

The First-Generation Challenge

Aida Rodriguez

Abstract

The term first-generation college student can be defined as a student whose parents or guardians have not received college degrees. First-generation college students face many challenges and encounter factors that can ultimately determine the success or failure of their postsecondary educations. Success is defined as enrolling in college and attaining a college degree. Failure is defined as dropping out of college. The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges and factors that lead to the success or failure of first-generation college students in the Palm Beach County area. A 20 question survey was collected from 40 participants who formed a diverse demographical sample. Study results were unable to support or reject the hypothesis that predicted a low level of college success among first-generation students in the community. The results suggested that the college enrollment of first-generation college students was overall positive but the degree attainment of first-generation students was inconclusive.

The First-Generation Challenge

The experience of being the first in the family to attend college represents many challenges. These challenges include being poorly prepared for college, delaying college entry, attending part-time and discontinuously, withdrawing and repeating courses, earning fewer credits, and dropping out of college. All of this affects the enrollment and graduation rates of students whose parents or siblings never attended college and who find themselves lost in the system of postsecondary education. Questions to be answered include: are first-generation students academically prepared for college; are students who belong to minority groups at a greater disadvantage; are there other demographic variables such as gender, age, or income that affect the college experience of first-generation students; are the families of first-generation students involved in their education; and are there resources available to first-generation students in local and national colleges and universities. It is of importance to identify the academic challenges and social factors that influence the success (enrolling in college and earning a degree) or failure (dropping out of school) of first-generation college students to ensure their postsecondary degree attainment and persistence. Overall, the success of first-generation college students will bring about a well prepared and educated work force.

The academic challenges that first-generation college students face can be categorized into three groups: high school preparation for college, college enrollment and performance, and college persistence and attainment. Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez (2001) found that first-generation students demonstrated to be less prepared for college because of their lower rates of rigorous courses in high school and their lower scores on college entrance exams. The rigor of students' high school curriculum was strongly associated with their college GPA and the amount of remedial coursework they required. In other words, students who throughout high school took

basic courses without being academically challenged were at a great disadvantage when they reached college. Warburton et al. (2001) showed that 93% of students who took rigorous courses were more likely to remain enrolled and work towards a degree, versus 75% of students who did not exceed the core New Basics requirements. The academic rigor of high school courses was also connected to the number of remedial courses that first-generation college students required. Data from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1998 (Chen, 2005) shows that 55% of first-generation students took remedial courses in comparison to 27% of non-first-generation students. The lack of preparedness caused first-generation students to take more remedial courses during their college years than students whose parents held college degrees. Perhaps the greatest setback that first-generation students, who did not take rigorous high school curriculums, encounter is the fact that they are less likely to take college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT and that when they do they score lower than their peers. Scoring low on college entrance exams or not taking them at all can prevent the college enrollment of first-generation students.

The trends in college enrollment and performance of first-generation students can negatively affect their postsecondary education. In the PETS report (Chen, 2005) it was found that first-generation students were more likely to delay postsecondary entry, begin at a vocational or two-year institution, and/or attend part-time and discontinuously. The quality of education offered at two-year institutions does not cause a disadvantage to first-generation college students. In fact, community college students who academically stand above the rest can certainly make the transfer to a four-year institution but what happens to first-generation students who do not know how to navigate the postsecondary education system? Statistics from a study by the Department of Education (Merrow, 2007) show that 35 to 50 percent of potential transfers are

not successful. These students become lost in the confusion and with limited student services available they are prevented from continuing their education at a four-year institution. The fact that first-generation students tend to delay entry and attend irregularly can also significantly diminish their academic potential. Factors that also tend to diminish academic promise include working full time, choosing a business/management major, and lacking an objective. First-generation students picked business and management majors because they were restrained by their weak academic preparation from picking “high skill” fields of study such as science and mathematics. Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2011) found that first-generation students lacked a specific goal or purpose and simply hoped to get a “better job” or a “better future”. This naïve view harms students because they are unable to recognize concrete actions needed to attain a college degree. The lack of an objective increases the dropout rates of first-generation students. In general, first-generation students had lower first-year GPAs than students whose parents had college degrees (2.6 and 2.8 respectively) and were more likely to have taken at least one remedial course during their first year of college in comparison to students whose parents had college degrees (21 percent versus 10 percent) (Warburton et al. 2001). Earning credits in college can be challenging for first-generation students who first have to take supplemental courses to fill the gap that their high school curriculum left. According to the PETS study (Chen, 2005) first-generation students earned an average of 18 credits in their first year, compared with 25 credits earned by non-first-generation students. This lower level of credit achievement could prolong the time to earn a degree and increase the likelihood they will leave college without earning a degree. Chen (2005) also found that first-generation students were five times more likely than non-first-generation students to withdraw or repeat a course throughout their college enrollment. This in result lowered the postsecondary degree attainment and persistence of first-

generation college students since lower rates of repeated and withdrawn classes increase the students' chances of earning degrees.

