

Understanding Motivations and Barriers, in the Presence of Enhanced Support, of  
First-Generation College Students and their Quest for Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines data generated from focus groups with undergraduate college students that are the first in their families to seek a four-year college degree (also known as first-generation students) at a large, southeastern, Research I Institution. All participants belong to an in-house first-generation college access program which provides students with a scholarship for tuition, books, and a housing stipend in addition to supplemental support services throughout the students' college careers. The goal of this study is to better understand the experiences of first-generation students participating in a college access program as they relate to motivators and barriers to degree completion. Transcriptions from eight focus group sessions with sixty-six participants, ranging from freshmen to seniors are examined. Study findings are reviewed in the context of national research on first-generation college students.

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The purpose of this study is to understand the motivators and barriers to degree completion that first-generation students experience when financial obstacles are seemingly eliminated. This study developed out of the researchers' work with the participating college access program. After reviewing retention and graduation rate data from the institution, the access program, and the general regional area the access program targeted, researchers sought to understand more fully ways to improve the program's retention rate and ultimately the graduation rate. The current study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students enrolled in the access program at a southeastern flagship university. The access program is an in-house first-generation, early intervention program that selects students based upon first-generation status, academics and financial need. While all student participants in the access program are first-generation college students, the majority of students are also considered students of high financial need, according to the Federal Application for Student Financial Aid.

Perspectives

This study is framed within the literature on first-generation college students and their related issues of access and obstacles to college degree completion. First-generation students are enrolling in postsecondary institutions at heightened rates (Horwedel, 2008), yet only 26% of those who enroll in a four-year institution will graduate with a Bachelors degree (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Researchers concur that the greater the quantity and severity of limiting socioeconomic factors a student encounters, specifically a first-generation student, the less likely he/she is to earn a college degree (Ayla & Striplen, 2002; Carter & Robinson, 2002; Chen &

Carroll, 2005; Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) report that first-generation students are more concerned about their finances, feel less prepared for entering college, and overall lack a basic understanding about the expectations of college than do their non first-generation peers. Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006) report that lack of financial resources and family encouragement negatively affects first-generation students from going to college. Researchers suggest that one way to increase college graduation rates is to offer effective early intervention based college access programs for first-generation college students (Cushman, 2007; Filkens & Doyle, 2002; Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004).

Given these findings on first-generation students, in addition to internal graduation rate data for the participating college access program, the guiding research question for this study is: what do students identify as motivators for and barriers against persistence to graduation when cost of college attendance is largely subsidized?

### Method

The primary method of data generation for this study was qualitative focus groups. Eight focus groups were conducted with a total of sixty-six first-generation college students ranging from freshmen to seniors in a four-year university college access program. The same question guide was followed for each session although moderators were free to probe and explore different areas as necessary. Three main questions were asked of each focus group in addition to follow-up, probing, and clarification questions. The first question addressed students' motivation for pursuing a four-year degree at their institution. The second question asked students to describe a time when they felt particularly discouraged and then to discuss their reasons for staying in school despite these challenges. Finally, the third question addressed student support networks. Students were asked to identify people who support and encourage

them to meet their academic goals. Focus group sessions were audio recorded, and each session had at least one additional person in the room taking notes. The audio recordings from seven of the eight sessions were transcribed as one recording malfunctioned. Approximately six hours of data were transcribed into 115 pages of text. Analysis involved an initial open coding based on responses to each of the main questions addressed in the focus group. Codes remained close to the data as researchers adopted a “bottom up” approach to coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32). After the initial coding, researchers reexamined the aggregate codes to identify connections and patterns among the data sets. From there, researchers identified overarching themes with subsequent subthemes that encapsulate the experiences of the first-generation students in the access program examined in this study. The focus and purpose of this paper is to elaborate on four themes that arose from the data related to barriers and motivations for students’ persistence – namely academic preparedness, “the pull from home,” social mobility, and optimizing opportunities.

### Results and Discussion

Preliminary findings suggest that regardless of the supplemental services and financial assistance they received, which covered tuition, mandatory fees, housing, books, and in some cases, a residual stipend, first-generation students still experienced a multitude of factors that may inhibit their likelihood of earning a college degree. Through the thematic analysis, researchers identified key concerns students experience. The first area identified as a major concern for students centers around their academic preparedness. These concerns include challenges related to poor study skills, insufficient preparation in science courses, poor performance in the classroom, adjusting to the demands of college-level work, and the ability to manage time with the increased work load. One female participant described her challenge with

feeling less prepared than other students from larger cities. She states, “It’s challenging when you get into chemistry and physics, and you have classmates from [city] and [city] that have already had through the next level of class. And, they’re getting hundreds on the test, and you’re struggling to pass.”<sup>1</sup> Another female participant from a different focus group described her academic struggle this way:

I think it’s discouraging like when you study really hard for something and then you don’t perform as well as you think you did. And it makes you just want to give up, but you just have to try harder and study more.

