Case Study: First Generation College Students and Issues of Persistence in Higher Education

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Currently, first generation college students account for approximately fifty percent of students attending college (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011; Williams & Hellman, 2004). This is a huge portion of the overall student population in America, but according to some studies, these students are not achieving academic success at the same rates as second generation college students. This is cause for alarm for student affairs professionals, who are dedicated to creating an environment conducive to student success for all of their students.

In the next portion of this paper, two causes of this motivational issue are explored and two solutions to remedy the problem will be proposed.

Introduction:

What is the problem?
First generation college students are more likely not to succeed in college than second generation college students

How do you know this is a problem?
- First generation students currently account for 50 percent of the students in college, but they report lower academic and social satisfaction and lower GPAs (Mehta, Newbold, O’Rourke, 2011; Williams & Hellman, 2004)
- First generation students are more likely to drop out of college than their continuing-generation counterparts (Mehta, Newbold, O’Rourke, 2011; Penrose, A., 2002)
- First-generation students were about twice as likely to drop out of a 4-year institution as compared to those students whose parents have a college degree (Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tacz, 2010).

Context of the problem:
Who: First generation college students
What: are not achieving academic success at the same rates as second generation students
When: current; first semester of undergraduate
Where: United States, 2- and 4-year institutions

Why is it important to solve this problem?
As future student affairs professionals, we want to provide an academic environment that is conducive to academic success for all of our students. We want to create a level playing field and provide the most positive experience possible.

Causal Analysis and Solutions
First Cause: Low Self-Efficacy

The first cause that contributes to first-generation college students’ poor retention rates is low self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to “the evaluation students have about their abilities or skills to successfully complete a task” (Dembo & Seli, 2008, p. 70). It has been shown that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to persist and complete difficult tasks, and they are also less likely to experience fear and anxiety towards academic tasks (Dembo & Seli, 2008). This means that if a student feels confident that she has the capabilities to be successful in academics, she will be more likely to motivate herself to continue even if the task is daunting.

First-generation college students in particular may struggle with self-efficacy in college because they are coming from homes where no one else has completed a degree program. They have no examples in their immediate family of anyone who has achieved success in higher education, and lack the basic prior knowledge that continuing-generation students have about higher education institutions. This lack of prior knowledge and lack of a role model makes it much more difficult for first-generation students to feel completely confident in higher education settings. In order to increase the retention rates and overall academic success of first-generation college students, it is important to increase their academic self-efficacy, because it has been shown that first-generation have lower self-efficacy than continuing-generation college students (Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tacz, 2010), and that lower academic self-efficacy is closely related to students’ GPAs and persistence in college (Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tacz, 2010).

Solution 1: Peer Mentoring

In order to combat the effects of low self-efficacy, it may be beneficial to implement a peer mentoring program to provide models of success and to promote social integration. In addition to providing students with peer models, a peer mentoring program would also be beneficial because it would provide an opportunity for social integration of first-generation students into the campus. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) contend that “students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff and other students have repeatedly been shown to be independent predictors of student persistence” (p.408). Creating a peer mentoring program battles first-generation retention issues on two fronts, by improving student self-efficacy through modeling, and by providing a means for social integration.

Solution 2: Providing Opportunities for Successes

Another idea that may help to increase self-efficacy in first generation students is to create opportunities for small successes. This can be achieved by helping students break their goals into small, manageable tasks. For instance, if you are helping a student that has a 15 page paper due in three weeks, it may be beneficial to have her find four journal articles to use as references in the first two days, write an outline by the end of the first week, and write seven pages by the end of the second week. This helps the student focus on small pieces of the task at hand, making it seem more manageable in scope, and appear less overwhelming. When the student successfully completes a manageable section of the assignment, they will

Second Cause: Lack of Time Management

Another reason why first generation college students may have difficulty persisting in higher education and graduating is that many lack the time management skills necessary to be successful in school.

Solution 1: Planning Schedules and Prioritizing Tasks
In order to remedy the students’ lack of time management skills, it may be important to conduct workshops both on campus and online to help students develop some time management strategies. These include planning out schedules and helping students to prioritize tasks so they have the ability to work ahead. This will help the students to be able to create additional time in their schedules.

**Solution 2: Establishing Short and Long-Term Goals**

The second way to ensure that first generation students are not inhibited by their lack of time management skills is to have students establish both long- and short-term goals. These goals will help students to keep themselves focused and committed to their coursework.
References