When it comes to college persistence and attainment, the report by Warburton et al. (2001) showed that first-generation students were less likely to be enrolled continuously or to earn a degree from their initial college than non-first generation students. Overall, first-generation students were less likely than students whose parents had completed college degrees to stay on the persistence track, which is to remain at their initial two-year institution or transfer to a four-year institution. This might hold true for first-generation students who did not exceed the basic curriculum but the findings regarding overachieving first-generation students are more optimistic. The report states that first-generation students who took rigorous coursework in high school were as likely as students whose parents had college degrees to be continuously enrolled, remain on the persistence track, and attain degrees.

Social factors such as race and income level, family involvement, and the resources available influence the success or failure of first-generation college students. A brief look at the statistics shows that first-generation college students are more likely to be part of minority groups, primarily Black and Hispanic individuals, and to come from low income families. Within the Hispanic community only half of college students earn a degree (Ocaña, 2011). Hispanics fall behind other minority groups including African Americans and Asians. Ocaña (2011) found that to provide Hispanic individuals with resources to earn a college degree the Hispanic Scholarship Fund recently launched "Generation 1st Degree," a program that aims to increase the number of Hispanics who hold a degree by 14 million by 2025. This initiative is ambitious and would increase the percentage of Hispanics with degrees to 60%.

The assumption that all first-generation students are low income individuals cannot be made. This is simply because out of 100% of first-generation college students, 18.0% reported family income in the lowest quartile, 56.7% reported family income in the two middle quartiles, and 25.3% reported family income in the highest quartile (Davis, 2010, p.34). It is true that first-generation students tend to be low income students but this is not always the case. However, students who fit both statuses tend to assume responsibilities and financial burdens that non-first-generation students do not have to deal with. Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2011) found that nearly 6 in 10 of first-generation and low income students were left to pay their higher education costs by themselves without any help from their families. About 7 in 10 of those who leave school report that they did not have scholarships or financial aid. Students who have to pay for school by themselves have the need to work to pay tuition costs and make ends meet. Some students are not capable of managing the pressure of juggling long hours at a job and long nights studying. Many ultimately decide to abandon their postsecondary education. Indeed, the lack of financial support can hold first-generation students from completing college but according to Rockler-Gladen (2009) students have to be aware of the availability of scholarships and financial aid to first-generation students that can help them pay for tuition costs.

Parental involvement in the education of first-generation college students proves to be an advantage. Advocates for parental involvement say parents are the individuals who have the greatest influence over their children. When parents are knowledgeable about the educational system they can enhance the retention and graduation of first-generation college students. Davis (2010, p.73-74) claims that many first-generation students are motivated by their families to attend college without any concrete guidance or steps to take yet others find themselves completely alone. Despite having college aspirations for their children, less well-educated and

lower-income parents do not have the resources to advise their children on the college and financial aid search and the application process. Students who face the absence of encouragement and advice from family members are also sometimes deterred from pursuing a college degree. Ryan Sal, a first-generation college student, recognizes that his family did not support his education. He says, “They believed that education was a waste of time” (“Challenges Face,” 2007). Students like Sal are discouraged from attending college by non-supportive families who tend to draw students away from their studies and back home. In contrast, supportive parents who view education as the key to success push their children to attend college. After attending an orientation at her daughter’s community college, Consuelo Arellano, a supportive parent of a first-generation college student in McAllen, Texas, understood the importance of not only encouraging her daughter but also getting involved in her education. It is important for first-generation students to receive adequate guidance and advice from parents because students who are poorly counseled are more likely to delay college entry resulting in an increased probability of dropping out of college.

Colleges and universities across the nation have a variety of resources and services available to first-generation college students. The main reason that institution officials want to know exactly how many of their students are first-generation is because they want to create services and support systems that will increase their persistence and attainment of educations. Some resources available to first-generation students in institutions include but are not limited to freshmen orientation programs, freshman housing, academic advising and mentoring, tutoring and other forms of academic support, summer programs before freshman year to introduce students to college, informational meetings for parents of first-generation college students, and last but not least, campus organizations (Rockler-Gladen, 2009). All of these initiatives are