This finding is consistent with existing literature on first-generation college students; first-generation students are more likely to earn grades that are lower than their continuing generation peers (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). One explanation for this finding is that students who come from low-income families are particularly susceptible to needing remedial courses in college (Conley, 2007). Conley suggests that as low-income students tend to be the first in their families to attend college, the families are reliant on signals from the school system to determine if their child is academically ready for the rigors of college as the parents are unable to draw from their own college experiences. As a result, first-generation and low-income students may not realize that they are not academically prepared for college until they enter college. The students’ comments above demonstrate the need for students to continually manage their disappointing academic performance in order to persist, as it is easy for many of them to become discouraged and leave school. In addition, the comments illustrate a social comparison students make between their own academic achievements and those of their peers. This finding corroborates existing research on first-generation students. These students frequently assess their

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<sup>1</sup> Participant quotes have been slightly edited to enhance readability.

own competencies as secondary to that of their classmates (Conley, 2007). New kinds of academic demands and disappointments, partnered with negatively judging their own abilities in relation to their peers, create significant barriers for first-generation students' persistence, especially if they have weak ties to the institution.

Research has shown that if first-generation students do not discover a purposeful relationship with the university community, they often drop out of school willingly or fail out academically (Folger, Carter & Chase, 2004). The need for connection with the university community was confirmed within this study. One participant talked about how getting involved in a campus ministry helped ease her transition to college. She said, "I started finding community here which that's why things turned around once I got involved with [name of group], another campus ministry here. And that became my friends and my family here." Interestingly, first-generation students are less likely than their peers to engage in the university community, even though these students reap greater benefits from extracurricular involvement in college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). However establishing these connections is not so easy for these first-generation students. A major factor inhibiting participants' ability to connect to the university is what researchers identified as "the pull toward home." As one female participant described it:

Parents, I think, might have a big impact on this because I know that a lot of us hear, "When you coming home? We want to see you. You've been away. Are you coming home this weekend?" And they try to get you to come home like all the time because they're...I don't know why...And I don't know if that's something unique to [region of the country] that we deal with more than a lot of other people but that could be a big

factor in retention. And parents pushing to stay there rather than come home to us. We don't really care what you're doing but we want you home with us.

The above comments demonstrate the importance of making connections with the university as well as the obstacles first-generation students face in doing so. Students who fail to assimilate into the campus community will likely decide to leave college and return to their home communities. Folger, Carter, and Chase (2004) suggest that in order for first-generation students to form a connection with their college, they need support in becoming integrated within the university setting through forming relations with their peers and to form a sense of who they are academically. The students in this study are all assigned a common supplemental advisor intended to support students in becoming integrated within the university community. Yet, even with this additional advisor many students still struggled to integrate into campus, which may be a result of the "pull" to go home. The following quote illustrates one male participant's internal struggle with staying at the university versus going back to a community college at home.

I think sometimes that like, our parents could be kind of distracting cause it's hard for some people to let go. And like it was for me to let go in the first couple of month. I didn't say anything about it – I really was upset. I was like you know well, "I'm on my own." But, in the back of my mind it's like my mom is up in [home town] and you know. I kind of wanted to go back home and just like go back to community college.

This "pull toward home," which many students expressed, comes from external sources, like parents, as well as internally, as the above quote illustrates. The "pull" appears to stem from the priority students place on family. Several students described the challenge they have with balancing their home and school lives especially when family issues arise at home. Negotiating this balance can be particularly difficult for some students as friends and family at home may not understand the struggles related to and the time commitment required in college.

As participants continued to talk about their experiences, researchers realized that the boundary between students' barriers and motivators for college persistence was not so clearly defined. In fact, many of the same themes emerged as barriers as well as motivators – one such overlap was that of family.

Researchers identified social mobility as a motivator for students to pursue their four-year degree. Under the umbrella of social mobility are such subthemes as: increased job opportunities, financial security, exposure to new ideas, meeting new and diverse people, and the opportunity for new experiences not otherwise available to them. A common response to why students chose to pursue their degree is illustrated in this male participant's comment:

I think a big part of college is kind of coming in contact with different ideas like that you wouldn't normally have a chance to experience. Like you get to meet all kinds of different people from different parts of the world and different cultures and different regions so you get exposed to a lot of different ideas. I think that's a big part of it for me.

This comment expresses what researchers heard from many participants, which describes the opportunities students have *during* college to make new friends and have new experiences. However, when students described their long-term motivators these were rooted in financial mobility for their families. One senior female participant said:

I think my motivation is my family and you know like I've seen how they've struggled and stuff. My sister's getting ready to start college soon and I know that's going to be a financial burden, and I just want to do well so I can help my family more.

