

Awareness, Adaptation, and Alienation: Challenges of the First-Generation American College Experience

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As more and more American jobs require postsecondary degrees, the importance of college enrollment has increased. In 2018, approximately 63 percent of jobs in the United States are projected to require postsecondary education (Carnevale et al. 2010). This is up from 28 percent in 1974. Currently, almost 70 percent of high school graduates enroll in college within two years of completing high school (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Roughly 30 percent of entering freshmen are first-generation college students (*USA Today* 2010).

Many students who are potential first-generation college grads, especially those who also come from lower income homes, face unique challenges both in successfully enrolling in college and persisting in college. The percentage of these students beginning college immediately after high school is 55 percent, compared to 84 percent of those from high-income families (Aud and Hannes 2011). One reported finding has shown the baccalaureate attainment rate for first-generation, low socioeconomic status students is only 12 percent, as compared to 73 percent of those from high income homes (Mortenson 2007). There are several reasons for this disparity. Beyond the obvious challenges posed by financial constraints which cause student employment to consume study time, students coming from families where their parents did not attend college also must learn to navigate a new cultural arena. First, they need to become more aware of the basic logistics of college, including entrance requirements, course expectations, choices of major, and financial aid application procedures.

Second, they will have to adapt to a new, typically, “middle class” cultural setting. Even more daunting, many first-generation students must complete both of these tasks with little family support. Worse than receiving little support, students may find that the process of adaptation results in rifts between family members.

Awareness and Assistance

Parental involvement generally plays a lead role in students’ academic advancement (Davis-Kean 2005; McCarron et al. 2006). Many middle class students rely on their parents to guide them in their college preparations. Parents aid them in learning about and choosing a major, visiting and choosing a college and filling out applications. Without college experienced parents, first-generation students are more likely than their counterparts to lack knowledge about the college preparation requirements and application process (Terenzini et al. 1994; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Choy et al. 2000; Walpole 2007; Roderick et al. 2008).

First-generation students who have managed to successfully enroll in college have already overcome a significant barrier. However, once enrolled, they continue to face unique challenges. Some students may not be supported by family members. Parents of first-generation students do not always understand educational pursuits (Billson and Terry 1982; Lynch and O’Riordan 1998; Goodwin 2006; Kleinfeld 2009). Instead of praising their children for continuing their education, many first-generation students are criticized by family members. Family and friends, who did not pursue a postsecondary degree, may perceive higher education as unnecessary and costly, a luxury, or even an irresponsible choice.

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Adaptation

Additionally, college as a gateway to the middle class, forces blue collar raised students to adapt to a new cultural environment. In fact, many first-generation students feel out of place in college. As Graziella Pagliarulo McCarron, Kurotsuchi Inkelas, and Karen Kurotsuchi (2006) restate Inman and Mayes (1999) notion of culture shock on the college campus:

[Lack of] knowledge of the campus environment, campus values, access to human and financial resources and familiarity with terminology and the general functioning of a higher education setting . . . may contribute to a sense of college “culture shock.”

First-generation students may feel like cultural outsiders (Granfield 1991; Aries and Seider 2005) or imposters (Jensen 2004). Wolfgang Lehmann (2007) found that first-generation, working-class students were more likely to leave university very early. Not “fitting in,” not “feeling university” and not being able to “relate to these people” were key reasons for eventually withdrawing. Pamela Aronson (2008, p. 49) explains that these students “often feel fearful or isolated in college, are aware of speaking differently from others, have difficulty making friends, question their own abilities, feel like outsiders, or feel that education institutions do not understand or respect their experience.”

Adapting to a new cultural setting is in addition to the tasks related to “learning the ropes,” including how to interact with professors, coursework expectations, and scheduling. While all new college students face adjustment challenges, those who were not aided by hearing parents’ stories of college life, have to play catch-up.

Alienation

After students acclimate to a new set of cultural norms, there is an impact when interacting with family members and friends who have not gone through the same process. Alfred Lubrano (2005) calls first-

generation college enrollees “straddlers,” as they balance between both blue collar and white collar worlds. Students experience problems “that arise from [living] simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither” (Rendon 1992, p. 56). These students report strained relationships with family and friends who did not attend college as the college-goers are perceived as changing and separating from those who did not go (Piorkowski 1983; London 1989; Rendon 1992; Terenzini et al. 2001).

Those successful academically may even feel badly about their achievements. Geraldine K. Piorkowski (1983) describes what she terms “survivor guilt” felt by students who attempt to “make it” as they think about less fortunate peers and family members. This sense of guilt can serve to hold achievers back.

There is some evidence that first-generation college students face unique challenges in their pursuit of college degrees. Having overcome previous hurdles, many arrive on campus only to be confronted by an additional challenge of having to navigate the uncharted waters of a new cultural arena with little family support or assistance. Entrance into the middle class requires change which may reduce family cohesion and challenge the individual’s belief system. As American colleges strive to adapt to a changing student body which includes greater numbers of first-generation enrollees, an understanding of the first-generation experience is warranted. Interventions programs aimed at increasing student persistence rates would benefit from the recognition of unique challenges these students face.

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