helpful to first-generation college students; the only thing students have to do to take advantage of these resources is to inquire with an academic advisor. One method that has shown high levels of college retention is “learning communities” (Davis, 2010, p. 52). The typical first-generation college student is faced with family and work obligations that take time away from studying. The “learning community” method provides a balancing act of time for class, work, and family obligations; this method supports the traditional classroom and increases the graduation success of first-generation students. At the local level, Palm Beach State College is part of a federal program that assists first-generation college students and offers a course that has the potential to aid them. From an interview with Henry Ponciano a Career Advisor at the Lake Worth campus Career Center it was learned that the college offers the Student Support Services TRIO (SSS TRIO) Program to assist first-generation college students. SSS TRIO is a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education that provides academic advising, financial assistance, career guidance, and tutoring/mentoring to low income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. The SSS TRIO program at Palm Beach State College and other two-year colleges also helps students transfer to four-year universities. The program serves 170 eligible students from the four campus locations: Lake Worth, Boca Raton, Belle Glade, and Palm Beach Gardens. In regards to academic courses, a specific course designed for first-generation students was not found, however, first-generation students can benefit from the course titled “Strategies for College Success”. According to a syllabus the course teaches how to utilize effective study techniques, manage time effectively, and identify and state personal goals. Despite not being exclusively for first-generation college students this class can prepare students with essential college skills. Any student can benefit from this class but considering that first-

generation students are at a disadvantage when it comes to studying habits and time management skills this course could significantly improve their academic performance.

Based on the secondary research about first-generation college students and considering factors such as the high rate of high school dropouts in the local public school system, Palm Beach County is one of the 25 counties with the highest high school dropout rates (“Dropout Epicenters,” 2011), the great racial and cultural diversity of the communities, and the disproportionate distribution of wealth between towns and cities in Palm Beach County, it was hypothesized that research from the local community would reveal a low level of college success, meaning enrollment and graduation rates, for first-generation college students.

Method

Participants

A total of 40 individuals were surveyed in the Lake Worth and West Palm Beach areas. Random persons were approached in Downtown Lake Worth, a shopping plaza in West Palm Beach, and the Lake Worth campus of Palm Beach State College. These locations were chosen because of the number and variety of people found there. Students and non-students were asked to fill out a survey concerning first-generation college students. The people surveyed in Downtown Lake Worth and the shopping plaza in West Palm Beach were of a diverse group of ages while the students surveyed in the Lake Worth campus of Palm Beach State College were mostly under 25. This caused the age results to be as follows: 65% under 25, 17.5% 25-34, 7.5% 35-44, 7.5% 45-54, and 2.5% 55-64. The gender and race/ethnicity of the participants were altered from survey to survey to ensure the diversity of the sample. Despite this, of the overall sample 60% were females and 45% were Hispanic/Latino. The people approached regarding the

survey were overall receptive except for a small number of White older males who were uncooperative.

Instrument and Procedure

The survey consisted of 20 questions concerning basic demographics and topics such as family and education, paying for school, and views of a college education. The demographics included age, gender, race/ethnicity, income level, marital status, level of education, and parents' level of education. The family and education section of the survey inquired about the first-generation college student status of the individual. Other questions related to the family asked about the emotional and financial support of parents towards their children's college educations and trends in college dropout rates. In the last two sections three questions asked about the methods of paying for college and four questions inquired about the personal views of the individual concerning a college education. The participants were given the survey and told it was anonymous and confidential. It took participants approximately five minutes to answer the survey and the surveyor was at hand to clear any confusion-

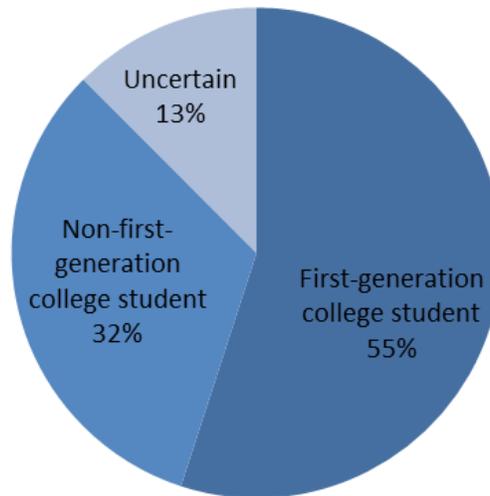
Results

The demographics of the sample turned out to be somewhat diverse with high concentrations of certain groups. Seven race and ethnicity groups were represented and included 17.5% Caucasian, 25% African American, 45% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, 5% Bi-racial, and 2.3% Multiracial. Over half of the people surveyed selected the under 10,000 (45%) and 10,000-20,000 (27.5%) income levels while 2.5% chose 35,000-50,000 and 10% chose over 50,000. Taking into account that surveys were collected at a college campus it is not surprising that to the question inquiring about the highest level of education of the individual 23 had some college and