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment as he described how family motivates him:

You have your parents telling you, motivating you to go, and part of it for me is like you can see your own family struggling financially and you're like, 'why don't I go better myself to one day help them?'

These participants' comments reveal the way in which students use their desire to financially assist their families of origin as motivators for college persistence. In addition, students also



talked about motivators related to the families they hope to establish in the future. One female student said, “I seen how my family struggled growing up and I just want to better my own family one day by getting a degree and getting a good job.” The findings here suggest that, for first-generation students, families can serve as both a motivator and a barrier for persistence in college, depending on the individual student. Yet, individual family situations notwithstanding, social mobility is a significant motivator for many students in this study.

The final theme addressed here, related to first-generation students’ motivations for persistence, is the notion of optimizing the opportunity offered through the access program scholarship. Students explained how the scholarship itself serves as a motivator to continue their education. For some students, their motivation to stay and do well is rooted in the idea that they are the lucky ones and as such they do not want to waste the opportunity they have before them. One female said, “For me, like, this is an opportunity that a whole of people back home don’t get to have. So, I want to take full advantage of it, obviously, not go back home and become like the other people.” Another participant reflected on how previous scholarship recipients’ mistakes motivate him. He said it this way:

I think the biggest reason for me – the reason I want to do good at university and do good as far as for myself – is because of the issue back at home. A lot of people even that got the scholarship did not realize what great opportunity it gives. They let their own little ideas, and I guess these little notions they would get in their minds, pull them away from a better life.

The way in which this access program is setup combined with the small communities that it services, creates a situation whereby many of these students knew the other students with whom they were competing for the scholarship. They also knew many of the past recipients from their local schools. So it is not surprising, as the above comments illustrate, that participants view their scholarship as a special opportunity not to be squandered. In this way, it

is not only the scholarship that serves as a motivator, but also the students back home that were not so fortunate as to become members of this particular college access program.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this study suggest that obstacles in the degree seeking process for first-generation college students are not mutually exclusive. In other words, removing or limiting identifiable factors, such as cost of attendance and providing a supplemental advisor to assist the students in their transition to the college community, will not necessarily be enough to increase the likelihood that a student will graduate from college. As the findings here indicate, even when financial barriers are removed, first-generation students still experience a complex web of other barriers in their pursuit of higher education.

#### Conclusion

The importance of this study lies primarily in the participating student group as they are the beneficiaries of an institutional access program – a program full of financial, academic, and social benefits akin to those recommended in the literature on first-generation students. Given the multitude of resources available to these students, this study is particularly salient to the educational research field as it raises important questions about the direction for future research on first-generation students. Much of the literature on first-generation students speaks to the barriers of college attainment, such as a lack of financial resources, (Aronson, 2008), and, in so doing, researchers make suggestions for how to increase the likelihood that first-generation students will attend college. However as this study shows, getting first-generation students to college is only half the battle; the other half is keeping them there. This study is a step in the right direction as it offers a starting point for research investigating barriers beyond the cost of college for first-generation college students.

One suggestion for postsecondary institutions is to continue to assess and track first-generation students' progress and educational experiences and to use this information as a method for continual improvement when offering support services to first-generation college students. The four themes identified in this study related to barriers and motivations for students' persistence: academic preparedness, "the pull from home," social mobility, and optimizing opportunities provides college service practitioners and administrators with direction for future programming and retention efforts.

As first-generation students are being admitted to postsecondary institutions, it is important to consider not only the obstacles to their matriculation but also to their persistence to graduation. The findings of this study suggest that limiting factors facing first-generation students may not be enough. Addressing certain factors that negatively impact a first-generation student's likelihood of earning a college degree does not necessarily translate into successful degree completion. Future studies investigating financial variables should be conducted to see whether or not removing the cost of college attendance impacts levels of degree attainment for first-generation college students. There are multiple ways in which financial factors could potentially influence students' relationship to degree completion. One such way is that offering a full scholarship increases the chances that a student will enroll in college but may not influence their persistence to graduation. Another way to view this relationship is that students who are not personally financing their own college degree may feel more inclined to leave college when challenges arise because they perceive less of a personal financial investment in their education.

In addition to questions related to financial assistance, this study raises questions about the role of additional support services for first-generation students. Even though researchers suggest that first-generation students require additional support to become integrated with the

university community, perhaps having a designated supporter discourages students from developing these relations independently. Students in this particular access program began receiving additional support services beginning their freshmen year of high school and those services continue into college. Yet as this study demonstrates, students in this study still face significant hurdles in successfully completing their degrees as compared to their non-first-generation peers. As a result, additional research is needed to more fully understand the ways in which these support services actually affect first-generation students. These are critical questions to consider as it is important to examine existing initiatives for first-generation access programs and centers to see if they are maximizing institutional resources and effectively serving this student group.

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