual development (Pike & Kuh, 2005)
 - First-generation students report lower sense of belonging at their institutions because of their lived experiences and structural/institutional qualities that disadvantage them (Gopalan & Brady, 2019)

Diversity within the population

- First-generation students are more likely to be female (60.2%) and come from homes where family income is less than \$25,000 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018)
- Although many institutions view FGCS as low-income, many other factors and identities contribute to FGCS status such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, veteran status, and employment (Ilett, 2019)
- “First-generation students are not a monolith, and their needs are as diverse as their backgrounds and experiences.” (Bettencourt et al., p. 272, 2020)

Implications for Higher Education

- Current literature is limited for first-generation students-most research only considers the 4-year undergraduate experience, not the community college or graduate-level experience (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018)
 - Additional research should recognize the intersecting identities that institutions do and do not consider (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).
- First-generation college students at 4-year institutions report lower sense of belonging than other students. This demonstrates the importance of better understanding how first-generation students experience belonging on campus and how institutions can better serve them (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).

Strategies for advising/working with this group

- Institutions should support identity-conscious career exploration for first-generation students that emphasize social-emotional and identity development (Flores, 2021).
- Student affairs professionals need to foster affirming spaces that value the experience of FGCS (Ellis et al., 2019)
- Course curriculum for first-year experience classes should include objectives that promote self-efficacy to support first-generation college students' integration to the institution (Flores, 2021).
- First-generation college students need more support in their overall transition to college and need tools to better prepare them for the integration into academic and social spheres of college life (Flores, 2021).

Recommended Resources

- NASPA Center for First-Generation Student Success (NASPA)
- Online Guide for First-Generation College Students (Benítez, 2020)

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