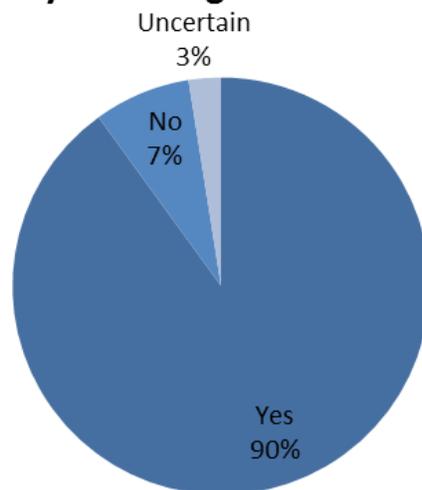
only 3 had Bachelor's degrees. From this one can conclude that 57.5% of people surveyed are current students.

Out of 40 people surveyed 55% were first-generation college students. Students who reported dropping out of college, or knowing someone who did, made up 42.5% of the sample. Areas of studies were equally chosen by individuals. The area of study that was not an answer choice but was chosen greatly by participants was applied science, which included majors such as health science, business, and communications. While 27.5% of participants took remedial college courses, 65% did not. Of the overall sample 70% of individuals received financial aid and 30% did not. The number of participants who received financial family support (20) and those who did not (19) was closely tied; (one participant did not respond). More than half of the sample reported either having a full-time job or a part-time job (estimated 66%). Over 50% of participants agreed to know someone who is financially successful despite not having a college degree. A total of 27 participants agreed that school is not for everyone, 8 disagreed, and 5 were uncertain. The 22 participants who reported being first-generation college students were isolated from the sample to evaluate their responses in depth. Table 1 can be referred to in regards to the patterns found between employment and methods to pay for school in first-generation students with incomes under 10,000.

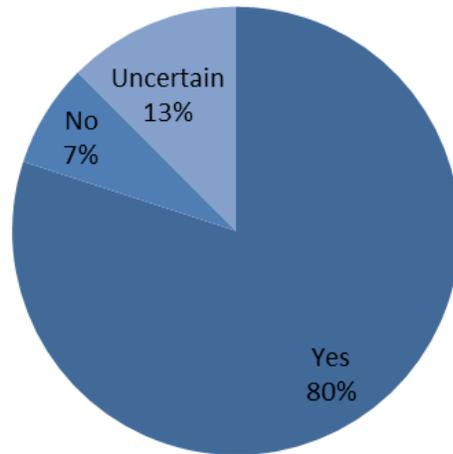
First-Generation College Students



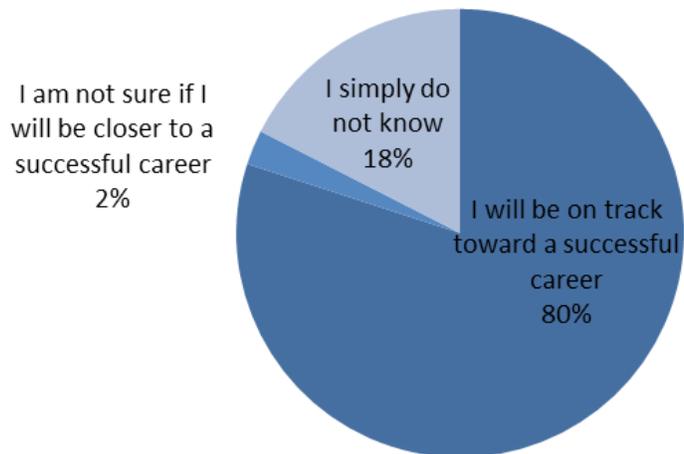
Did your parents always instill in you the importance of college and is your family supportive and understanding of your college education?



Do you agree that with a college degree you will make more money?



Which do you think is more likely to happen in the next 10 years?



Discussion

The purpose of the survey was to identify the academic challenges and social factors that first-generation college students encounter in the Palm Beach County area. The results of the survey were similar to statistics reported in the secondary research. Two of the most prominent distinctions among first-generation students include being part of a minority group and having a low socioeconomic status. From the surveys collected it can be concluded that in general the majority of first-generation college students are either African American or Hispanic/Latino and that their income level is between 10, 000 and 20, 000. It can also be concluded that many first-generation college students who are emotionally and financially supported and encouraged by their parents are more likely to attend college. The tendencies of first-generation students in the areas of college enrollment and performance presented by national reports were not supported by the data collected in the community. Individuals in the community rarely waited more than one year to begin college; vocational or technical areas of study were not found to be dominant, and majority of the individuals surveyed did not take remedial courses. A particular finding revealed that most of the participants were under 25-years old and reported to have some college as level of education but not yet a degree. Considering that a Bachelor's degree is a four-year program and that most students begin college at the age of 18, the assumption can be made that students over 22-years of age who are still seeking a degree put off going to college for more than one year and are taking longer to complete a degree. However, the overall sample demonstrated that 57.5% of participants went right from high school to college.

The research collected by the survey was not able to accurately measure the success, enrolling in college and earning a degree, of first-generation college students in the local community. The research demonstrated that the college enrollment of first-generation college

students was overall positive but the degree attainment of first-generation students was questionable as the majority of the people surveyed were current students. In conclusion the hypothesis cannot be fully supported or rejected as one measure, degree attainment, was inconclusive.

To improve the results of the research in the future the survey could be conducted in alternative forms such phone calls and electronic sources. These alternatives would reduce the bias that can occur when using a face to face interview either from the interviewer or the interviewee. Adding questions to the survey regarding the rigor of high school preparedness and resources available to first-generation students could broaden the research findings. Ultimately with more time and resources the hypothesis could be either supported or rejected by having a larger sample exclusively made up of first-generation students who are freshmen and seniors in college.

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Appendix A

Survey

Instructions

Please take this survey concerning first-generation college students to the best of your ability. Your answers will be used for a Sociological research project and will be kept confidential.

Part I: Demographics

1) _____ **Age:**

- a. Under 25
- b. 25-34
- c. 35-44
- d. 45-54
- e. 55-65
- f. Over 65

2) _____ **Gender:**

- a. Female
- b. Male

3) _____ **Race or ethnicity:**

- a. Caucasian
- b. African American
- c. Hispanic/ Latino
- d. Asian
- e. Native American
- f. Other (Please specify) _____

4) _____ **Income level:**

- a. Under 10,000
- b. 10,000-20,000
- c. 20,000-35,000
- d. 35,000-50,000
- e. Over 50,000

5) _____ **Marital status:**

- a. Married
- b. Free union
- c. Single
- d. Divorced
- e. Widowed

6) _____ **Highest level of education:**

- a. High school diploma or GED
- b. Some college
- c. Associates degree
- d. Bachelor's degree

7) _____ **Your parents' (mother, father, or both) or guardians' highest level of education:**

- a. No degree
- b. High school diploma or GED
- c. Some college
- d. College degree

Part II: Family and education

8) **Are you or anyone you know a first-generation college student - an individual who neither of his/her parents or guardians possesses a college degree?**

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Uncertain

9) **Did your parents always instill in you the importance of college and is your family supportive and understanding of your college education?**

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Uncertain

10) **Have you, a family member, or a friend failed to complete a postsecondary program?**

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Uncertain

11) **What was the time period between your completion of a high school diploma or GED and your college entry?**

- a. Less than 1 year
- b. 1-2 years
- c. More than 2 years
- d. I do not plan to attend college/ I did not attend college

- 12) _____ **What is your college area of study?**
- a. Humanities
 - b. Social sciences
 - c. Natural sciences
 - d. Formal sciences
 - e. Vocational or technical
 - f. Other (Please specify) _____

- 13) _____ **Have you taken remedial college courses?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Uncertain

Part III: Paying for school

- 14) _____ **What type of financial aid do you receive to pay for school?**
- a. Grants
 - b. Scholarships
 - c. Loans
 - d. I do not receive financial aid
- 15) _____ **Do your parents or other relatives pay for your tuition or other school costs?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 16) _____ **Do you have a full-time or part-time job to pay for school and make ends meet?**
- a. Yes (full-time)
 - b. Yes (part-time)
 - c. No

Part IV: Your views about a college education

- 17) _____ **Do you agree that with a college degree you will make more money?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Uncertain
- 18) _____ **Do you agree with the statement: “I know many people who make a good living who do not have a college degree.”?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Uncertain
- 19) _____ **Do you agree that college is not for everyone because some people just don’t like school?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Uncertain
- 20) _____ **Which do you think is more likely to happen in the next 10 years?**
- a. I will be on track toward a successful career
 - b. I am not sure if I will be closer to a successful career
 - c. I simply do not know

Table 1

Correlations of Employment and Methods for Paying for School of First-Generation Students with Income Under 10,000

	Employment	Paying for school		
		Financial aid only	Parent financial support only	Both financial aid and parent financial support
Full-time	10%	0%	0%	10%
Part-time	50%	30%	10%	10%
Not employed*	40%	10%	0%	20%

Note. *1 individual who was unemployed was not attending college.